

Impact of Carrying Out a Mentor-guided Classroom Research on How Teachers Understand and Solve Their Classroom Problems

Tanya Gulati

Abstract

This paper presents a study undertaken by teachers in their own classrooms to reflect upon their teaching methodology, teaching materials or any other classroom-related issues and problems. Engaging in teacher research makes teachers not only more reflective but also more learner-friendly, professionally independent and confident. In the light of this background, my paper looks into how classroom research helps teachers in understanding and addressing their own classroom issues in an effective manner. English language teachers, who participated in a funded teacher research programme sponsored by the British Council, participated in the study. Data for the study were collected through regular conversations, reflective journals, and qualitative interviews. The findings indicate that teachers' participation helped them become more aware of classroom-related problems and of strategies to address the problems. The paper also highlights the importance of teacher research as a tool for professional development.

Keywords: teacher research, reflective practice, mentoring, professional development

Introduction

Overcrowded classrooms, mixed ability groups, excessive administrative workload, pressure of showing better student achievements and creating "flawless English speakers" are some of the common stress-causing factors among English language teachers in India. Teachers are required

to stay professionally updated to handle these challenges and cope with related stress. Professional development through training programmes, workshops, seminars, etc. often helps teachers become more effective practitioners and more reflective. A relatively recent concept, teacher research, has proved to be an effective tool for promoting self-reflection. Teacher research involves exploration of one's own classroom which might include teaching methodology, teaching materials, assessment, problems related to learners such as motivation, etc. Teacher research may involve two stages: exploration and action. Through both the stages, a teacher may explore a problem and develop a suitable strategy to address it.

Background

Classrooms in state-run government schools in Delhi are often found to have students from various backgrounds. Unlike children studying in affluent English medium schools who have access to numerous opportunities, children studying in government schools, which are perceived to be over-crowded, bleak and boring, are heavily dependent on teachers for exposure to new opportunities. Many of them are first generation learners. In such a scenario, the role of teachers becomes critical and challenging. The current study is set in a state-run school in Delhi. It is a qualitative study of five teachers with varied teaching experiences in terms of number of years, their students' backgrounds, classes taught, administration and management, and other related factors.

Table 1: Profile of Teachers

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>School and designation</i>	<i>Classes taught</i>	<i>Years of teaching experience</i>	<i>Experience of conducting classroom research</i>
1	Teacher 1	Female	Government School, Delhi	V class	10 years	1 year
2	Teacher 2	Female	Government School, Delhi	III class	12 years	1 year
3	Teacher 3	Female	Elite School, Delhi	Pre-primary	5 years	NIL
4	Teacher 4	Female	Public School, Delhi	IX class	28 years	NIL
5	Teacher 5	Female	Elite School, Delhi	I class	3 years	NIL

Research Questions

- How does classroom research help the teacher researchers in understanding and addressing their own classroom issues?
- What are the main factors that shape a teacher's classroom research?
- How did the mentor's support help the TRs in doing their research?

Methods of Data Collection

The study was qualitative in nature. The methods used for data collection included semi-formal interviews, regular conversations during the course of the study, teachers' reflective diaries and classroom observations. The interviews were semi-structured in nature as they provided flexibility to the researcher in building on some leading questions and asking questions based on the teachers' responses. Teachers' diaries were helpful in obtaining information about what they thought and felt about the entire process. Classes were observed with the help of field notes.

Procedure

The data was collected in four phases. In the first phase, teachers were asked about their education and training, professional experience, school management, work schedule, teaching methodologies, etc. They were also asked about their understanding of classroom research and if they had been a part of such a research earlier.

During the second phase, the focus was on helping teachers to arrive at a classroom-related teaching-learning problem and analyse it. A series of guided questions were asked to encourage them to reflect on their practices. Whenever they came up with challenging situations, they were directed to think critically and find solutions. For example, when a teacher shared that only a few students of her class were taking the initiative in the speaking activities, she was asked a few questions like, "If one student engages in speaking, what are the other students doing during that time?", "Do they have the vocabulary to share their experiences?", "If they have the required vocabulary, are they confident about speaking in the classroom?". All these questions helped her to think about how to engage students in speaking activities, improve their vocabulary and confidence in relation to speaking in the classroom. It

took them around two months to identify a researchable classroom problem and frame their research questions.

