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## 'By teachers for teachers': innovative, teacher-friendly publishing of practitioner research

*Richard Smith, Deborah Bullock, Paula Rebolledo and Andrea Robles López*

### Introduction

This is a story – with pictures and hyperlinks, rather like a blog – of how we came to develop some innovative and teacher-friendly ways for teacher-research to be 'published', 'made public', 'communicated', 'publicized' or 'shared', both in oral form and in writing. As we show and tell what we have done, we also explain why.

### About us

Richard was coordinator, and Deborah and Paula were committee members of the [IATEFL Research Special Interest Group](#) (henceforth, 'ReSIG') between 2011 and 2015. Andrea, Paula and Richard worked together in the [Champion Teachers Project](#) organized by the British Council and Ministry of Education in Chile (2013 onwards). Later, Deborah helped to edit some of the stories from that project. Richard has synthesized different aspects of our work to lead-write this account.

### Our starting position

In our experience practitioner research can be empowering for teachers but perceived pressures to produce a written research report in conventional academic form can be discouraging, indeed disempowering. At the same time, academic-style reports may rarely be read by other teachers. We believe that teacher-research is primarily 'for teachers' as well as being 'by teachers', and does not *need* to follow academic norms. Therefore we have been exploring ways for teachers to share their research in a relatively comfortable manner for themselves and in a form which is relatively accessible for other teachers, in short in a way which is 'teacher-friendly' on both sides.

### Trying out different formats



From 2012 onwards, ReSIG began to emphasize support for teacher-research as a central part of its mission, organizing one-day workshops on both Action Research and Exploratory Practice in 2013 and a one-day event in 2014 where participants could present on their own research (this, in turn, fed into larger-scale teacher-research conferences in 2015 and 2016 in Turkey). Accompanying these initiatives, a new feature section in the SIG's publication *ELT Research* was set aside specifically for teacher-research reports, the hope being, as Paula expressed it, that we would be able to feature some of 'the bottom-up teacher-led research which seems so hard to find actually

published' (*ELT Research* 26: 8 (2012)).

Apart from welcoming reports written in relatively conventional form, the editors of this feature section encouraged more innovative writing. The first published report was '[Exploratory Practice: investigating my own classroom pedagogy](#)', by Yasmin Dar (2012), a narrative written in a relatively informal style which speaks directly to the reader as 'you'. Elsewhere in the same issue of *ELT Research* (26: 8), Yasmin expressed the following thought:

Teachers are very busy and I imagine, like me, trying to balance work and home life, so to save on preparation time, and to meet the needs of visual and auditory learning styles, perhaps other forms of communication (apart from the newsletter) could be useful for sharing information, for instance, teacher videos and podcasts.

At this time, Richard and Paula were in fact already setting up a '[Teacher-research reports](#)' section on the ReSIG website. Here, they stated their aim as being to

encourage sharing of experience through a wide variety of formats – non-conventional as well as conventional – including (but not limited to) video-recorded talks, podcast versions of conference presentations, newsletter articles, stories, visual diaries, posters, more formal reports, and so on.

One of the earliest links we put on this page was to a (2012) talk and accompanying blog entry titled '[Go online - getting your students to use Internet resources](#)' by Sandy Millin. Sandy used the application 'mybrainshark' to record a presentation of her research which she uploaded to her own blog, and we made a link to it. This kind of self-publication remains a simple and effective means for teachers to share their research orally, although it has not been widely taken up so far.



On the same 'Teacher Reports' webpage there are also links to video-recordings of a conference presentation by Ana Inés Salvi (on '[Combining learner autonomy and practitioner research through Exploratory Practice](#)', 2012) and to a talk by Katie Moran (on '[Exploratory Practice / Action Research Experience](#)', 2013). Video-recordings of oral presentations uploaded to YouTube or directly to a website can, again, be a simple and effective way to share teacher-research.

