

English language teachers' beliefs about research: Perspectives from the Netherlands

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Ten Geleide

Over het doen van onderzoek in de eigen lespraktijk (actieonderzoek) is al meerdere keren gepubliceerd in ons Tijdschrift. De voordelen lijken groot. Leraren die onderzoeksactiviteiten uitvoeren, werken aan hun eigen professionele ontwikkeling en zouden autonomer kunnen functioneren.

Onderzoek doen kost natuurlijk tijd en energie. Dat maakt het des te interessanter om anno 2008 te kijken op welke manieren en met welke frequentie leraren in ons land hun eigen onderwijspraktijk onderzoeken en/of onderzoeksliteratuur bestuderen. Simon Borg schetst in zijn Engelstalige bijdrage hoe een aantal leraren Engels dit aanpakt en op welke belemmeringen zij stuiten.

In de rubriek Gesignaleerd zijn ook nog andere positieve geluiden te horen over actieonderzoek. Het is niet alleen goed voor innovatief gedrag van leraren (zij durven makkelijker veranderingen aan te brengen in hun handelen), maar ook goed voor hun motivatie. Al met al genoeg redenen om leraren optimaal uit te rusten voor het doen van onderzoek en om een werkklimaat te organiseren waarin leraren die onderzoek (willen) doen ondersteund, gewaardeerd en beloond worden.

Dit nummer besteedt verder aandacht aan het motiveren van leerlingen. Leraren die de interesse van leerlingen in een bepaalde vreemde taal willen stimuleren, doen er verstandig aan tijd te besteden aan de beeldvorming over de doeltaal en het land waar de taal gesproken wordt. Dit kan door het aanbieden

van reclameteksten, zo stellen Jos Hornikx en Marianne Starren in hun bijdrage. In het artikel vindt de lezer praktische tips om in de VT-les te werken met reclameteksten.

Wat er gebeurt als het begrip 'communicatieve competentie' geconceptualiseerd en geoperationaliseerd wordt vanuit een competentiegerichte invalshoek leest u in de bijdrage van Els van der Pool en Frank Vonk. De inspanningen van de auteurs hebben tot doel hbo-opleidingen houvast te bij het opstellen van een doorlopende leerlijn van de communicatieve competentie in het Nederlands. Wellicht kan het denkkader ook gebruikt worden in de hbo-opleidingen moderne vreemde talen.

De bespreking van het proefschrift van Eline Raaphorst laat nog eens zien hoe moeilijk het voeren van een echte dialoog is tussen docent en studenten/leerlingen, maar ook tussen studenten/leerlingen onderling. Wellicht een geruststellende bevinding. Tegelijkertijd zou het uitlokken van (meer) zinvolle interactie in de tweede/vreemde taal een activiteit moeten zijn waaraan leraren voortdurend blijven sleutelen.

Dit en nog meer in dit nummer van het Tijdschrift.

Namens de redactie,
Carla Driessen

In education generally there has been sustained interest in recent years in the issue of teacher research engagement – i.e. ways of enabling teachers to be more involved in both reading and doing research. The belief underlying this drive has been that such engagement is good for teachers' professional development – reading and doing research can enable teachers to better understand their work, encourage them to reflect on what they do, lead them to experiment with new ideas, and become more autonomous (see, for example, Kincheloe, 2003; Kirkwood & Christie, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Overall, such processes can also enhance the quality of teachers' work. While the benefits of teacher research engagement have been widely discussed, we know less about teachers' beliefs about research and the author has been studying this issue with reference to English language teachers around the world. This paper reports on the views of a group of teachers of English working in the Netherlands.

Method

This research forms part of a larger study involving almost 600 teachers of English from 14 countries. For the current paper, a

volunteer sample of 92 teachers of English in the Netherlands completed a questionnaire (on-line or via electronic attachment) through which I studied the following questions:

1. What kinds of activities, according to teachers, can be described as 'research'?
2. What are teachers' views about the characteristics of 'good' research?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of their institutional culture in relation to research?
4. To what extent do teachers say they read research?
5. If they do not read research, what are their reasons?
6. To what extent do teachers say they do research?
7. What are their reasons for doing and not doing research?

