

Teachers' Professional Development: Partnerships in Research

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Abstract

This study describes the design and results of a descriptive and explorative case study into the development of professional knowledge by pre- and in-service teachers through collaborative research in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. Studies have shown that teacher research has a profound effect on those who have done it, in some cases transforming classrooms and schools. It has been found to facilitate teachers' critical thought, boost teachers' self-esteem, and increase their awareness of students' needs. Yet, it has been observed that neither pre- nor in-service teachers of English can do much research in Turkey. The main reason is that pre-service teachers generally cannot get permission from schools for research, and in-service teachers do not have sufficient time and training to conduct research. Thus, the impetus for this study came from the belief that if pre- and in-service teachers are encouraged to collaborate for research, both parties will benefit. Ten pre-service and ten in-service teachers participated in this study. After being provided with relevant theoretical knowledge on research, they collaborated and conducted their research in in-service teachers' classes. It was found that participating in collaborative action research gave teachers from both groups a framework for systematically observing, evaluating, and reflecting on their L2 teaching practices. They also gained an understanding of the importance of collaboration.

Introduction

There is general agreement that learning to teach is a lifelong process, and teachers must be equipped with sufficient knowledge, skill, and awareness in order to carry out

their jobs. In-service education and training (INSET)--intended to stimulate the professional competence and development of teachers (Kennedy, 1995)--improve classroom teaching practices and/or implement educational innovations decided upon at governmental level (Pennington, 1990; Roberts, 1998), and provide teachers with continuous education throughout their teaching career (Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996).

A review of current INSET practices in Turkey reveals the training orientation as "one-shot" programs, in which knowledge is usually transmitted by an outside expert (Craft, 1996). The popularity of these programs lies in what Widdowson (1987) calls the "social and professional intensity of the event" (p. 2). Thus, teachers have a break in routine, a chance to meet new colleagues, and to discuss their professional problems. In addition, they are exposed to stimulating new ideas and experience the novelty of being students again. Despite their popularity, one-shot, knowledge-transmission INSET programs have serious limitations, and do not achieve their aims of effecting a change in teacher behavior (Hayes, 1997). One significant reason is that the participants are passive recipients of knowledge, and their existing knowledge, beliefs, and are not acknowledged by the trainers. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle:

[I]n-service teacher education programs are typically organized to disseminate a knowledge base constructed almost exclusively by outside experts. This means that through their careers teachers are expected to learn about their profession not by studying their own experiences but by studying the findings of those who are not themselves school-based teachers. (1993, pp. 1-2)

The constructivist pedagogies of today, however, emerge from an intellectual world in which knowledge is seen as constructed rather than received (von Glasersfeld, 1991), and explored rather than remembered as a uniform set of ideas (Rorty, 1979). Influenced by Dewey's line of inquiry, Schön (1987) believes that by questioning, discussing, and checking beliefs and practices with others, teachers make implicit knowledge explicit and progressively gain or improve control of their own teaching. Within this framework, educational research is no longer used only as a way to prescribe teachers' actions. Instead, teacher education programs include opportunities for teachers to become aware of their own practices and the beliefs that underpin them, and teachers are encouraged to construct their knowledge and become active participants in research (Tom, 1985; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Zeichner, 1994).

Background of the Study

Two years ago, when I was asked to give in-service training to teachers at the English preparatory school attached to the university at which I work, I tried to initiate a professional development program with ten volunteer teachers. After providing the teachers with relevant theoretical knowledge on conducting research, I asked them to conduct research in their own contexts. The teachers were eager to do research, but

when it came time to collect or analyze data, they all said they needed more time and "energy." As the preparatory school administration could not give them any time off, typical in all institutions in Turkey, most of them could not finish their research. Additionally, I could not guide them through the research process as much as I wanted because of my own workload.

Thus, the impetus for this study came from my belief that, as a teacher educator, I could make the research task, following the initial INSET program I devised on research theory, easier for the participating teachers through an ongoing collaboration with pre-service teachers (pre-service teachers working with in-service teachers). My model would be collaborative action research. This way I could help in-service teachers bridge the gap between research and teaching as well as familiarize pre-service teachers with research in real classroom contexts. I felt the project itself could serve as a preliminary study for improving INSET programs in my context, Turkey.