As ReSIG developed its social networks well beyond its own membership over ensuing years ([Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), in particular), and as it developed links with other groups, it became possible to publicize online presentations like those just

mentioned more and more widely and effectively: thus, the development of social media as well as audio-, PowerPoint- and video-uploading brought affordances for the sharing of teacher-research which did not exist even a few years previously.

Table 1 summarizes the formats we experimented with on the ReSIG 'Teacher-research Reports' page from 2011 to 2013, and which formed the building blocks for ensuing innovations:

Table 1: Items in different formats on IATEFL Research SIG 'Teacher Reports' page

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First-person written narrative: '<a href="#">Exploratory Practice: investigating my own classroom pedagogy</a>' by Yasmin Dar (2012);</li> <li>• Video-recorded presentation: '<a href="#">Combining learner autonomy and practitioner research through Exploratory Practice</a>', by Ana Inés Salvi (2012) and '<a href="#">Exploratory Practice / Action Research Experience</a>' by Katie Moran (2013);</li> <li>• 'mybrainshark' PowerPoint presentation and blog entry: '<a href="#">Go online - getting your students to use Internet resources</a>', by Sandy Millin (2012)</li> </ul>
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### Poster presentation as publication



A major focus and springboard for further experimentation with ways to share teacher-research was a one-day event ('Teachers Research!') organized by ReSIG on 1st April 2014. The day was planned and advertised as 'a special, participant-centred day dedicated to research *by* teachers *for* teachers. As Richard later explained, in '[The concept, and spirit, of "Teachers Research!"](#)' (p. 3), 'The emphasis on *for* teachers in this slogan was intended to push back an increasingly dominant idea that academic quality criteria should necessarily be applied to teacher-research' (see also this [review](#) of his, written around the same time). 'Pushing back' in this

case involved:

- there being no 'front' to the workshop room, in other words no sense of 'expert-centredness', as no use was made of a projector, and posters were placed in all of its corners, and all around the room;
- presenters speaking for no more than three minutes each (simply providing a 'taster') in front of a creatively designed poster (which would also provide only an outline), rather than giving a longer PowerPoint presentation or producing a highly detailed poster in mimicry of an academic conference;
- positively emphasizing active participation and *interactivity* rather than just listening: a generous amount of time was allotted to 'gallery-style' interactions

around posters – following the 3-minute presentations – along lines determined by participants themselves.

This disruption of the more typical conference presentation genre enabled a good number of teacher-researchers to present and was very positively responded to by participants. Indeed, the same basic style of sharing via poster presentations, interaction and discussion has since been extended to a set of larger conferences which have borrowed the title as well as the concept 'Teachers Research!', in Izmir (2015), Santiago de Chile (2016) – for which see these [reflective reports](#) – and Istanbul (2016) so far, with further conferences being planned for Buenos Aires (2017) and Istanbul (2017).

For those interested in adopting this style of sharing teacher-research themselves, Appendix 1 contains instructions which can be given to presenters and session chairs, to help them understand the process and underlying rationale.

Apart from offering inspiration for further events, the April 2014 Teachers Research! event stimulated innovative publications. From one point of view, of course, sharing via a poster presentation or other form of oral presentation can, in itself, be seen as a form of publication – 'making public', that is, to other teachers present. We were also mindful, though, that there was a much wider potential audience and so hoped to push 'oral publication' further by documenting the day's work systematically and sharing it more widely online. Following consultation in advance with presenters, a video-recording was made of each poster presentation, and close-up photographs were taken of all posters. Together with abstracts submitted previously, these were put together after the event to constitute the following multimedia compilation on the ReSIG website:

*Teachers Research! Posters, Talks, Discussions*, compiled by Richard Smith, with Daniel Xerri, Yasmin Dar & Ana Inés Salvi (2014).

