

Why collaboration matters in language teaching action research

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For many teachers, teaching is (still) experienced as an ‘egg-crate’ profession (Lortie 1975), where their work is carried out in isolation from other colleagues. Many teachers enter their classrooms, or increasingly their online environments, and work with their students without any scheduled opportunities to engage with other practitioners on pedagogical issues and challenges that are important and relevant to them. This is particularly so in this age of managerialism and accountability. In the English Australia/Cambridge Assessment English Action Research in ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) Program we have aimed to offset any such sense of isolation by creating a collaborative professional learning process where teachers can share their expertise and draw creatively upon the skills and knowledge of other colleagues. We argue that such collaboration is fundamental to facilitating the sustainability of the research for the teachers, their centres and the ELICOS sector more generally, and also ultimately creates a broader impact on the effectiveness of student learning (see Burns, Edwards and Ellis 2022, Edwards and Burns 2016). Here I explore the concept of collaboration in such language teacher action research programs and why it matters.

What is collaborative action research?

Put simply, collaboration involves working with others to enhance meaning and understanding in enterprises that are important to a group of individuals. Collaborative processes mean sharing knowledge, ideas and skills with others to achieve a particular goal. Collaboration can be seen from a sociocultural perspective where learning with and from others is seen as more beneficial and productive than operating alone. To achieve collaboration in the ELICOS action research Program, various strategies have been initiated, including:

- collaborative identification of a researchable topic
- collegial processes for learning about and carrying out the research
- cooperative sharing of the outcomes of the research.

In the sections below, I discuss each of these elements in turn.

Collaborative identification of a researchable topic

One of the aims of the action research Program is to identify issues and topics that are current, relevant and important to the ELICOS field. Since 2010, when the Program began, various overarching themes have been pinpointed, such as student assessment and feedback, the teaching of the four language skills, and the interaction of students with their local community. Since the advent of COVID-19, greater emphasis has, understandably, been placed on student engagement with online learning, the pedagogical uses of technology in classrooms, and assessment of learner progress in online environments.

Thematic areas are identified each year through several collaborative strategies.

- At the final workshop of the action research Program, teachers propose themes they consider likely to be relevant to the ELICOS sector, their colleges, their colleagues and their students in the coming year. The discussion is conducted as an open and interactive exchange where teachers present their ideas and these are discussed for priority among the whole group. Teachers draw on their own experiences of the pedagogical opportunities and challenges within their colleges throughout the year and consider whether these would lend themselves to further research. The themes are then recorded for future discussion with other stakeholders.
- The themes identified by the teachers are presented to the action research Program's Reference Group in a further collaborative discussion. This group consists of two senior ELICOS managers from across the national ELICOS sector, one representative each from English Australia and Cambridge Assessment English in Australia, and the author of this article. The themes are evaluated for their currency to ELICOS and the teaching of international students more generally, their relevance to the developments and challenges in the sector, and their researchability. They are then prioritised according to these three criteria.
- These themes and their order of priority are presented to the sponsors of the Program, Cambridge University Press & Assessment in the UK, for further consideration and prioritisation. Their responses are then considered again by the Reference Group who are asked for a consensus on which theme should be selected.
- Following the selection of a thematic area, potential key research topics are fleshed out and listed to provide some guidance on researchable issues for teachers wishing to apply for the Program in the following year. The overarching theme and the possible topic areas are then promoted on the English Australia website for teachers interested in joining the Program. In 2021 the overall theme was 'New ways to assess learner progress' and the articles in this issue reflect the various ways that the participating teachers identified their topics and responded to this theme.

Collaboration in this element of the Program means that the research themes emerge ‘bottom-up’ from teachers’ concerns and interests, with reference to their wider experiences within their institutions, in combination with ‘top-down’ imperatives across the whole ELICOS sector. To these perspectives are added the international knowledge and considerations of an influential worldwide organisation with an interest in researching the impact of teaching and learning trends at the classroom level.