Collaborative Action Research

Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1990) broadly define teacher research as "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers" (p. 83). This definition is consistent with the idea that to learn deliberately is research, and with the notion that every lesson should be an inquiry for the teacher (Goswami & Stillman, 1987). According to McKernan, teacher research suggests:

[R]igorous examination of one's own practice as a basis for professional development, the idea is that each school, and indeed each classroom, is a laboratory in which the curriculum and problems experienced as problems by teachers (not outside researchers) are subjected to empirical examination by practitioners. (1988, p. 154)

Collaborative action research as a form of inquiry requires teachers to engage in a cycle of questioning, planning, acting, observing, reflecting, pre-planning, and often questioning further (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), and invites them particularly to question the common assumption that knowledge for and about classroom teaching should first be generated at the university and then used in schools (Lewin, 1946; Stenhouse, 1985; Ogberg & McCutcheon, 1987; Kraft, 2002).

Studies on the effects of collaborative action research found that both novice (pre-service) and experienced (in-service) teachers become more reflective, critical, and analytical about their teaching behaviors in the classroom as they engage in collaborative research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Cardell-Elawar, 1993; Henson, 1996; Schleppegrell, 1997; Moreira, Vieira & Marques, 1999; Rainey, 2000; Smith, 2005; McDonough, 2006). Other studies indicate that participation in research promotes continuous learning (Rock, 1999), revitalizes teachers' practice and motivates them by improving their self-confidence as professionals (Lomax, 1995). Case studies involving pre-service teachers and their cooperating teachers have further revealed strong

evidence to support collaborative research as a professional development tool (Catelli, 1995; Friesen, 1994; Levin & Rock, 2003).

The present study presents an alternative, collaborative action research INSET program in which the participants (in-service, experienced teachers) are asked to make use of the theoretical knowledge on research in their own contexts through collaborating with pre-service teachers. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. In their own view how does collaborative action research following the INSET program affect the professional competence of in-service teachers?
2. How does participation in collaborative action research affect the professional competence of pre-service teachers?

Method

Participants

Six volunteer experienced, in-service teachers (ITs) and six prospective, pre-service teachers (PTs) participated in this study. All participants were native speakers of Turkish. The ITs, five females and one male, were teachers at the English preparatory school attached to a highly competitive state university in Istanbul, Turkey. None had ever carried out any research. Their average age was slightly over 29, and they had an average of 5.4 years experience of teaching. Two ITs had degree work in English language teaching and the others had degree work in English language and literature. Three ITs were teaching elementary level English and three were teaching intermediate level classes. All of them taught English for fifteen contact hours per week, considered a full-time load.

The PTs were fourth-year students enrolled at the Department of English Language Education of the parent university. At the time of the study, 179 PTs were enrolled in the department. Out of 34 PTs who volunteered to participate in this study, 6 were selected on the basis that they all aimed to apply for employment at the attached university prep school after graduation. The PTs, 4 females and 2 males, had an average age of 21. In the four-year teacher education program, the PTs had had one research writing course. Moreover, in one of their methodology courses they had to do research on teaching young English learners in Turkey. However, most of the research was limited to writing literature review as only a few PTs could get permission to interview teachers and to give questionnaires to young learners. My role in this project was as a teacher trainer. I was working in the same department with the PTs, so they had regular access to me. I also provided the ITs with the INSET program on research and guided them through their research process.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data came from three main sources: informal talks with ITs, journals kept by the PTs, and my field notes. As the participating teachers did not want to do any writing, and were keen to reflect through collegial dialogues, I decided to meet each of them regularly, either in groups or individually, to discuss the process. I tape-recorded and transcribed these talks. PTs were asked to record the research process, and their thoughts about it in their journals, writing a minimum of one entry per week. Borg (2001) has illustrated the value of journal writing as a tool to support the development of research skills. In this study, PTs' reflective writing in journals provided me with insight into the personal and implicit processes that they experienced in their research process. I also kept field notes, which included my thoughts and observations I recorded during my visits each week. These notes helped me to document the process of research and collaboration.

As is typical in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Creswell, 2003), an inductive analysis of the data was adopted so that themes emerged from the data. To begin I read the entire corpus and identified only the themes that illustrated the effects of participation in research on the professional competence of the participants. After identifying the themes, I read the data again to extract segments from the texts that illustrated each theme.