The screenshot shows the IATEFL Research SIG website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, ReSIG Members Area, and Publications. Below the navigation bar, there is a section for Elena Oncevska. The text describes her poster titled "Outside the comfort zone: An experiment in group argumentative writing." It details an informal classroom experiment where she asked students to work with colleagues they had not worked with before, aiming to explore the value of getting students to work outside their comfort zone. Below the text, there is a video player for a 3-minute talk and a photo of the poster presentation. The photo shows Elena Oncevska standing next to a poster board with a colorful diagram. Below the photo, there is a link to "Back to Teachers Research! home".

By compiling recordings of oral presentations in this systematic manner, we were interested in pushing the boundaries of what might be considered a 'publication', in other words seeing whether a curated multi-media space could start to be seen as a valid form of teacher-research dissemination.

As in the example in the screenshot to the left (please click on it to go to this example directly), we did find that when there is a wish to disseminate beyond a small group, one means of doing so can be simply to record oral poster presentations and place them on a website, together with photographs of posters and perhaps short written abstracts. This can be considered to be an appropriate publication option, (1) in its own right, (2) as a step on the way to writing when this is desired (see 'From dialogue to posters to



writing' below) and/or (3) as resource to accompany a write-up (see 'Books of teacher-research' below).

Subsequent to the innovations documented above, a '[Teachers Research!](#)' Facebook group was set up (here we acknowledge the contribution of Kenan Dikilitaş), and some presentation recordings, photographs of posters, etc. at subsequent conferences have been occasionally uploaded there. However, one problem is that these don't constitute an accessible resource for very long, disappearing down the page as new concerns come to the fore. In the future we hope that conference organizers and mentors of teacher-research might repeat our initiative in carefully documenting, compiling and disseminating oral presentations and associated posters on dedicated websites, in order to further push back the boundaries and extend the possibilities of oral poster presentations being legitimately 'published' online.

### **From dialogue to poster to writing**

Alternatives to the conventional 'writing up' of findings have also been explored in the [Champion Teachers Project](#), which has been engaging secondary school teachers in teacher-research from January 2013 onwards. In fact, ReSIG and Champion Teacher Project experience intersected interestingly during the time the Teachers Research! event began to be prepared, in the second half of 2013.

The assumption of those involved in the first year of the Champion Teachers project had initially been that teachers should present final written reports in a relatively 'conventional' manner. However, we ended up attempting something quite different – an innovative, deliberately teacher-friendly approach to the presentation of reports at a two-day workshop in January 2014. A decision was taken to focus on sharing among the teachers involved (40, by that point) rather than making wider dissemination a priority. Partly, this was to emphasize immediate benefit and 'reward' to the teachers concerned rather than focus on production of a written report nobody may ever read. Indeed, a major concern throughout the project, which has now reached four cohorts of secondary teachers, has been to ensure that teacher-research can be incorporated into teachers' professional lives and be seen to have intrinsic value to them, to meet their own needs. Thus, teachers were asked to make a poster of their research journey and prepare to talk about it in the interests of gaining immediate feedback from peers as well as mentors.



As we shall see, a developmental, process approach to sharing was taken overall. At the workshop itself, participants were given the opportunity to practise in pairs, then groups of four, before presenting their posters orally to a larger group of ten. Participants had previously created their posters (which they brought with them to the workshop), but repeating the experience of oral presentation three times to

different people noticeably helped them develop confidence as well as gain extensive feedback.

We also introduced a further process-oriented innovation which was influenced by Paula's experience mentoring Andrea's teacher-research in the second half of 2013. At one of their meetings Andrea expressed concern about writing up her research, worried about the perceived need to do so in an academic style. Paula then suggested that Andrea could try engaging in relatively informal writing based on the notes of a conversation they had been having about her research methods and findings. This proved to be a good way for Andrea to overcome her anxiety, and Paula recommended the same to her other mentees. The experience influenced our decision not to require a written report by the time of the January 2014 workshop but instead to use this as a stepping-stone into writing.