Collegial processes for learning about and carrying out research

Teachers who volunteer to participate in this Program, continuing from March to December, meet together from across Australia and do not previously know each other. Once the Program commences, they engage in a nine-month process of conducting their research. Typically, six projects are carried out in any one year, with teachers working individually or pairing with one other colleague. As mentioned above they come to this process with self-selected topics within an overarching theme. Their participation consists of three face-to-face (or more recently also online) collaborative workshops interspersed with the initiation and continuation of the research at their institutions. Various strategies for engendering collaboration characterise this process:

- Support for learning about action research is ensured through my facilitation of the Program, as an academic researcher and teacher educator, together with that of the English Australia Professional Development Manager. However, at the first workshop meeting, great emphasis is placed on the fact that the respective roles of teachers and facilitators in this Program is one of active collaboration, and not simply ‘passive participation’. Discussion focuses explicitly on the fact that the group comprises different aspects of expertise, in the form of direct classroom experience, research knowledge and sector familiarity. In addition, these are not monolithically located in any one individual but dispersed across the group in different dimensions. Beginning with explicit reflections on how collaboration is intended to work in the group has been shown to relax teachers who are meeting for the first time and who may be experiencing nervousness about what is to come.
- The schedules for each workshop are loosely structured and adjusted according to the needs and responses of the group. Although input is provided along the way (e.g. on the theory, practice and procedures in action research, current theoretical and practical ideas related to the research theme, approaches to data analysis), most of the time is allocated to the teachers describing and explaining their plans for research, updating the group on their progress, and outlining their successes and challenges. These exchanges are highly interactive, conducted first as short monologues to cover the ground but then as dialectic exchanges, where numerous questions are posed, suggestions made, (positive) critiques proposed and insights reflected upon.
- Following these exchanges, teachers are given time to draw on these collaborations with their colleagues and to reflect further on their research. These reflections are carried out individually or with pairs of teachers further discussing their ideas, depending on their preferences. Facilitators and teachers

frequently circulate the room to talk through questions that come up or refinements that need to be made for particular projects. These can consist, for example, of input on technology others have used successfully, revision of research questions, decisions about data collection or analysis and so on.

- Each workshop begins and ends with time set aside for discussion by the whole group of any issues that have arisen in the wider experience or conduct of the research. Everyone is encouraged to be frank and constructive in their comments, which typically include both positive (e.g. developments in teacher practice, student achievement) and negative (e.g. uncertainties or anxieties about the research, student enrolment, future employment in a volatile sector) reflections. These opportunities seem to provide an outlet for expressing the psychological/emotional aspects of being part of the Program but also for generating insights for its future development.
- To further collaboration between workshops, the participants make use of a Whatsapp group where updates and questions can be posted and even personal details celebrated (a new baby in 2021!). These contacts enable the teachers to maintain instant interactions with each other where new reflections and ideas can be generated and any problems quickly resolved. In addition, teachers are invited to hold individual online discussions with me if there is further input needed on any research dilemmas.

These aspects of creating collaboration are built into the processes rather than the products of the Program. They mediate the on-the-ground forward movement of the participants' experiences. They aim to provide support, interaction and reflection both at an individual and group level as the Program proceeds, and to create a strong and continuing network among the participants.

Cooperative sharing of the outcomes of the research

A further element of the Program is to ensure that the outcomes of the teachers' research are publicised for a wider audience, both within the ELICOS sector and beyond. This takes the form of professional development presentations on each project and also written reports in various formats. Again, strategies to enable this goal to become a collaborative and supported process have been attempted and refined over the years, in order to avoid placing a possibly burdensome set of expectations on individual teachers. I describe below how these strategies work:

- In the first workshop the teachers are given an overview of the expectations for how their research will be publicised in the ELICOS sector and beyond. The deadlines for producing each piece of writing are determined in line with the timetabling and teaching demands within the teachers' colleges and the expectations of the sponsors of the Program.
- The final written expectation from the teachers is the report published in this journal. This is seen as important, not only to summarise the findings from the Program but also to provide examples for other teachers and to expand

the existing literature on teacher action research. However, the process for producing this writing is broken down into various stages in order for the teachers to share their research among themselves and the facilitators along the way and, ultimately, to scaffold the development of a succession of written drafts.

