

# Researching our own classrooms: Challenges and opportunities

By Rob Neal

## Researching our classrooms: challenges and opportunities

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### Aims of workshop

- ▶ Reflect upon why it is important to research our own classrooms
- ▶ Consider factors which might inhibit teacher research
- ▶ Demystify the research process

### Why is teacher involvement in research important?

- ▶ Very low research base: 'Almost nothing is known of what works and what does not for the teaching of Chinese to English-speaking school children' (Orton, 2011: 159)
- ▶ Lack of a specific Chinese pedagogy
- ▶ 'Scandalous lack of research on young *beginner* learners' (Macaro, 2010: 305)

### Why is teacher involvement in research important?

- ▶ Stops the government and government agencies imposing practice-related policies on language teachers (Macaro, 2003: 43)
- ▶ Pupils should be taught to understand basic grammar appropriate to the language being studied (Draft version of Key Stage 2 Programme of Study for Languages, Department for Education, 2013: 173-4)

### Specific strengths of the 'teacher-researcher'

- ▶ Long-term engagement – easier to track a group of learners over a longer period of time
- ▶ Longitudinal research design as opposed to cross-sectional research design typically favoured by outside researchers
- ▶ More 'insider knowledge' or 'ecological validity' – we know our learners and their learning context better than any outsider

### Why is teacher involvement in research important?

- ▶ 'Research can be a great deal of fun and an intellectually highly satisfying activity' (Dörnyei, 2007: 16)
- ▶ Liberating and re-energising – taking part in researching our classrooms helps us 'step off the treadmill' (Lamb and Simpson, 2003)

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#### Factors inhibiting teacher involvement in research

- ▶ Time – tension between preparing students for public exams and carrying out research
- ▶ Perception that research is scary and only for professional researchers – teachers do not have the required skills or experience (Macaro, 2003: 43)
- ▶ 'So what?' – 'The research in question is only a drop in the ocean of experience and so what possible significance can the highly localized findings of my experience have for anyone else?' (Evans, 2009: 112)

#### Quantitative and qualitative research

- ▶ Quantitative research seeks to reach hard factual conclusions based on some form of measurement
- ▶ Qualitative research aims to generate hypotheses and arguments or to explore themes supported by trustworthy evidence from the data (Evans, 2009: 123)
- ▶ Strengths of a mixed-methods approach

#### Our responsibility as teacher researchers

- ▶ Make our research as 'trustworthy' as possible
- ▶ 'The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an inquirer persuade his or her audience (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 113)
- ▶ Resonance of research outcomes with those in the same social situation (Burns, 2005: 62)

#### Strengthen the reliability and validity of the research

- ▶ 'Reliability refers to the rigour, consistency and above all, trustworthiness of the research' (Evans, 2009: 116)
- ▶ Validity means 'the degree to which a study measures what it claims to measure' (ibid. 124)

#### Increasing the 'trustworthiness' of our research

- ▶ Important to situate the study within the context of an existing wider, intellectual and professional debate
- ▶ Need to provide a clear account of the aims and objectives of our research which are linked to prior discussion in the literature (Evans, 2009: 117)

#### Why are Mandarin tones difficult for English speakers?

- ▶ Context – explosion of interest in teaching and learning Mandarin in Anglophone settings
- ▶ Lack of research focussing on English school children's tonal acquisition
- ▶ Highlight existing themes from the literature
- ▶ Unfamiliarity of English speakers with tones (Winke, 2007)
- ▶ Wider pitch range of Mandarin speakers (Chen, 1974)
- ▶ Interference of English intonation (White, 1981)
- ▶ Inherent challenges of Mandarin Chinese including identical tone combinations (Zhang, 2010)

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#### Be explicit about your underlying assumptions and aims

- ▶ Pragmatic approach to knowledge claims – my overriding concern is not so much whether my study is 'scientific' or leads to 'true' knowledge but whether it generates 'useful' knowledge (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009: 55–6)
- ▶ 'Useful' means that the research ultimately leads to providing sensible 'pedagogical advice' (Shen, 1989: 27)
- ▶ Possible to provide an illuminating account of how learners acquire a second language through a careful and detailed analysis of the language learners produce (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005)