Thus, teachers at the workshop were asked to record their oral presentations using mobile phones. They were then given time to transcribe their recordings, to gain feedback on the transcript from other participants, and to rewrite on this basis. By the end of the workshop, each teacher had 'given in' a poster, an oral record and an informal written report of their teacher-research which they could then decide to expand with further details and photographs and disseminate in

whatever form they chose.

For example, here is Andrea's recorded oral presentation, with her final written version based on transcript, accompanied with photographs:

'Wrapping up classes': audio-recording of presentation and story with photographs, by Andrea Robles (2014). Online.



**Wrapping up classes**

Andrea Robles

*"The end is as important as the beginning of the class"*

00:14 11:48

Investigación Acción Andrea Robles

The written report can be viewed as pdf below with most browsers:

My name is Andrea Robles, I am a teacher from Iquique and I'll share with you my action research project called "Wrapping up Classes" The end is as important as the beginning of the class.

I work in Academia Iquique School, it is one of the best subsidized schools in Iquique, and it is a huge school with more than one thousand and seven hundred students. Here we receive students who have a high performance in many subjects including English. If they don't get a 6.0 average at the end of the year they have to leave the school. For this reason we have good results and I do not have problems with grades, motivation, or class participation but what I do have is a puzzle, a wondering about my own teaching practice. I actually teach 11<sup>th</sup> graders and I have many questions about how I am doing my classes.

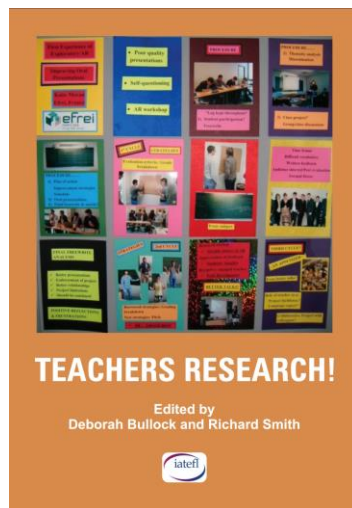
This was put on the project website, simply as an example and encouragement to other teachers to share their own reports further *if they wished*. Few took up this option, in fact, but wide dissemination had not, anyway, been our goal. In their feedback on the workshop, participants were particularly appreciative of the staged, supported manner of presenting, first in pairs, then groups of four, then larger groups, and the collaborative process approach that had been adopted to writing up.

## Books of teacher-research

However much we might wish oral presentations to take the place of written dissemination (cf. 'Poster presentation as publication' above), it cannot be denied that written publications at present tend to gain more attention of a particular kind (e.g. being reviewed) and, indeed, can currently be more easily cited and included in CVs of writers, etc. Of course they can also provide more detail for those who desire it. We are certainly not against write-ups, just against the assumption that they should be the default mode for busy teachers.

Collections of written reports have a place, then, but they can also be produced and presented in more or less teacher-friendly ways, as we shall now illustrate. Following the innovative 'Teachers Research!' April 2014 event described further above there was in fact a desire to create a written record. Deborah and Richard took on the editing for this, ending up with this online open access e-book:

*Teachers Research!*, edited by Deborah Bullock and Richard Smith (2015). Faversham: IATEFL.



As explained in the book's introduction – ‘[Introducing: a new kind of book for teacher-research](#)’ – we invited each of the poster presenters to draft a written version of their story for publication. Our intention was to create an online, open-access collection which would be accessible, of interest and encouraging to English teachers worldwide. Stories would be shorter than conventional reports, written informally, and include photographs of classrooms and other visual support. Since this would be an e-book, stories would also be hyperlinked to other resources, including to videos of presentations. In short, we aimed to produce a publication which would resonate well with the spirit of the event (‘by teachers and for teachers’). Although we offered suggestions