In the third phase, when teachers were focused on experimenting with their planned activities and strategies in the class, their reflections were recorded. Regular discussions were organized to develop their reflective writing. This phase introduced them explicitly to some of the effective tools of reflection, how to record one’s own reflections about a classroom, how to use the reflections for improving student learning, etc.

In the last phase, teachers were given a qualitative questionnaire. The objective was to find out what the teachers think about the impact of their participation in this project on their professional development. In addition, efforts were made to obtain information about their understanding of classroom problems, learning pattern of students, student involvement, etc.

Analysis and Findings

Table 2: Analysis and Findings based on the questionnaire

Name of the Teacher	Research Question	Methods of Data Collection	Findings
Teacher 1	In spite of having the vocabulary, why is it that my students don't read confidently? How can I help my students to read and comprehend simple text?	- Students' participation in classroom reading sessions. - Worksheets	- It was found that students required more effective reading strategies (blending, phonic sounds, etc.). - They did not know how to learn new words. - Considerable change was observed when they were trained in reading and word attack strategies.
Teacher 2	How can I help my class V students to frame correct sentences in writing?	- Classroom observations - Samples from students' notebooks - Samples of the activities conducted in class - Interviews	- Error correction techniques were identified (coded correction, more to less serious errors). - Gradually led to peer correction and self-correction - Providing practice with significant amount of patience was found to be a key factor.

Teacher 3	<p>Why do my students show unwillingness to use the English language?</p> <p>What activities and strategies can help me expose them to the English language?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Classroom observations - Informal conversations with the past teachers, parents and a co-teacher - Analysis of students' writings and classroom interactions - Need-based exercises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students' home environment directly affected their interest in the language. - Students took interest when the teacher got personally involved with them. - Exposure to audio and video clips at home led to lack of interest in its use in the classroom. - Students performed better when they were demonstrated how to use the language. - Learning the language through interaction with peers was found to be an effective way. - Students were found more expressive and involved when they were involved in group activities.
Teacher 4	<p>Why are my students more comfortable while writing rather than speaking?</p> <p>How can I help them to be confident English speakers?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Questionnaire - Interviews with students and other subject teachers - Discussions with parents - Students' reflections through oral discussions and written anecdotes - Observation of students' work pattern and involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Writing gave them time to think. - The fear of being laughed at was found to be a major reason of not conversing in English. - Lack of vocabulary was found to be the second most common reason for not speaking in English. - Positive changes were observed in students who were earlier marked as "slow learners". - Classroom talks saw an increase in the use of English.

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students were more comfortable in sharing their concerns and issues with the teacher. - Minute changes were seen in the students who were already doing well in academics.
Teacher 5	<p>Why do my I grade students not like to interact in English? What kind of tools should I use to improve their ability to speak in the English language?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Classroom observations (students' talk and work pattern) - Discussion with the previous teacher and parents - Worksheets - Samples from Pre and post reading activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students were more comfortable using their mother tongue in the classroom. - Students enjoyed activities which were different from their regular classroom activities. - Students were more comfortable with group activities. - They seemed to be comfortable using English with close friends. - Change in sitting arrangement, modules, classroom setup, etc. all led to more curiosity and engagement among students in the classroom. - Pre- and post-activity discussions helped students consolidate their learning.

From the data collected, it was observed that in all the classrooms, students initially showed lack of interest towards the English language. The reasons identified were mainly lack of vocabulary, confidence and exposure to English, which were evident from the analysis of questionnaire responses, interviews with students and classroom observations. Engagement in this project helped them overcome their prejudices and to work with a positive outlook. During interviews and discussions, teachers shared that they had changed many of their assumptions regarding students and their behaviour during the project. Significant change was observed in “slow learners”. They were found

to be gradually becoming more comfortable with their teachers and performing better. However, no significant changes were observed in the performance of already academically better-performing students. In all the cases, students responded positively to the strategies used by their teachers in the classroom. Students enjoyed change in teaching techniques adopted by their teachers.

From the questionnaire, it was noted that all the teachers felt more confident after engaging in this research project. Teachers from government schools were found to be more comfortable compared to the ones in private schools. It was also observed that age has nothing to do with a teacher's urge to learn. All the teachers were found to be equally involved in the project irrespective of their age or work experience.

Discussion

How does classroom research help teachers in understanding and addressing their own classroom issues?

Through this project, it was noted that teachers became more focused on their classrooms, they were able to observe and share minute things about their students and their performance. This project helped them to identify the behavioural as well as personal struggles. They engaged their students in group activities which made them feel more comfortable. This could be because it gives space and ease to children to learn from their classmates. This project led to a positive change in student participation and their interest in classroom activities. It was observed that teachers gained motivation to teach better and confidence to discuss their respective classrooms. Engaging in this project made them more reflective.

