

## Interview

### Exploring Territories of Teacher Research

Santosh Mahapatra in conversation with Richard Smith

**Richard Smith** is a Reader in ELT and Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick. He has led teacher research projects in several countries including India. His recent publications on teacher research include, *Teachers Research!* (2015), *Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* (2016), *Developing Insights into Teacher Research* (2017), *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (2018) and *Mentoring Teachers to Research Their Classrooms: A Practical Handbook* (2020).

**Santosh Mahapatra (SM):** Dr. Smith, you have been associated with teacher research programmes across the world. How would you define teacher research?

**Richard Smith (RS):** The teacher-research programmes I've been advising on have been for secondary and primary school teachers in various countries, and the best way to demystify research for them has been to be as down-to-earth as possible. So I've been defining it quite simply like this: teacher-research is research which is carried out—and usually initiated voluntarily—by teachers themselves, into issues of importance to them in their own work, for their own benefit and that of their students; in other words, research which is *by* teachers *for* teachers (and their students). And “research” itself can be defined quite simply as a process of asking questions and answering them with data (relevant information or evidence) in an organized way. I favour relatively clear, relatively jargon-free definitions like these—though of course there are more complex possible answers to your question, and plenty of books have been written about the nature of research in general! When introducing teacher-research to teachers, apart from sharing these very simple definitions, I also try to provide plenty of examples of research

by other teachers, to show that engaging in research is possible and can be useful for teachers, and is not just for academics.

Of course, there are different *kinds* of teacher-research—Action Research and Exploratory Practice, for example, and even “Exploratory Action Research” (or “EAR” as it is sometimes abbreviated), which is the approach I’ve developed with and for school teachers and their mentors in Latin America and South Asia. This involves teachers exploring carefully and trying to understand a situation, often a problematic situation, before deciding whether—and, if so, how—to engage in researched action to change it (there is extensive guidance about this for teachers in *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research*, published by the British Council in 2018). EAR is intended as an approach which isn’t an added burden for already-busy school teachers (whereas some forms of Action Research can appear to be quite burdensome), but which instead takes account of the difficulties they already face. As I’ve said, we present it as something practical and useful—as a way of *addressing* their difficulties, in fact. Engaging teachers in research can be quite gradual and user-friendly like this, and we try to avoid putting them off with complicated and inappropriate models of what research “should” look like from an academic perspective.

**SM:** Could you please cite some examples of the variety of teacher-research programmes across the world?

**RS:** For some time, there have been small-scale but well-publicized programmes like those supported by Cambridge Assessment in Australia and the UK for selected teachers in language school type settings. And there have been isolated past attempts to engage larger numbers of teachers of English in teacher-research, for example in the context of the CBSE-ELT project in India in the 1990s and a University of Leeds initiative in Oman in the 2000s. But new things have been happening in the 2010s, largely under the impetus of the British Council’s Champion Teachers Programme in Latin America (I helped launch this in Chile in 2013 and it was then extended to Peru, Colombia and Mexico), and the British Council’s Action Research Mentoring Scheme (ARMS), which has involved mentors working with groups of teachers in India and Nepal since 2017. Together, these programmes have succeeded in engaging more than 500 teachers in quite substantial teacher-research projects. I’d also cite Rama Mathew’s recent work with the English in Action project

in Bangladesh and AINET initiatives in India led by Amol Padwad and his colleagues.

So, what's been happening in recent years? Well, firstly, these teacher-research programmes that I've named have been set up for secondary and primary school teachers in relatively "difficult" circumstances rather than well-resourced language school or tertiary settings; and, secondly, there's been an international coming-together of experiences from different contexts so that these days there seems to be more of a kind of teacher-research "movement" going on globally. I've led initiatives within IATEFL Research SIG ([resig.iatefl.org](http://resig.iatefl.org)), the TESOL Electronic Village Online on "Classroom-based research for professional development" ([classroombasedresearch.weebly.com](http://classroombasedresearch.weebly.com)) and the International Festival of Teacher-research ([trfestival.wordpress.com](http://trfestival.wordpress.com)) which have sought to develop this sense of a worldwide movement. There seems to have been a quite striking rise in the numbers of school teachers engaging in or at least interested in teacher-research in Latin America and South Asia, but that may be because I've been "in the thick of it"! I guess we shouldn't be under any illusion that teacher-research is engaged in by many teachers, but there's certainly been a sense of spread, and a rise in interest.