Results

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As Table 1 shows, the teachers in this study were varied in terms of years of experience in ELT, with the largest groups being the least experienced (0-4 years) and the most experienced (25+). In terms of qualifications, over 40% had a first degree while a similar figure

| Years | N | % |
|--------------|-----------|--------------|
| 0-4 | 23 | 25.8 |
| 5-9 | 17 | 19.1 |
| 10-14 | 9 | 10.1 |
| 15-19 | 5 | 5.6 |
| 20-24 | 9 | 10.1 |
| 25+ | 26 | 29.2 |
| Total | 89 | 100.0 |

Table 1: Years of experience in ELT

had a Master's degree. In other respects the teachers were more homogeneous; almost 85% of them worked in state schools while over 93% said they taught learners in the 13-19 age group.

Conceptions of Research

EVALUATING RESEARCH SCENARIOS

To investigate their views about what research is, I asked the teachers to indicate to what extent they felt the activities described in six scenarios were or were not research. The scenarios are listed in Table 2 and in each case teachers had to say if they felt the activity

- 1 A teacher noticed that an activity she used in class did not work well. She thought about this after the lesson and made some notes in her diary. She tried something different in her next lesson. This time the activity was more successful.
- 2 A teacher read about a new approach to teaching writing and decided to try it out in his class over a period of two weeks. He video recorded some of his lessons and collected samples of learners' written work. He analysed this information then presented the results to his colleagues at a staff meeting.
- 3 A teacher was doing an MA course. She read several books and articles about grammar teaching then wrote an essay of 6000 words in which she discussed the main points in those readings.
- 4 A university lecturer gave a questionnaire about the use of computers in language teaching to 500 teachers. Statistics were used to analyse the questionnaires. The lecturer wrote an article about the work in an academic journal.
- 5 To find out which of two methods for teaching vocabulary was more effective, a teacher first tested two classes. Then for four weeks she taught vocabulary to each class using a different method. After that she tested both groups again and compared the results to the first test. She decided to use the method which worked best in her own teaching.
- 6 Mid-way through a course, a teacher gave a class of 30 students a feedback form. The next day, five students handed in their completed forms. The teacher read these and used the information to decide what to do in the second part of the course.

Table 2: Six scenarios

described was definitely research, probably research, probably not research or definitely not research.

Figure 1 collapses teachers' ratings of each scenario into two categories - 'Not research' (made up of definitely not research and probably not research) and 'Research' (probably research and definitely research).

Scenario 2 was that rated as research by most teachers (95.6%); Scenarios 4 and 5 were also highly rated as research (by 93.5% and 90.2% of the teachers respectively), while a clear majority (73.9%) rated Scenario 3 as research. Scenario 6 was that least recognized as research (62% placed it in the 'not research' category) while on Scenario 1 opin-

ions were quite evenly split (46.7% research, 53.3% not research).

Characteristics of Good Quality Research

Teachers were also asked to rate the importance to good quality research of a list of characteristics. Table 3 summarizes the responses to this question. 'More important' includes 'important' and 'very important' ratings for each characteristic, while 'Less important' includes 'unimportant' and 'moderately important' responses.

The characteristics most highly rated as important in research were 'hypotheses are

