

9 Developing Teachers as Researchers: The BA (TESOL) Programme

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1 INTRODUCTION: TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS

In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the University of Leeds delivered a BA in Educational Studies (TESOL) Programme to six Cohorts of diploma-holding teachers over a nine year period, 1999 to 2008. The course aimed to provide participant teachers with relevant theoretical knowledge of different aspects of TESOL, and required them to use these theories to explore their understanding of their own practice. Over the nine years, the BA Programme developed and evolved, with each cohort of teachers studying revised modules and materials with revised assessment. These revisions were informed by the experience of previous cohorts, and also informed by developments in thinking and understanding of TESOL issues. One area of the programme that developed significantly was a focus on conducting small scale classroom research.

Being able to conduct meaningful, systematic and ethical research is now understood to be important for the continuing professional development of teachers. With the confidence and skills to conduct research into their own practice, teachers can cope with future changes to the curriculum as well as continue to develop their knowledge and understanding of their learners and their practice.

Conducting classroom research requires teachers to engage in a systematic planned process of investigating personally relevant issues by identifying research questions and appropriate research methods, collecting data, analysing and interpreting the findings, and then articulating those results to other practitioners. Teachers need to question their own practice and adopt an attitude of enquiry. Once they start asking questions about how their learners are learning and how they could be learning more effectively, they then need to develop the skills to answer those questions through conducting research. Having some skills to investigate their own practice could now be argued to be an essential component for teacher proficiency.

In this chapter, we look at the impact the BA Programme has had on developing teachers as researchers as seen from the perspectives of a former BA Regional Tutor (RT) who taught Cohorts 1 and 4, and two BA graduates, one from Cohort 4 and one from Cohort 6. We explore the different elements and modules of the programme, look at how research knowledge and skills were developed, particularly through the requirements of assessments, and also at how the programme developed from one cohort to another. We discuss some of the positive outcomes for teachers who studied on this BA course. Finally we attempt to identify some of the missed opportunities and outline implications for future in-service programmes of this nature.

2 DEVELOPING RESEARCH SKILLS THROUGH THE BA (TESOL) PROGRAMME

2.1 The BA (TESOL) Programme

The key aim of the Ministry of Education's BA Project was to upgrade the qualifications of English teachers from Diploma level to BA level, through the provision of a BA in Educational Studies Programme and to create a graduate teaching profession. It was expected that graduates from the programme would not only have developed their knowledge and understanding of TESOL issues, they would also have developed skills of analysis and critical thinking. Analysing, interpreting and evaluating are all skills developed through conducting research and teachers on the BA Programme developed these research skills through the research-based assessment of some modules studied in the course. These modules gradually and progressively trained the teachers to conduct small-scale research and present the process and findings of this research in an academic style.

In this chapter we hope to show what was learned by students about research, with particular reference to Cohorts 4 and 6 and how this was achieved. By highlighting some examples of the differences between the experiences of the various cohorts, we also hope to show how the BA Programme developed to enhance the research competency of students and we will suggest that this development of research skills was achieved somewhat less effectively with early cohorts and rather more effectively with later cohorts.

2.2 Developing research skills through the taught modules

Even in the early versions of the BA Programme, there was an implicit focus on teaching research skills in many modules, as module assignment questions typically emphasized a requirement to "design" , "analyze" , "compare" or "evaluate". The focus of assessment in the earlier cohorts was very much on developing critical thinking skills, particularly through looking at classroom activities. Many assignments required students to review background theory and then use this theory to develop criteria for designing and evaluating classroom activities. Students were assessed on their ability to discuss the theory and the extent to which the designed activity reflected that theory.