**SM:** Please tell us about the British Council's Action Research Mentoring Scheme (ARMS) and how it is similar to and different from other models.

**RS:** I would say that ARMS is different from the other programmes in that it has an explicit goal of developing *mentors* who can facilitate teacher-research with groups of teachers, some of whom might later themselves become teacher-research mentors, meaning that relatively large numbers of teachers can become involved. This makes ARMS quite innovative and important—I think developing mentors is the way forward if we want the benefits of teacher-research to spread further, and this idea underlies the most recent book I've written, based on ARMS experience, *Mentoring Teachers to Research Their Classrooms: A Practical Handbook* (published by the British Council India). I hope this book will be helpful for those who think they might like to support teachers to engage in teacher-research but who can't quite see how—this includes teacher educators, administrators, teacher activity group leaders, and so on. Ideally, models like Champion Teachers or ARMS could be adopted by governments or teacher associations for in-service teacher

development, and there are some signs that this has been happening, in Chile, for example.

There've also been quite a few cases in the past where teacher-research has been supported by the inspiring efforts of individual mentors, and these cases can also serve as a model, for example for university-based pre-service teacher education and in-service teacher development. I'm thinking of the long-standing efforts in the past by Professors Wang Qiang and Rama Mathew at their respective universities in China and India, as well as Flávia Vieira and Maria Alfredo Moreira in Portugal, Melba Libia Cárdenas in Colombia, and Inés K. Miller and her colleagues in Brazil. This is certainly another model for developing teacher-research that I hope will be reproduced more in the future—university-based teacher educators engaging student-teachers, and re-engaging graduates who have become teachers.

Another model which seemed to be gaining ground at one point in Turkey, under the leadership of Kenan Dikilitaş in particular, was teacher-research by university-based language teachers, who were being mentored by coordinators of teacher development based in their institutions. Assia Slimani-Rolls and Judith Hanks have been engaged in this, too, in their respective UK universities. From everything I've been saying, you'll gather that I think mentoring of teacher-research is crucial, and that developing mentoring capacity is the key to encouraging more teachers to engage in teacher-research.

**SM:** There is extensive research claiming that teacher-research improves teaching quality. What are your views on these claims?

**RS:** I became very committed in the 2010s to promoting teacher-research, so I guess it's obvious that I think it does improve teaching quality. In fact, though, rather than from external research findings, my commitment to teacher-research comes from my own lived experience as a teacher, confirmed by repeated experience during two decades of being a teacher educator, first with student-teachers in the UK and, for the last eight years, also with in-service teachers in various countries. Student-teachers and practising teachers alike repeatedly express appreciation of teacher-research not just as a way of improving the quality of teaching and learning in the particular situation they're investigating but as an *empowering* form of professional development which has changed their mindset. I can't emphasize enough that, for me, the point of advocating

teacher-research isn't that it can help advance general knowledge in our field (though I think it probably can, in a cumulative fashion) but that it helps individual teachers address important issues they're facing in a very practical and immediately useful way, enabling them to take control of their own development rather than remaining victims of circumstance or dependent on outsider expertise. So, yes, teacher-research certainly does improve the quality of teaching and learning in the particular situations it addresses but, much more significantly than this, student-teachers' and teachers' reports also show that it brings about a change in mindset, towards a more empowered, in-control state, at the same time as tending to bring about a greater degree of trust of, and rapport with, students who've been consulted in the process. In the long term, such effects are more important and long-lasting than immediate improvement in teaching quality and are what, for me, justify advocating and supporting teacher-research mentoring programmes.