The context and my reflections on the research process

Before moving to the results, it is important to clarify the context of the study and the research process based my field notes. The study took place in the first term of the 2005-2006 academic year and lasted for three months. In the first week, I had an introductory meeting with the teachers and agreed on a date for the INSET seminar. In the second week, the participating ITs were provided with the theoretical knowledge on research in a three-hour INSET seminar. The seminar aiming to familiarize the participants with the basic knowledge on action research revolved around the following key assumptions, suggested by Ponte (2002):

- Action research is geared to teachers' own practice and the situation in which they are practicing;
- In action research teachers engage in reflection on information they have systematically gathered themselves;
- Action research is carried out through dialogue with colleagues (the prospective teachers in this case) within and outside the school; and
- In action research students are used as an important source of information.

Because of time limitations, the ITs were given only one action research example. Each step, that is, problem formation, data collection and analysis, and so forth, was discussed in detail. Different data collection instruments were shown as examples. The ITs were told that volunteer PTs would share the research tasks with them. The same seminar was given to PTs, but it focused more on data collection instruments and

analysis.

One week later, I had another meeting with the whole group to introduce the participants to each other. This meeting lasted for about two-and-a-half hours, and we focused on the roles and responsibilities of the partners. To begin, we decided ITs and PTs should meet at least three hours a week (they did this throughout the study). Then, by using the same action research examples, I told them my suggestions regarding the sharing of each task: The ITs would identify an issue or a problem to be researched, but as partners, the ITs and PTs would design the study together. The PTs would collect and analyze the data. They were not expected to design a data collection instrument, as I would guide them to find the relevant one(s), and carry out statistical analyses. PTs were also asked to prepare and submit the action research reports. I told them that I would guide them through the entire process, and that I would visit each pair once a week and give them deadlines for every step of the research. Although the deadlines were strictly kept for the first two phases there were some delays in the others. Over the course of the research process teachers developed research questions, designed a data collection plan and analyzed data in a collaborative way. During my visits I could talk with the ITs during breaks and they also had access to me through email. The PTs could see me any time during school for their questions.

The participants explored the following topics, taken from the teachers' experiences in their L2 classes: Effectiveness of classroom management, class participation and willingness to communicate, writing anxiety, use of target vocabulary, and effective use of group work (see Table 1).

Table 1*

Research Carried Out by One Pair of Participants

Pair	
Aylin (IT) Sema (PT)	Research question: Aylin How willing are my students to communicate in L2 inside and outside class?
	Data collection: Sema Use of 'Willingness to Communicate in English' questionnaire (developed by Macintyre & Charos, 1996).
	Data analysis: Sema Taking frequency counts
	Sharing the results

	Data collection: Aylin Interview with 11 students randomly
	Action: Aylin- Sema Group work with key vocabulary given Use of recasting in an effective way

* All names appearing in this study are pseudonyms.

Some of the more specific research questions ITs and PTs formulated a researched were:

- Will changes in my questioning and feedback make any changes in L2 use of my students?
- How willing are my students to communicate in English in and out of class? How I can increase their level of willingness to communicate?
- What is the level of writing anxiety of my students? Will there be a difference in their anxiety if I use individual conferencing? Supplementary materials in the pre-writing exercises?
- How can I make my students use target vocabulary in their output?
- Will the use of jigsaw reading have an effect on group work participation?

Results

An analysis of the talks with the ITs revealed three major themes regarding the effects of research: Changes in perceptions about research, increased awareness of their own teaching, and appreciation of collaboration.

Changes in perceptions about research. The ITs all indicated that at the beginning of the process, they had a fairly narrow conception of research but gained a broader perceptive by the end of the semester:

To me research meant something very scientific and complicated. I thought one would need intensive training before s/he can start doing some research. Through my own research process I realized that research doesn't have to involve testing hypotheses or complex statistical analysis. Research is something achievable for me now. (Participant comment)

and:

I have always had the idea that a researcher is someone who can use 'academic and technical terms' appropriately and who can refer to theory. I may not do these but I still feel like a researcher now. (Participant comment)

and:

My decisions are based on tangible data and analysis now. I feel much more confident when discussing something which I did in my class with my colleagues. (Participant comment)

Although the ITs initially associated research with quantitative studies, which arguably require a degree of preparation in research methods, their overall perceptions of research eventually broadened to recognize the usefulness of small-scale and context-specific studies not requiring advanced statistical analyses.