#### Define your terms – learner language

- ▶ Learner language as expression – provides evidence of what learners know about a second language by examining the linguistic forms they produce
- ▶ Learner language as content – learners self-report about their beliefs and attitude to the target language and about their behaviours they engage in when learning the language (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005: 7–11)

#### Epistemological assumptions

- ▶ Post-positivist approach to linguistic data – aspects of students' tonal production exist as an objective reality but there are no simple ways to find definite knowledge about that reality (Taber, 2007: 38)
- ▶ Interpretivist approach to perception data – any explanations of tonal production, if forthcoming, will not be accepted as fact, but as one of a number of possible interpretations (Friedman, 2012: 190)

#### Theoretical underpinnings and conceptual frameworks

- ▶ Chao's (1948) framework – there are four basic lexical tones (advantages and disadvantages)
- ▶ Interlanguage theory (Selinker, 1972) – learners' tonal production is not random but rule-governed and influenced by both English, Chinese and universally preferred structures
- ▶ Tonal Markedness Scale – rising tones are more difficult to produce than falling tones which are more difficult than level tones (Zhang, 2010: 43)
- ▶ A learner's pronunciation accuracy can be influenced by the nature of the task (Nguyen & Macken, 2008)
- ▶ Relationship between competence and performance (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) – what kind of performance provides the most valid and reliable information about competence?

#### Case study research

- ▶ Is the class of learners the case or am I looking at multiple case studies in a single setting with each individual learner regarded as a separate 'unit of analysis'? (Merriam, 2009: 41)
- ▶ Boundaries of the case need to be clearly marked – otherwise it's not a case
- ▶ Exploratory, descriptive or explanatory (Yin, 2003) – where's the overall focus?
- ▶ Intrinsic or instrumental (Stake, 2005)

#### Sampling strategies

- ▶ Mainly a 'sample of convenience' as based on practical criteria such as ease of accessibility
- ▶ Partially 'purposeful' as I employed some sampling criteria (e.g. only native English speakers)
- ▶ Sampling is not representative of the whole class so findings do not apply to the whole class
- ▶ Parental permission – phrase the letters home carefully

### Ethical considerations

- ▶ British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines
- ▶ Avoid 'parasitic research activities' (Allwright, 2005: 361) but make the data collection activities as useful as possible for the learners and closely related to normal classroom activities
- ▶ Ultimately students need to know that their involvement in the research project is voluntary, safeguarded by confidentiality, not linked to any kind of formal class assessment, and may be cancelled at any moment by their choice without detrimental consequences (Taber, 2007: 140)

### Ethical considerations

- ▶ Potential conflicts of interest as a result of the dual teacher-researcher role
- ▶ 'The metaphor of teachers acting as gatekeepers, controlling the access of researchers to their pupils, breaks down when the teacher and researcher are one and the same' (Taber, 2002: 439)
- ▶ Students may not always feel that participating in the research is in their best interests - conceptualised as 'co-learners'
- ▶ Recognise the gift of the students' time

### Data collection and analysis procedures must be accessible

- ▶ Keep transcripts of interviews
- ▶ Questions used at interview need to be justified in relation to the specific study aims - stimulated recall interviews
- ▶ Explain rationale behind research decisions (e.g. looked at mean lengths of utterances to see any speed-accuracy trade off) (Tao and Guo, 2008: 26)
- ▶ Put oral proficiency tasks in the appendix

### Be honest about the limitations of your study

- ▶ Discuss potential threats to validity (the degree to which a study measures what it claims to measure) and the strategies you devised to offset the threats
- ▶ Judgement of errors is overly subjective so I had two native speaker raters and carried out a rater-compatibility analysis
- ▶ Pupils' behaviour and responses likely to be influenced because the person interviewing them is their own teacher - have a range of data collection methods

### No research is perfect

- ▶ Always possible to find problems but being self-critical increases the 'trustworthiness' of the study and makes it more convincing
- ▶ Qualitative research is as much about the process as about the outcomes
- ▶ Don't have too much data or too many research objectives. Be realistic within the time and resource constraints you're working under (Evans, 2009)
- ▶ Small scale pieces of empirically-based research can make a contribution, however modest, towards establishing a specific Chinese pedagogy

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