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Review of "Language Teacher Research in the Americas" edited by H. M. McGarrell

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Book reviews


Traditionally, the story of language teaching has been told by university-based researchers, who have produced the knowledge base for language teachers. In constructing this story, researchers have been awarded the status of experts, and evidence suggests that teachers have passively accepted a role as consumers of the work of academic experts (Stewart, 2006). As Freeman (1998) contends, teaching has been thought of as an activity that academics research and teachers do. Stewart (2006), however, observes that many language teachers today are ‘taking control over their professional development by researching their own practice’ (p. 425–426). This evolution is evident in the growing literature on teacher-led inquiry, including for example the ‘Practitioner research’ section edited by Dick Allwright in this journal.

Following in a similar vein, *Language Teacher Research in the Americas* is a collection of studies conducted by language teachers as part of the progressive movement toward taking control over their own professional development, and exploring and transforming their practices. This anthology illustrates how teachers at all levels can act as knowledge producers in reshaping the landscape of TESOL’s professional knowledge base (Freeman and Johnson, 1998).

The book begins with an introductory chapter in which the editor briefly discusses the growing shift toward teacher-led research and the potential institutional obstacles in doing teacher research. The introduction is followed by 12 original contributions from teacher researchers representing various educational and sociocultural contexts in the Americas: Brazil, Canada, Columbia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Jamaica and the USA. Each chapter follows the teacher-research cycle (Freeman, 1998). Similar to the traditional academic research genre, each chapter begins with an introduction (referred to as ‘Issue’ in this book), followed by background literature, procedures and results. A departure from this genre, however, is the inclusion of a ‘Reflection’ section, in which the authors examine how the inquiries have changed their practices. Additionally, rather than being thematically organized, the contributions are arranged alphabetically, according to the first author’s surname.

Due to the diversity of topics and contexts covered in this book, I highlight here just a few of the contributions in order to illustrate the range of issues and insights revealed. In exploring the links between teaching and testing, Angela Bailey, Lourdes Rey and Nayibe Rosado explain how research helped them understand that their classroom practices in a Columbian university were
part of the reasons for low student achievements on the TOEFL Institutional Testing Program. Turning to demands on teacher capacity and development, in one example Mary Hill Kuck discusses the complex interaction between language and identity among Jamaican contact language speakers and the need for teachers of students who use stigmatized varieties to incorporate those varieties in the teaching of ‘standard English’. In another teacher capacity example, Elizabeth Park emphasizes the need for middle school teachers in the USA to address their ESL students’ vocabulary needs much more directly. Examples also highlight the student point of view in informing teacher practice, as in Andy Curtis’s description of the insights he gained for his film-based course by attending to student voices at a Canadian intensive English program. Likewise, Sharon Springer examines metacognitive strategies training for her Costa Rican university students and, although her findings were inconclusive, the inquiry compelled her to continue on the path to understanding the ‘quality of language classroom life’ (Allwright, 2003, p. 114).

The systematic and self-reflective studies in this anthology are a testament to changing views on the ownership of research and to an epistemological shift in what constitutes legitimate knowledge and research in language teaching. As with any edited volume, there are certain limitations. One concern is the representation of only seven regions within the Americas, with more than half of the studies coming from Canada and the USA. To embody accurately the Americas, it would seem important to have more sociocultural (and linguistic) contexts represented, particularly the less documented settings. Another area of concern is the inclusion of researchers who are not technically language teachers. While the editor states that the studies are intended to reflect ‘teacher-driven research’ (p. 2), several of the studies were initiated by university-based teacher educators, individually and collaboratively with teachers. In the teacher–researcher collaborations, one might question the power dynamics of these relationships; that is, whose research agenda is being pursued and under what terms? Finally, attention to language classrooms in non-university settings is minimal. Although the editor suggests that ‘the culture of research is more visible in university settings than in other teaching contexts’ (p. 2) and, therefore, the majority of the studies are from university settings, there might have been more effort made to include contributions from non-tertiary contexts, especially since these settings are less visible in the literature.

Despite these limitations, the editor of this volume (and the TESOL series) should be applauded for recognizing teacher-led research as a unique but viable form of research. This book will play a part in the important turn toward valuing teachers as legitimate participants in reshaping the knowledge base of language teaching and in forging a discipline of teaching. In addition, as a distinct form of research, Freeman (1998) argues that ‘teacher researchers will need to create new forms of expression… to tell a different story’ (p. 16). This book is a continuation in the telling of a different story about language teaching. The language of research here is expressed in the code of teachers, and the studies do not end with implications and a conclusion (as found in the
traditional academic research genre). Rather, each closes with a critical self-reflection on how ‘exploring the fascinating world’ (Springer, in McGarrell, 2007, p. 182) of the language classroom led each teacher toward a transformational understanding of teaching, students, language classrooms, and teacher as researcher (Allwright, 2003). For these reasons, this book is highly recommended for language teachers, researchers and teacher educators who envision a different way of, and a different role for, researching language teaching.

References

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