(influenced by ongoing experience from the Champion Teachers Project in Chile) on how to go about the writing process, we avoided prescriptive guidelines in order to preserve the variety of the poster presentations and the individual creativity of each presenter (see Appendix 2 for the guidance shared). Our editing interventions mainly focused on encouraging further reflection on the experiences described and on encouraging writers to find a personal ‘voice’. The resulting collection turned out to be quite unique particularly in its visual aspects and in the way it is integrated with the earlier produced website where video-recordings of original poster presentations and additional material can be viewed. A teacher-friendly style of presentation – visually appealing, in non-academic format and featuring jargon-free writing – was largely achieved and our hope is that the collection and its process





of construction might serve as a possible model for future teacher-research publications.

Indeed, Deborah and Richard brought this experience to bear in next co-editing, with Paula, an online e-book arising from the Champion Teachers project in Chile:

*Champion Teachers: stories of exploratory action research*, edited by Paula Rebolledo, Richard Smith and Deborah Bullock (2016). London: The British Council.

Recordings and writings connected with the final presentations of Champion Teacher cohorts 1 and 2 form the basis for the stories included in this collection, with the addition of photographs and other materials.

Again, as with the *Teachers Research!* book, we hoped to achieve a reader-friendly form of presentation which would appeal to other teachers, and make a collection which would stand out from those already available in relatively academic form. Visual media were once again incorporated, not only to support understanding, but also to increase appeal by breaking written text into manageable chunks and adding colour and individuality. While this had also been our aim in *Teachers Research!* we set out to innovate even further in this collection by introducing other less conventional visual features such as speech and think bubbles, and drawings.

The use of these visual features arose largely from our decision to present the stories as third-person accounts. This decision was made to avoid placing an added writing/editing burden on teachers, while providing them with the opportunity to disseminate their work further (although encouragement to others to engage in teacher-research, not dissemination of findings *per se*, was our main goal in publishing the collection). Third-person writing also enabled us to maintain a consistent tone throughout the collection. An alternative would have been for us to 'ghost-write' first person accounts, that is edit them to sound as if they had been fully authored by teachers themselves. However, we decided from the outset that this would be both inauthentic and patronizing. We should stress, however, that the stories and the photographs are the teachers' own, and the editing process merely served to help us achieve a consistently informal tone and produce accounts which are clear and reader-friendly. In line with this intention it seemed natural to add speech and think bubbles, stick figures and, on one occasion, even emoticons, not just for innovative effect but to highlight key points of the teachers' accounts, and to reflect something of their emotional experiences and individual personalities. Overall, we aimed to make this collection even more accessible and appealing than *Teachers Research!*, while remaining true to the experiences of the teachers involved.

### **Final reflections**

This article has been *about* innovative, teacher-friendly forms of presentation and writing of teacher-research, but it also *represents* an innovative form of writing in the field of ELT academic publishing. Being rather like a blog (in ways to be discussed below) but published as an article in a university-based journal, it is perhaps an

example of 'genre-busting' ('Why not mix it all together? Because that's what life is actually like. We laugh, we cry, you know, we buy the t-shirt.' - Alan Moore).

The article uses photographs, for example, and references via hyperlinks in the text which go directly to the sources mentioned. We consider this useful - essential even - because the article is a kind of 'show and tell', and the multimedia nature of some of the examples linked to can only be appreciated when actually viewed. Perhaps we've been attempting to extend the boundaries of academic writing to match what we've been describing for teacher-research. Or perhaps we just like writing this way!

As a result of our innovative use of photos and hyperlinks in this journal - and of our attempt to deliberately write in a jargon-free, reader-friendly style, we hope this has been a 'good read', and an informative and useful one, with plenty of immediately accessible examples for others interested in how teacher-research can best be promoted and publicized. Perhaps other mainstream journals might loosen up a bit and include blog-like contributions like ours - when appropriate - in the future!