**SM:** Could you briefly tell us about the factors that may motivate teachers to engage in teacher-research?

**RS:** Well, I think the best teachers reflect on their teaching already, and they may be doing teacher-research—in other words, gathering data to answer relevant questions—without calling it that, for example when they ask students for their feedback on lessons, try to find out what students are doing outside class to improve their English, or invite an observer to come into their classroom to help them focus on a particular problem they're facing. Equally, good teachers everywhere experiment and reflect on how well the new things they're doing are working. So, I don't think of teacher-research as something that needs to be seen as very new to or "imposed" on teachers, but as something that can build on many teachers' existing experience, and which, if it's presented in a user-friendly way, can appeal to them as a way forward based on organized generation of data, not just reflection. And teachers can very often see the value of engaging in more of an action research type of approach when they're exposed to examples of other teachers like them who have benefited from the process. This is why we brought out the *Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* book (published by the British Council in 2016) and other publications which showcase research done by teachers in an attractive format.

**SM:** What do you think are some hindrances in carrying out teacher-research in schools and colleges in India?

**RS:** Well, there are constraints of course, even with a relatively “benign” approach like Exploratory Action Research, and I don’t want to give the impression that teacher-research is some kind of magic solution on its own—it isn’t of course, and concerted political action will always also be needed to bring about positive change in the environments teachers work in. Lack of time for extra work can be a major factor hindering teacher-research—excessive workloads, in other words—and there are all the disadvantages of teaching in large-class, low-resource classrooms, as well as syllabus constraints, occasionally unsympathetic head teachers, and so on which can demotivate teachers and discourage them from participation in continuing professional development in general. At the same time, though, teacher-research can be an excellent way for teachers to begin to *address* the constraints they’re facing. There’s a good example in a recently published book arising from the ARMS programme in Nepal (*Exploring for Action, Action for Change*, edited by Janak Singh Negi), where the last chapter is all about how a teacher of a large class addressed a problem of some students becoming distracted and, on the basis of understanding the situation, managed to attract those students back to paying attention to her class, developing a greater sense of her own agency in the process. Examples like this show how the benefits of teacher-research can outweigh the hindrances even in—or perhaps especially in—quite demotivating difficult circumstances.

**SM:** Finally, how do you see the future of teacher-research in India?

**RS:** When I started engaging with teachers, teacher educators and researchers in India it was back in 2012, when the British Council invited me to work with Paul Gunashekar, Lina Mukhopadhyay and their colleagues at EFL-U, and with Rama Mathew, Amol Padwad and, later, Atanu Bhattacharya, Padmini Boruah and Ravinarayan Chakrakodi to discuss how ELT research capacity could be developed. Together we planned some initiatives including a survey of existing ELT research and the English Language Teaching Research Partnership (ELTReP) awards, which resulted in a series of publications, *Explorations: Teaching and Learning English*. I personally think, though, that the most productive initiative which eventually came out of these discussions was ARMS—the Action Research Mentoring Scheme. As we speak (during the week of May 4-8, 2020), the third cohort of ARMS mentors, who themselves have been mentored by Ravi Chakrakodi and you (Santosh Mahapatra), are sharing their work via a series of webinars. Although ARMS itself

won't continue in the same form into the future, it seems to me that it has helped teacher-research achieve a solid foundation in India, building on previous pioneering efforts by Rama Mathew, Amol Padwad and AINET. I hope the network of mentors that has been developing will continue to explore the potential of exploratory action research together. I also hope to keep in touch and help where I can, and I look forward to teacher-research becoming a better-established part of pre-service and in-service teacher education in India, generally.

**SM:** Thank you Dr. Smith for sharing your knowledge and insights about teacher-research. Let's hope teacher-research continues to spread across the world and becomes a universal professional development tool for teachers.

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