If we analyse the modules studied in Cohort 4 and 6, we can see that there was some development towards exploring practice other than the design of existing materials, such as by trying out activities in the classroom. For example, in the module Language Acquisition and Learning, part of the assessment required students to choose topics from the module and write journal entries based on their classroom observations about them. In this way students were trained at a fairly early stage in the programme (year 2 semester 1) to investigate classroom topics according to their interest and curiosity. They also learnt that they can explore ideas by collecting evidence from their own classrooms. These classroom investigations were very important in helping students learn about research and in fact, a number of the students were encouraged to continue investigating such topics through their dissertations. In the module Assessing Children Language Learning students were asked to design different kinds of assessment activities, evaluate their effectiveness by trying them out in their classrooms and then reflect on that experience. They were also shown how to deal with a large amount of data, such as data from test papers, how to classify the results and present them in an academic and professional style by grouping them in diagrams or tables, and how to interpret the data. Some students found the module Advanced Communication Skills 2 of value in helping them learn how to report data, too.

However, in some modules the requirements of assignments for earlier cohorts were different than the ones for Cohort 6. For example, in Tasks in Language Learning, students from Cohorts 1 to 4 were introduced to the idea of language learning tasks and were asked to plan a task in a systematic way, considering the sequencing and the organization so that the task would start with a preparation activity, continue to a core activity and end with a suitable follow up activity. In each stage, students had to identify the different kinds of demands and support required in the task, and to give a clear rationale for these in their discussion. However, Cohort 6 students were asked to design a task and then give it to a friend to teach while they observed the lesson and collected data to evaluate its effectiveness. This required the students to develop skills in focused observation and how to use observation schedules to collect data related to specific criteria. Cohort 6 students were therefore introduced to the idea of research and actually conducted some limited research early in their programme.

In the module Initial Literacy, Cohorts 1 and 2 students were asked to conduct an investigation into the literacy strategies used by Omani young learners by conducting a "miscue analysis" to identify different reading strategies used by one of their learners. The assignment was structured as a small research project, requiring the student to provide a literature review, outline their research questions, describe the process of data collection and research methods, analyze data and consider implications at the end. From this challenging but beneficial experience students learned about the basic elements of small-scale classroom research. Cohorts 3 and 4 also had the opportunity to conduct a miscue analysis, but were additionally given the option to analyse learners' written work. Cohort 6 students were asked to investigate the literacy skills of one pupil. They were required to

design instruments for collecting data related to reading and writing skills and then to analyze that data in order to diagnose weaknesses in the child's literacy skills. Finally they had to propose remedial plans to help the child overcome these weaknesses. Although this research was not identified as a case study investigation, that is in fact what students were developing some experience of.

For the Speaking and Listening module, part of the assessment required students to collect data about listening or speaking activities. Cohorts 1 to 3 students were asked to design a communicative task to develop pupils' speaking and listening skills, discuss the theoretical background and the criteria for developing effective speaking and listening activities. Cohort 4 students also had to design or adapt a speaking or listening task, but were additionally asked to teach and evaluate their task according to various criteria and by using different methods of data collection, such as observation. They then had to analyse pupils' performance and finally propose changes to improve their task. Cohort 6 were given a similar assessment task, but were directed to use or adapt speaking and listening activities from Hadfield & Hadfield (1999a and b). Both cohorts were required to use criteria to evaluate their task in practice, which gave them experience of acquiring research skills, such as collecting and analysing data from transcripts of pupils' speech in a systematic manner.

For the Stories in Language Learning module, the assessment required Cohorts 1 to 4 students to adapt or design their own big book story and read it to a class using the 'shared reading' method. Cohorts 1 to 3 were assessed on the quality of their big book, their ability to identify the features of an effective shared reading text and their procedure for teaching it. Cohort 4 students were additionally asked to record their reading of the big book to their class and analyse the reading. The Cohort 6 assignment question was different. Cohort 6 students were asked to teach several different stories over an extended period and then to choose the one story session which they believed their learners enjoyed most. This session needed to be reported on, according to criteria they had met in the module. Here, students were given the choice to experience using different methods of using stories, including story-telling, shared reading, using power point, or acting out the story events. This provided the students in Cohort 6 with experience of focused observation in several contexts using the same criteria, an interesting variation on developing research skills, which previous Cohorts had unfortunately not experienced.