### **Appendix 1: Instructions to presenters and chairs**

For those wishing to organize a teacher-research event on similar lines to those explained in the 'Poster presentations as publication' section of this article, the following instructions to presenters might be useful (as distributed in advance to presenters at the 'Teachers Research! Chile 2016' conference):

"We will be asking you not to use PowerPoint slides but instead to talk in front of a poster. The poster should be no larger than 90cm (width) X 120cm - you can use the space as you like. You and others in a group of five different presenters will talk from different corners of a room for no more than 3 minutes each, in front of your poster. This will serve as a stimulus for audience members to come round and look at / discuss your posters with you individually for about 30-40 minutes and finally there will be a general discussion in the room. So, we'd suggest you don't need too much detailed information on your poster, which should be more like a stimulus for discussion than a 'full' presentation. Also, please don't think that you have to produce a multi-coloured, large, professionally produced (and potentially expensive) 'academic conference type' poster - we're encouraging a relatively informal atmosphere so you could even just produce some A4 and A3 sheets (coloured paper perhaps) and stick them on poster paper. The more photos / pictures, the more attractive your poster will be. We hope this gives you enough of a feel for what we're expecting but please do get in touch if you have any questions in the lead-up to the event! You might like to take a look at the following record of the 'Teachers Research!' event in Harrogate, UK, in 2014, to get a feel for why / how we are imagining these sessions: <http://resig.weebly.com/teachers-research-1-april-2014.html>"

And the following instructions to those chosen to chair sessions in the rooms might also come in handy:

"Since the format is a little unconventional we thought we'd send you a few notes in advance about how the sessions should be organized. We've attached the draft of the programme and instructions sent to presenters [above] for your information. You might like to explore the website of the Harrogate 2014 event given at the bottom of the instructions for speakers [above] to see how a previous event worked in the style envisaged.

There are a few more things for you to be aware of:

All presenters need to make sure their posters are on the walls before the beginning of the session – please be there early and make sure this occurs!

[first 20 minutes] 3 minutes for each presenter in front of their poster – please indicate 'time is up' quite assertively, with an alarm on a mobile phone or by tinkling a glass with a pen.

[next 30 to 40 minutes] : people walk around and interact with the poster presenters in front of their posters. If the rooms are really too crowded we will have to think again, for example putting some of the posters in the corridors during this part. It is fine if people want to wander in and out of other rooms during this part.

[final 15 minutes – or more if you prefer: people sit down again and you facilitate a general discussion – e.g. 'what have you seen or heard that is interesting? What would you like to know more about regarding teacher-research? Get the presenters or others in the group to answer as much as possible]

And finally (quite important in order to share the conference with others who can't attend the event) Could you charge your mobile phone up and try to take a video or at least make an audio-recording on your mobile phone of every 3-minute presentation? Also, take a well-focused photo of every poster – on its own (one shot) and with the presenter standing in front of it (one shot) - and one photo just of the presenter's face? And please try to ask presenters if they mind these being uploaded to a website. Could you then send these to [organizer's email address here] or upload them to the following web-page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1667532090151304/>: it's a good place for sharing photos etc. of the conference."

## **Appendix 2: Brief guidance for writers**

Following an event where teacher-research has been shared via recorded oral presentations, the following suggestions for writing could be adapted (as sent to presenters at the April 2014 Teachers Research! event):

"We do not want to be prescriptive regarding what to include [in our collection] – we really appreciated the variety of the poster presentations. However, we understand that some of you may like some guidance or examples of what the stories could look like. So, we have a couple of suggestions for you:

One idea is [...] to transcribe what you actually said at the [event]. The 3-minute talk will probably produce 500–1000 words and be relatively informal/narrative in style – you could use this as a starting point. If your recorded talk isn't on the [website] yet, it will be soon.

For those of you who were unable to attend the [event] (and for those of you who did), you may find it useful to take a look at this example of a teacher's story from a similar project/publication in Chile: <http://championteachers.weebly.com/andrea-robles.html>"