These stages involve:

- i) a short account of up to 1,000 words written as a brief description or notes about 6–8 weeks after Workshop 1 and circulated to the group before Workshop 2 at the end of May;
 - ii) a 500-word description of the research and any findings for publication in an online brochure for other ELICOS teachers to read (see www.englishaustralia.com.au/documents/item/1359 for an example);
 - iii) an ‘interim’ report of up to 2,000 words submitted in August, for which teachers get detailed feedback from the facilitators in preparation for the final report;
 - iv) submission of the final report by early December. Feedback is then provided on this version by the end of January and the teachers revise it for submission through English Australia to this journal for publication.
- In addition to the written report, teachers present their research nationally to colleagues and other interested attendees. Before these presentations, the teachers rehearse what they have prepared at Workshop 3 and receive constructive and collaborative feedback on ways to refine the presentation. Although in previous years these presentations formed a colloquium at the annual English Australia conference, they have been offered in an online format since 2020 and the advent of COVID-19. On each of three successive days, two projects are presented in half hour sessions with additional time for discussion and questions. Staggering the presentations in this way accommodates the participants’ teaching obligations and also means that other teachers across the sector can dip into the presentations during their free time. The online versions have enabled a greater number, who may not have been able to attend the conference, to be at the sessions, and have served to disseminate the research more widely. These presentations are an important way of spreading the word about action research to other teachers in the sector, particularly as the presenters typically include reflections on their experiences to uncover the processes for others who might be interested. Beyond these ‘built-in’ opportunities, teachers in the Program have also presented their research within their organisations and at national and international seminars and conferences.

These different cooperative strategies have concentrated on the products of the Program, ensuring that outcomes can be documented and disseminated. Nevertheless, they have also incorporated collaborative forms of sharing and support and have expanded the interactive and collegial nature of the Program. Moreover, teachers have been kept informed and updated on each other’s projects and have commented positively on the connections and interrelationships among their topics, which have benefitted their own research.

Why collaboration matters and what it offers teacher action researchers

In the previous section I have outlined the various ways in which the action research in ELICOS Program has aimed to create collaboration within and across the research participant group. It is useful to draw out from this description what differences collaboration might make to the processes and products of conducting such research and why these might matter to teachers first experiencing this kind of research. In contrast to undertaking research individually, collaboration strives to create:

- equality: not everyone takes the same roles, but different forms of expertise are considered equal and important for all
- collegiality: participants work jointly with others on issues of common or related concern and have a group of 'critical friends' with whom to share research-in-progress
- reciprocity: participants aim to reciprocate access to information, provide feedback and share ideas and outcomes
- mutuality: participants create shared ownership of and investment in the research themes and connections
- affirmation: individuals within the group receive external evaluation and validation of their practices from other members
- sustainability: the impetus for the research is sustained through group interaction which encourages members to keep on task
- sociality: problem-posing and -resolving is shaped by recognition of the broader social, educational, institutional and professional contexts that might affect the individual
- regeneration: dialogue within the group is a source for the creative reconstruction of research and classroom practices.

(Adapted from: Burns and Hood 1997:4)

Conclusion

Collaboration has become something of a buzz word in many fields of work, including education and research. However, it is sometimes difficult to find accounts of what collaboration means 'on-the-ground' and how it manifests itself across the duration of a process. In this article, I have aimed to give a sense of how it is portrayed in the Action Research in ELICOS Program and what strategies are used to engender and sustain collaboration. My argument is that collaboration in action research is a potent means of support for teachers commencing a research journey. My hope is that this account may offer insights and suggestions for other practitioner researchers and professional development staff who may want to begin a similar initiative in their own organisations.

References

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