What are the main factors that shape teachers' understanding of their classroom issues?

Managerial interference directly affects teachers' efficiency to work. Teacher 1 taught a pre-primary class, but her class was changed in the middle of an academic semester which affected her confidence and motivation. This led to an unsettling time and she was clueless about how to cope with the stress. She had to rework on her classroom plans and also modify her research plan to a comparative study between the students of two classes and age groups. This managerial interference impacted her morale initially but she eventually managed to overcome

the same. The other two teachers did not have much interference in their classes and enjoyed the liberty to conduct their classes as per their plan. This kept them motivated throughout the project. Whereas Teacher 3 and Teacher 5 were not allowed to use their phones in the classroom which restricted them to collect enough data for their study. This clearly shows that school administration must encourage the teachers to work as per the need of their students as well as their own professional growth. It was also observed that personal issues too hamper a teacher's mood and it clearly affects work. Teacher 4, being the senior most teacher working with the senior classes, went through a personal crisis at home and took a break as she couldn't handle the two fronts. External interferences like government orders, examination, delegated duties, etc. takes away the focus and time of teachers from their classrooms and lead to delay in their work. It was also observed that age has nothing to do with a teacher's urge to learn. All the teachers were found to be equally involved in the project irrespective of their age or work experience.

How did the mentor's support help the TRs in doing their research?

The mentor is the person who directs, instructs, questions, probes, advises and guides teacher researchers to explore and identify their classroom situations. A mentor's initial role is to help the teacher researchers explore and narrow down the topic so that it is feasible to be worked upon within the given settings. After identification of the topic, teacher researchers seek assistance from their mentor in framing their research questions. Being a patient listener, showing acceptance and then asking questions to probe teacher researchers to reflect back is very important to help them in breaking their assumptions. Teacher researchers certainly seek assistance from their mentor to help them to look for relevant reading material in order to get a clear picture of their identified issues. Often I, as a mentor, also felt stuck on how to help teachers when they were coming up with certain classroom issues. Sharing the whole journey with the super mentors and discussing the possible solutions to the struggles was of great help there. For example, when Teacher 3 was not able to identify her core area of research and was more focused on teaching "grammar" to her students, I struggled on how to make her realize the constructive approaches of language teaching. I shared the same with my super mentor, he helped me in providing the teacher with various readings to understand the core meaning of what an action study is, how it is different from the monotonous teaching

methods, what all she can opt for as her research area. All this helped me and my teacher researchers to accomplish this project with practical learnings. Time management is another very important component in a time bound research study. It is the responsibility of a mentor to frame a schedule to be followed throughout the journey and the group must try to follow the same to complete their work within the set time limit. I struggled with the same, because teachers were sometimes occupied with other things and could not meet the deadlines. It was demanded that the mentors should be empathetic and patient with the teachers and allow them to work at their pace.

My Learnings

Mentoring played a pivotal role in these classroom research studies. This was the first time that I worked as a mentor in such a project. It was indeed a new experience with ample scope of learnings at every step. Throughout the project, I faced various struggles and managed to look for solutions. I learnt to build a positive relationship with the teachers that helped them overcome the problems faced in their classrooms. The skill of questioning and counter questioning, without serving readymade answers to the teachers, was also one of the important learnings for me. Through this project, I became more reflective regarding my actions, and to look for solutions to the prevailing problems.

Conclusion

The study tried to investigate how classroom research helps language teachers in their classrooms as well as in their professional development. The study comprised a year long journey of five teachers from various backgrounds working in different schools of Delhi. Based on their study, it was observed that teachers' involvement in these kinds of projects help them identify their classroom struggles and tackle those in an effective manner. This study showed a positive change in students' participation, their involvement and performance. Students were more focused and interested in various activities incorporated by their teachers. This study also showed how classroom research helps teachers to be more reflective in their classroom practices. The study was more qualitative in nature, and the teachers struggled to make time for the planned activities as they had administrative pressure of other tasks. Teachers were not allowed to record their classrooms to have accurate data which somehow created

impediments in their work pattern. The study deals with students of different grades from different schools, and is not a reflection of the distinctive changes in government and private schools.

*Tanya Gulati is a primary school teacher with the Government of Delhi.
tgulati.tg@gmail.com*