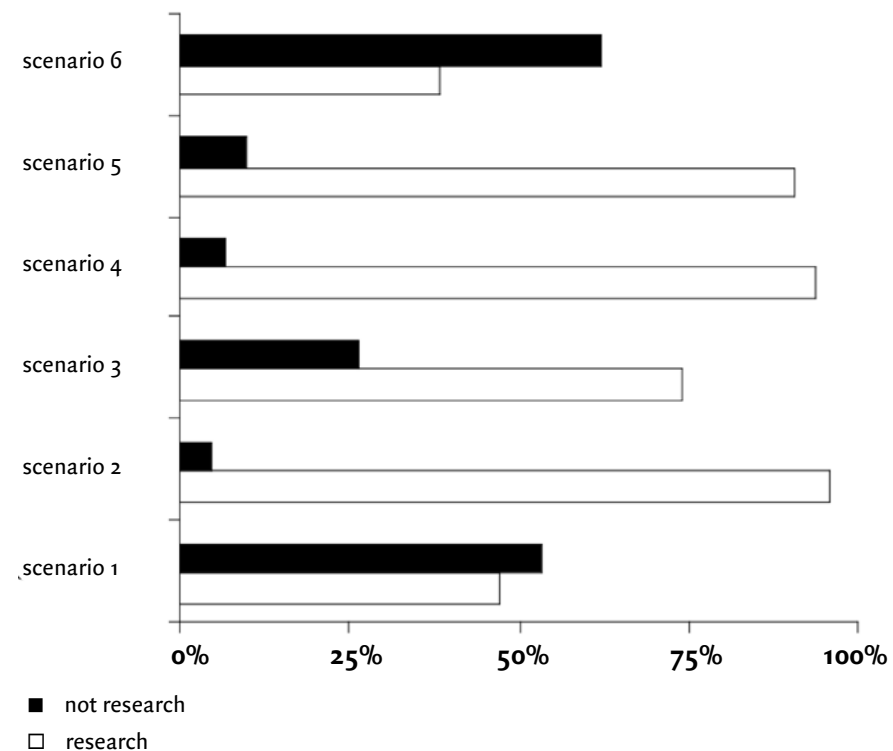


Figure 1: Assessment of research scenarios

| Research characteristic | More Important (%) | Less Important (%) | Unsure (%) |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Hypotheses are tested | 87.00 | 3.30 | 9.80 |
| The researcher is objective | 87.00 | 8.70 | 4.30 |
| Variables are controlled | 75.00 | 4.30 | 20.70 |
| The results give teachers ideas they can use | 72.80 | 19.50 | 7.60 |
| A large number of people are studied | 70.70 | 21.70 | 7.60 |
| Experiments are used | 68.50 | 14.10 | 17.40 |
| Information is analysed statistically | 66.30 | 17.40 | 16.30 |
| A large volume of information is collected | 60.90 | 29.30 | 9.80 |
| The results are made public | 47.80 | 40.20 | 12.00 |
| Questionnaires are used | 40.20 | 39.20 | 20.70 |
| The results apply to many ELT contexts | 33.70 | 41.30 | 25.00 |

Table 3: Assessment of research characteristics

tested' and 'the researcher is objective'. That least considered to be important in determining the quality of research was 'the results apply to many ELT contexts'; only 33.7% felt this was important. This was, however, also the characteristic which received the highest number of 'unsure' responses, suggesting that the teachers had doubts about the importance of generalizable results in research. Fewer than half of the teachers felt that making results public was important for 'good' research.

Research Culture

There is evidence in the literature that the institutional culture can influence the extent to which teachers read and do research (e.g. Ebbutt, 2001). A further section of the questionnaire thus aimed to elicit teachers' views of the extent to which they worked in an environment which encouraged learning about and doing research. Table 4 summarizes these views (the original five point scale,

| View on institutional research culture | Agree (%) | Disagree (%) | Don't Know (%) |
|---|-----------|--------------|----------------|
| Teachers have access to research books and journals | 51.10 | 39.10 | 9.80 |
| Teachers have opportunities to learn about current research | 50.00 | 36.90 | 13.00 |
| Teachers do research themselves | 40.20 | 40.20 | 19.60 |
| Teachers are given support to attend ELT conferences | 35.90 | 51.10 | 13.00 |
| Teachers read published research | 34.80 | 26.00 | 39.10 |
| Teachers talk about research | 33.70 | 54.40 | 12.00 |
| The management encourages teachers to do research | 22.80 | 70.60 | 6.50 |
| Teachers feel that doing research is an important part of their job | 19.60 | 56.50 | 23.90 |
| Time for doing research is built into teachers' workloads | 16.30 | 77.20 | 6.50 |

Table 4: Assessment of research culture

with 'disagree strongly' and 'agree strongly' at the extremes, has been collapsed into three categories and responses expressed as percentages).

Overall, high levels of agreement with any particular statement were not found here. In particular, the levels of agreement for the 'the management encourages teachers to do research', 'teachers feel that doing research is an important part of their job' and 'time for doing research is built into teachers' work-

loads' were particularly low. Overall, the average rating teachers gave their institutional research culture was 2.76 (out of 5, where 1 = an environment that does not promote research at all and 5 = a very supportive environment for research). This means that as a group these teachers did not feel they worked in supportive institutional research cultures.

| FREQUENCY | N | % |
|--------------|-----------|------------|
| Never | 2 | 2.2 |
| Rarely | 19 | 20.7 |
| Sometimes | 49 | 53.3 |
| Often | 22 | 23.1 |
| Total | 92 | 100 |

Table 5: Frequency of reading research

Reading Research

Table 5 summarizes how often the teachers said they read research. Overall, over 75% said they read research at least sometimes. These teachers were asked what they read. Table 6 summarizes the responses and shows that web-based sources of research were those most commonly referred to by the teachers.