Increased awareness of their own teaching. Three ITs indicated that they had become more aware of their students' needs as a result of participating in research:

For years we have been complaining about students, who do not like writing, in the staff room. Yet, never had one of us thought of or took the burden of using a questionnaire. Our project was on the writing anxiety of the learners. Aslō found a questionnaire on writing anxiety and we went over it together. We did not translate it as my students could understand the statements. Aslō collected and analyzed the data and told me that there were many students in the 'high anxiety' group. It was a real surprise for me and I really wanted to find out the reasons. So we prepared some open ended questions and read their answers one by one. There were things which I could not change, like their background in writing. But a number of things were related to my teaching practices. For example, I used to give written feedback on each paper and not discuss anything with the students unless they had any questions. Three weeks ago I started individually conferencing each student to check their mistakes together as well as make them reflect on their essays. I think it was really useful, I may give the questionnaire for the second time later but I can feel that there will be a decrease in their anxiety level. Both the questions and individual talks helped me to understand students' view. (Participant comment)

and:

At the very beginning of the study Gaye asked me if I could do any group work in my class. I said not much as it was an elementary class and the students had vocabulary problems. One week later she told me she could prepare word cards and we could do jigsaw reading in groups. I heard of jigsaw reading in a seminar last year but I had never used it in my class. Each group read one section and the word cards encouraged my students to use the target words much more. It was a real change. (Participant comment)

These statements show that teachers not only became aware of their own teaching

practices but also tried to apply the knowledge they obtained either from the PTs or from me to improve their L2 teaching practices.

Appreciation of collaboration. The third finding that emerged from the data was that the ITs gained an appreciation for novel kinds of collaboration while doing research. There were four ways in which ITs' reflection referred to the role of collaboration in doing research. The first related to the positive effects of collaboration on their classroom practices. Here is one teacher commenting on how collaboration and discussion allowed him to identify a feature of his work:

I'm a literature graduate and I have been doing many things on intuition. So I asked Gizem to videotape me. When we were going over the tape together, I asked Gizem to tell me her opinions. She said she couldn't because I was the 'experienced' teacher. But when I started reflecting on my own teaching, she contributed a lot in a very respectful and constructive way. For example, I was directing the questions to students in the front and at the end I was dealing with the same three..ÉÉ For the following week I tried to focus on this issue and asked Gizem to focus on it while observing me. When you work with someone, you share alternatives and get aware of a problem which might otherwise be unnoticed. (Participant comment)

The second sub-theme was how collaborative research enriched their theoretical knowledge and increased their familiarity with types of classroom observation, as illustrated in the following statements:

Without the help of Sema, I would never have been able to find an appropriate questionnaire for my research. She showed me a number of similar studies, I read them all. At first I was a bit demoralized, it was for years that I had not read any articles on teaching. (Participant comment)

and

It is the first time in my all teaching career that somebody observed and video-taped my class. It was really insightful. (Participant comment)

A third sub-theme, under the heading of collaboration, touched on the role that my support, as the teacher educator, played in enabling the teachers to make progress with their research. All participants indicated that this program was different from others, because they felt they were "doing" something. One teacher indicated that when she participated in "typical" INSET programs she did not feel "renewed" as she thought the experts generally talk about things that the INSET audience had not experienced.

The analysis of PTs' journals regarding the effects of participating in collaborative action research with ITs revealed a fourth theme, enrichment of skills and knowledge. Two PTs commented on the positive effects of preparing the research on their content and

pedagogical knowledge, and their writing skills. The following extracts reflect this view:

During the research I read many articles on foreign language writing anxiety. This reading gave me the chance of learning more on a specific subject and writing the report really improved my writing skill. (Participant comment)

and

Writing a research paper gave me the chance to apply the rules I learned about formal writing. (Participant comment)

All PTs mentioned that the knowledge they gained had positive effects on their future teaching career:

I found a lot of information about intensive and extensive reading. I'll absolutely use these in my own classes in the future. (Participant comment)

and

It was very difficult to decide on a topic. Actually I had some topics in my mind but didn't dare to share these with Mr. Cakör. For example, most of the students were so reluctant to communicate in his class because he generally follows the coursebook line by line. He asked me to micro teach in one lesson in advance and I prepared very nice materials and students very totally different. So he suggested that I prepare some supplementary materials for the next units she was going to cover. Though I used similar materials in my practicum school for my micro teaching before, it was the first time that I observed them used by a teacher as part of a 'real' lesson. (Participant comment)