Thus it can be seen that some assignments, and interestingly not just those for methodology modules, were developed during the project to provide students with experience of conducting small-scale research. Even though such modules did not have an explicit focus on research, the assignment questions that were set required students to begin to develop a range of knowledge and skills of how to conduct investigations and how to report them, which they could use in their dissertations afterwards.

2.3 Developing research skills through the Researching TESOL module

From our analysis of some of the assessments that the various cohorts experienced on the BA course, we can claim that the Researching TESOL module

was not, then, the starting point for students to learn and develop their research skills. However, it was a very important module as it was the first step in designing and carrying out the investigation that would lead to the dissertation. Thus, there was a more explicit focus on developing research knowledge. The module particularly focused on research methodology in TESOL, requiring students to look at different types of research, at a range of research approaches and methods, and at the strengths and limitations of each.

The Researching TESOL module built up an understanding of research and asked students to apply this understanding to their own topics, to support their own research. For example, they learned how to write a research proposal by identifying research questions and appropriate methods to carry out their own research. They learned how to critically read and evaluate research studies and discuss their implications in teaching and learning. Although this module helped both Cohorts 4 and 6 to gain a lot of important knowledge about the principles and practice of doing research, there was nevertheless still a focus on a traditional academic view of research, with relatively little focus on formally and explicitly developing the kind of research skills teachers need to conduct small-scale research into their own practice, such as action research and analysing qualitative data. Fortunately Cohorts 4 and 6 already knew a lot about conducting classroom research from earlier modules in the programme, as discussed above.

An important feature of the module was that it was taught in Leeds during the Summer School, which meant that the experience of learning about research was potentially even richer and more significant for students. As it was studied after they had chosen their topics, they had an excellent opportunity to discuss them with tutors in Leeds, justifying their choices and getting advice on developing or changing their topics or research questions. Cohorts 5 and 6 students were given the highly relevant task of identifying useful readings for their literature review, making the Leeds research experience even more valuable. Students were shown how to search for different sources in three large libraries, and how to use electronic searches, so they could find, borrow, copy and return references in a systematic and easy way. Being surrounded by many other students all studying and engaging in research made the whole process of focusing on their research much more meaningful for a majority of students. It should be added that, unfortunately, some did not make full use of this opportunity.

The module assessment for this module required students to write a detailed proposal for their own dissertation. They were asked to write about the plan that they had for their research and how they would carry out their investigation. Doing that assignment and receiving feedback from the markers helped to prepare students to carry out their own research, developed their critical reading of their chosen research topic area and helped them to plan the process they would need to go through to carry out their research.

2.4 Developing research skills through the Dissertation

As a result, when it was time for writing the dissertation, many Cohort 5 and 6 students were ready to undertake their research with some confidence. They could

apply the skills and knowledge that they gained from different modules over the course. They had an extended period (approximately 18 months) to work on their dissertation, which made it easier to trial research instruments so they could decide which ones would fit the questions asked and to collect data in different ways to answer their research questions. The way the dissertation was supported gradually improved from cohort to cohort (for example, the requirement for Cohorts 4 to 6 to make an oral presentation on their dissertation was an excellent innovation) and overall the dissertation proved a very important learning experience for every cohort. However, some students felt that the time allocated to the dissertation was too long, and that perhaps too much emphasis was placed on what was ultimately only a 20 module.

Writing up the dissertation was the last step in the process of carrying out the research and, to support this, each cohort of students was given a handbook (School of Education, 2007), which gave valuable explanation as to how to organize and write up the dissertation. However, the handbook only presented one relatively traditional academic approach to writing up a research report and advised a set structure (topic rationale, research questions, approach/methods, data collection, data analysis, interpretation, implications). It would have been more helpful if it had explored alternative structures of research reports, such as an action research report or a narrative style report. Students who wanted to carry out action research struggled with how to organize their research reports. The publication of Borg (2006) and Borg (2008) gave invaluable opportunities for Cohort 6 students to learn more about topics that had been investigated in the Omani context by students in Cohorts 1 to 4. Again, these volumes followed and reinforced the academic structure of research report writing recommended to Cohort 4 and 6 students in the handbook for writing up a dissertation (see above), but the implications and recommendations of the research published enriched their own research projects.