The 21 teachers who said they read research rarely or never were asked why. Table 7 summarizes their answers according to the numbers of times each reason was chosen and in descending order (teachers were asked to choose all the reasons that were true for them). As the table shows, lack of time was the most common reason given.

| REASONS | N |
|---|----|
| I do not have time. | 13 |
| Published research does not give me practical advice for the classroom. | 10 |
| I do not have access to books and journals. | 9 |
| I am not interested in research. | 7 |
| I find published research hard to understand. | 5 |

Table 7: Reasons for not reading research

| SOURCE | N |
|------------------------|----|
| Books | 49 |
| Academic journals | 21 |
| Professional Journals | 29 |
| Professional Magazines | 43 |
| Newsletters | 29 |
| Web-based | 56 |

Table 6: Sources of research

Doing Research

Table 8 summarizes how often the teachers said they did research. Those who said they did research at least sometimes (just over 47%) were asked to give reasons for doing so.

Figure 2 shows how often different reasons were mentioned. The three reasons for doing research cited most commonly (teachers could choose more than one reason) were 'to find better ways of teaching', 'it is good for my professional development' and 'to solve problems in my professional work'. These motives suggest that these teachers' reasons for doing research are pedagogical and practical rather than being driven by external

| FREQUENCY | N | % |
|--------------|-----------|------------|
| Never | 7 | 7.7 |
| Rarely | 41 | 45.1 |
| Sometimes | 37 | 40.7 |
| Often | 6 | 6.5 |
| Total | 91 | 100 |

Table 8: Frequency of doing research

concerns such as promotion or the demands of employers. These results, of course, do not distinguish among the different kinds of research teachers do; they simply reflect teachers' reasons for doing research, whatever form that activity takes for them (and so, for example, teachers who say they do research because they enjoy it may be enjoying various

kinds of inquiry). This points to an issue I comment on later about the need for qualitative research which explores the meanings of questionnaire responses such as these more closely.

The forty-eight teachers who said they did research rarely or never were also asked to comment on why. Table 9 summarizes their answers.

Once again, a lack of time was by far the reason most often cited for teachers' lack of involvement in research. Teachers also felt they lacked knowledge of research and also notable here is the potential influence of peers; i.e. in contexts where most teachers are not doing research it may be difficult for an individual teacher to do so. Over 37% of the teachers who do not do research also explained that they were teachers not researchers and that research was not part of their job; as one teacher wrote in an additional comment 'It [research] should be rarely!', implying that it was not a task teachers should be doing often.



Figure 2: Reasons for doing research

| REASONS | N |
|--|----|
| I do not have time to do research. | 40 |
| I do not know enough about research methods. | 22 |
| Most of my colleagues do not do research. | 20 |
| My job is to teach not to do research. | 18 |
| I need someone to advise me but no one is available. | 9 |
| I do not have access to the books and journals I need. | 5 |
| The learners would not co-operate if I did research in class. | 4 |
| Other teachers would not co-operate if I asked for their help. | 4 |
| My employer discourages it. | 1 |
| I am not interested in doing research. | 1 |

Table 9: Reasons for not doing research

Discussion

The teachers of English in the Netherlands who participated in the study were varied in terms of experience and qualifications but homogeneous in that they taught largely in state secondary schools and worked mainly with learners in the 13-19 range. Their responses to the questions involving the six scenarios and the characteristics of good quality research suggested that to a certain extent the predominant view of research held was a conventional scientific one (i.e. which values objectivity, hypotheses, and large samples). This finding reflects that of studies I have conducted in Turkey (Borg, 2007b) and Switzerland (Borg, 2007a) as well as the findings of research outside ELT which has asked teachers about their views of research (e.g. McNamara, 2002). At the same time, though, the teachers in this study valued research which gave them practical ideas they can use. Nonetheless, the overall view that research should meet certain scientific crite-

ria may be a barrier to teachers' involvement in it; for example, if teachers believe that research must study many participants and use statistics, then they may also feel that this is not an activity they can do because they lack the time and the expertise. An important step, then, in promoting research more productively among teachers is to encourage them to think more broadly about the different kinds of activity which research can involve, focusing in particular on the kinds of small-scale studies which are more feasible for teachers (Borg 2007c provides further discussion of this issue). Good research does not have to be large-scale and quantitative, while a certain level of subjectivity in educational research is always present; the key, of course, is that the researcher is aware of, monitors and reflects on the influence that such subjectivities have on the conduct and results of the study.