Discussion

This study aimed to find out the perspectives of Turkish in-service and pre-service teachers regarding the effects collaborative action research on their professional competence. The findings indicate that participating in collaborative research had a positive impact on the professional development of ITs by broadening their perceptions of research, helping them recognize the value of collaboration, and encouraging them to implement new instructional practices. During the research process, the PTs and ITs came together for a shared purpose and drew upon each other's energies and efforts. Engaging in activities involving new areas of inquiry seemed to move them to become a discourse community of their own with ways of understanding common problems and potential solutions.

Despite their concerns, the PTs had the opportunity to master the basic techniques and

skills necessary to conduct principled classroom research by "doing" and through sharing of expertise and experiences. From ITs, they learned how to identify problems and focus on specific areas that were open to action and change. By doing the research they learned how to collect and analyze data, and how to evaluate it in the light of the current theories and practice.

According to Cochran-Smith (1991), "The only way for beginners to learn to be both educators and activists is to struggle over time in the company of experienced teachers who are themselves committed to collaboration and reform in their own classrooms" (p. 307). Engaging in collaborative action research required pre-service and in-service teachers to struggle together as they became active learners of pedagogy and research. The PTs at my institution expect teacher education courses to be practical, to model pedagogies, and provide opportunities to practice strategies and techniques. However, because of the large student population, it is not possible for us to provide this thoroughly. Thus, the research process was a useful opportunity. Interestingly, all PTs mentioned their negative experiences with research from the previous year, comparing it with the present collaborative one. One PT remembered she felt uncomfortable doing research because she had to go to her home town, where she had relatives at a primary school who helped her get permission to do her research. However, she enjoyed her research with the IT, since everyone was ready to help each other.

After teaching for years, ITs generally have strong assumptions about the teaching and learning process. Too often they opt for a safe way to carry out their teaching, thus perpetuating the use of the same traditional methodology. The ITs in this study appeared to benefit from the research project as they gained greater understanding of their L2 classes and used that new understandings to improve their L2 teaching practices. Thus, they used collaborative action research as a tool for their individual professional self-development, as commonly reported in the action research literature (Rainey, 2000).

Kalnin indicates that:

[A]s researchers of their own practice, teachers can discover for themselves how deeply theoretical their work is and has always been. This discovery can position them in a new relation to university theory. For some teacher researchers, theory is no longer what 'they' do at the university, but becomes what 'we' do in or classrooms every day. (2000, p. 296)

The ideas of the participants of this study seem to support this idea. Teachers naturally benefited from the knowledge about research they gained through the INSET. However, experiential knowledge was also crucial for the acquisition of research skills. The experiential knowledge achieved through involving in research seemed not only to reinforce and strengthen the theoretical knowledge the participants obtained but also encouraged them to own and personalize it.

In considering ways in which the project enabled ITs to do research, I believe that a number of characteristics were important. First, the teachers were volunteers who felt a need for professional growth. Second, the time constraints mentioned above did not come up in this study because the PTs did most of the time-consuming work. Thus, none of the ITs complained about the tension between teaching--and other professional roles--and research, which was the dominant concern in previous studies.

To conclude, participating in collaborative action research gave the teachers a framework for systematically observing, evaluating, and reflecting on their L2 teaching practices, which are key attributes of the reflective approach to teacher education, and provided them with an understanding of the importance of collaboration. Regarding the PTs, the decision to participate in collaborative action research may be best left to their discretion; yet teacher education programs should provide opportunities for them to learn about and become involved in research. Though I cannot claim that collaborative action research is the answer to all the problems of teacher education in Turkey, my observations and experiences lead me to believe that a structured training program including theoretical knowledge as well as opportunities for practical research could be used as an effective tool for professional development and can be a motivating addition to any teacher education course.

The major weakness of the program was that the participating teachers could not get sufficient support from their institution. That is, they could have been given a certificate or have been asked to present and share their projects with others not in this study. Acknowledging teachers' work would be very encouraging for the future teachers. Moreover, teachers need to be given some time off to do research in the most effective way. Learning about and engaging in collaborative action research would enable teachers to shift from teaching as telling to teaching as listening and learning.

About the Author

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