Despite certain missed opportunities, which we explore in more detail below, we believe that many BA students did develop skills and an understanding of research which they can use for investigating issues in their classrooms and which they can also share with other teachers in their schools.

3 POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF THE BA PROGRAMME

3.1 Impact of the BA Programme on teachers and learners

So far we have seen that many graduates of the BA Programme developed skills in conducting research, skills that have had a positive impact on their lives, both personally and professionally.

Graduates of the BA Programme seem to be more confident than before to evaluate themselves and others around them. Some may conduct their own research in their schools without guidance from a tutor or supervisor. They can also advise other teachers who wish to conduct research in their schools and are able to give valuable feedback on their work. Their view of themselves as researchers has encouraged them to initiate projects in their schools and carry out changes in their lives. Self-esteem is one of the main benefits gained from conducting research and

most of the graduates of the BA Programme feel much more respectful of their own role and work as a teacher and more responsible for implementing change and development in their country.

Developing research skills deepened teachers' understandings of many aspects of their work. Through watching their learners more closely, teachers who studied on the BA Programme now feel that they have a much better understanding of their learners' needs and know more about their abilities as learners of second language. Since their observations of them are now more focused and detailed, this results in more informed decisions being taken about what to do in the classroom to support learning. This focus on individual learners, their differences, individual needs and learning styles has had an important impact on what teachers do in the classroom and on the quality of learning. As for the activities used, teachers have developed the ability to analyse and understand the rationale for different activities, as a result of planning their own use of activities for different assignments. They have also developed the ability to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of these activities for a particular group of learners using evidence collected in a systematic way. Based on this, they can then make informed decisions about how to make activities more suitable for their own learners' level and interests. Equally, teachers are more confident in their ability to try out new techniques and routines in their classrooms and to then accurately evaluate their effectiveness. Many say that their daily decisions in planning and teaching their lessons are now much more informed and that they can justify decisions they make according to principles which they learned about on the BA. Further evidence of how developing research skills on the BA supported teachers' growth is provided elsewhere in this volume (see particularly Chapters 5 & 13).

3.2 Impact of the wider BA Project on research

Beyond the BA Programme, the wider BA Project also had an impact on the provision of further research opportunities for teachers in the Ministry of Education. In addition to funding 54 teachers to study for their MA, the BA Project funded two initiatives to develop the research capacity of English teachers, a 100 hour Advanced Research Skills course and an 80 hour Research for Professional Development course. The former enabled 20 teachers and supervisors from the Ministry of Education to develop research knowledge and skills while conducting a research project. The latter aimed to develop a one semester course that could be delivered by teacher trainers in their regions, to enable teachers to conduct research into their own practice and to build understanding and skills of research in schools so that research could become an integral part of more teachers' practice. The course currently enables 80 teachers annually to conduct research and write a report, which is published and shared through the Ministry of Education's internet portal.

4 ACHIEVEMENTS AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Overall it seems that the BA Programme and the wider BA Project have had a very significant impact on the ability of teachers in the Sultanate of Oman to conduct research in their schools. Teachers who studied on the BA course developed

greatly through their three years of in-service study. They identify a number of areas of development, including increased knowledge of the theories and practices of TESOL, ability to analyse and understand their teaching materials and their classrooms and increased confidence in themselves as effective practitioners able to change and articulate change. The assessment for the modules, particularly those assignments that had a practical component, helped participants develop skills of analysis and evaluation. As the Project continued to develop from one cohort to another, modules and materials were subject to revision, and with regards to developing research-related knowledge and skills a number of important improvements were made, as discussed above. Credit should be given to all those who brought about these changes, including RTs, Project Management and External Evaluators, but mostly to staff at Leeds who responded so positively to recommendations and improved the course.