Teachers' responses here also highlighted uncertainty about whether research findings need to be true for contexts other than that studied and about whether research needs to

be made public. For the first of these, while generalizable results are often desirable, they are not a necessary criterion for good quality research, particularly in qualitative work (see Dörnyei 2007 for a discussion of this issue). On the issue of making findings public, I am a strong proponent of the idea that this is necessary, although I would qualify my position by saying that making public does not have to mean writing an article in a journal. Telling colleagues about our research is making it public too. Overall, I support the view promoted by, among others, Crookes (1993), that for an activity to count as research it must be made available for others to comment on.

Research textbooks (e.g. Nunan 1992) also highlight a range of other characteristics which research is generally seen to have; it must address a question, collect data, and analyse and interpret the data; qualities such as systematicity and rigour are also commonly mentioned. On the basis of such criteria, Scenario 3 (Table 2 above), which over 75% of the teachers here said was research, would not count as research as it involves reading but does not involve the collection and analysis of data.

This study also suggests that the teachers do not feel their institutions provide supportive research cultures. The overall assessment of institutional research cultures in this study was more negative than in the studies of English language teachers in Turkey and Switzerland referred to above. Given these conditions, one would not expect the teachers in this study to report high levels of reading and doing research.

Somewhat surprisingly, then, over 75% of the teachers here said they read research at least sometimes. I would interpret this finding cautiously. First, 'sometimes' does not have a specific meaning. In another study, I have asked teachers what 'sometimes' means and their answers have ranged from 'whenever I can' to 'once a year'. The

fact that over 75% of the teachers here said they read research at least sometimes, then, does not necessarily mean that they are reading research regularly. The second caution relates to the kind of material that is being read. Web-based sources of research were those most frequently mentioned by the teachers; this may mean that teachers are using the internet to look for research about language teaching or that they are (also) using the internet to look for teaching ideas; the latter is a form of research in the sense of looking for information but it is not reading research in the sense intended here. More information is needed about how often teachers read research and what precisely it is that they read.

In terms of doing research, teachers fell into two groups of similar size – those who said they did research sometimes or often and those who said they did it rarely or never. Those in the former group gave mainly practical and professional reasons for doing research, above all a desire to find better ways of teaching. External motivators such as promotion did not seem to be a reason why teachers did research (it may be that in the Netherlands, as in many other contexts, doing research will not actually help teachers get promoted). Here, too, though, caution is required in interpreting these results; as noted above terms such as 'often' and 'sometimes' can be interpreted in various ways; additionally, the results reflect what teachers say they do, and we can thus not make any conclusions about their actual practices (some teachers who say they do research often may not actually be engaging in activities which meet the criteria to be called research and which I discussed above). This points to the need for closer study of what teachers who say they do research actually do.

In explaining why they did not read and do research, teachers highlighted a number of

common issues. A lack of time was a major factor (this was also true in the Switzerland study). Several teachers also felt that research was not part of their job and that they lacked the knowledge to do research. Another reason teachers commonly gave for not doing research was the fact that their colleagues did not either. All of these factors raise important questions about the kinds of conditions which need to exist in order for teachers to feel that research is something they can engage in and with; time seems to be an obvious requirement, but there are other issues to address too such as raising awareness among teachers of the practical contribution research can make to their work. A number of conditions which support teacher research are discussed in more detail in Borg (2006) and Watkins (2006).

Conclusion

This study has shed light on the beliefs about research held by a group of teachers of English in the Netherlands. The overall picture to emerge is that there are a number of factors in these teachers' contexts that hinder the extent to which they can make research a productive feature of their professional work. Some of these factors are internal to the teachers (e.g. restricted views of what counts as research and about the relevance of research to their work) and others are related to their institutions (e.g. lack of time and encouragement). Understanding these factors needs to be the first step in any initiatives which aim to promote teacher research among teachers of English in the Netherlands (particularly in the state sector); this study has provided some initial insights, but more extensive and detailed research, using both qualitative and quantitative data, is required to examine these issues in more detail.

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