Perhaps inevitably, more could have been done to develop research skills. This was an in-service degree programme. Students continued to teach throughout their three years of study. They had their intensive periods of study through the Summer and Winter schools, but they were also released from their schools one day a week to attend the course. This special in-service context was fully utilised in terms of providing students with relevant academic support with their studies, but perhaps under-utilised in relation to encouraging and developing inquiry and research into practice in the early cohorts. Assessment was required by the University of Leeds to be of an academic nature with students having to sit a number of examinations as well as write academic assignments. This was in-line with the other undergraduate programmes offered at the University. Decisions also had to be made in relation to what undergraduate students at Level 2 and Level 3 of their studies could be required to do and be assessed upon. This may have meant that the research skills required to collect and to analyse qualitative classroom data were initially considered to be Level 3 rather than Level 2 competencies, though by Cohort 4 this perception seems to have changed, since the assignment for Language Acquisition and Learning appeared to invite this type of research.

The focus on academic rigour and standardisation with other undergraduate programmes resulted in BA Programme students experiencing a rather remote academic experience; sitting exams and writing assignments that would at best require them to design, and possibly evaluate, a teaching activity. These assignments certainly did develop skills of critical analysis and evaluation as well as students' ability to write academic assignments. However, the opportunity to conduct meaningful small-scale action research into practice in relation to content learnt through the modules was missed, certainly in the earlier cohorts.

Learning for many students, particularly those studying in Cohorts 1 to 3, was therefore a rather theoretical and academic experience with the focus on being able to understand and articulate taught theories through either an examination or an assignment. Implications and links to their own practice were often limited. Where they did learn about research, it was a traditional academic view of research that encouraged students to write up the dissertation in one particular way (background, literature review, methods, analysis, interpretation, implications). The

outcome of this was that the majority of students in the earlier cohorts investigated other teachers' practices and perspectives through administering questionnaires, rather than investigating what they were doing in their own classroom and the effect of this on their learners.

An interesting aspect of this was how the traditional academic approach to research adopted by the University of Leeds for this BA programme, at least in its earlier versions, confirmed the already established socio-cultural view of research held by these students. They already understood before they started to study for their BA that research was a scientific and academic discipline conducted by expert researchers requiring data to be collected to prove a hypothesis. What they learnt through this programme confirmed that perspective rather than challenged it. A look through the dissertation titles of earlier cohorts clearly demonstrates the dominance of a traditional positivistic approach to research. However there is no doubt that Leeds colleagues and RTs did develop their knowledge of research through the project, through teaching the research sessions and through reflecting on the experience of teaching earlier cohorts, and that they also became more experienced supervisors. Accordingly, and in line with programme changes, views towards research also changed, and it is interesting that there was much more variety in the dissertation titles produced by Cohorts 4-6. There was much more of a focus on action research rather than experimental research by this time.

5 CONCLUSION

As the BA Programme developed over the years, it included an ever more effective research element, which was of significant importance in developing the research capacity of teachers of English in Oman. We therefore believe its legacy with regard to research in schools is a positive one and the University deserves credit for this.

However, not surprisingly, questions remain as to what could have been done from the start of the BA Programme to develop a more meaningful and effective understanding and competency in research, and what lessons have been learnt from this programme that could inform future programmes of this nature.

Although this was an academic BA degree with 240 credits that required assessment, the use of examinations could have been reduced, perhaps being limited to modules related to students' language development. Secondly the quantity of assessment overall could have been reduced with a focus on quality and not quantity (awarding 60 credits for the dissertation for example).

Thirdly, the programme could have started building students' knowledge of and skills in of teacher research from the very first assignment, by encouraging teachers to investigate their own learners and their own classrooms. This could have been done through, for example, asking them to carry out case study research with one or more students exploring the learning of individual pupils through simple observation and interview. It could have been done through guided and supported action research, with students implementing a change in their classroom to further explore ideas learnt in the module, and investigating the effect of that change through analysis of observation, documentary and even conference evidence.

There could have been a greater focus on collecting and analysing qualitative data and participants could have been supported in how to write up an action research study. Students also could have learned more about the importance of understanding and observing ethical research procedures, especially issues to do with researching children. Tutors also could have been properly supported, with workshops exploring important issues of teacher research and how to supervise students carrying out classroom research.

We hope that these points may inform future programmes of this nature.

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