TEACHERS ENGAGING IN RESEARCH
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This volume is dedicated to English language teachers’ accounts of their engagement in research in their own classroom contexts throughout Turkey, a country where there has been an upsurge of practitioner research in recent years. The intrinsic benefits of such activity, in terms of more motivated learners and teachers, are becoming more widely known. Publications such as this, which appears just prior to the IATEFL ReSIG’s 1st international teacher research conference in Turkey (held in conjunction with Bahçeşehir University), continue to spread the word. Themes addressed in this volume include teacher research-mentoring (which is vital as teacher research spreads), developing collaboration and autonomy in language learning, skills development, teachers’ reflections on their own development, and technology and language practice.

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**A journey of enquiry to improvement: the story of an enthusiastic action research team of EFL instructors**

*Seden Eraldemir Tuyan*

**Our context**

The context of this action research project is YADYO, the School of Foreign Languages at Çukurova University in Turkey. I have been working here for more than twenty years in different academic offices, including syllabus, staff development as well as being a devoted EFL instructor. The primary aim of our school is to provide English language education for the students studying at Çukurova University, Turkey, at international standards. Even those students studying in departments where the medium of instruction is English for only some of their subjects need to develop the English language skills necessary to succeed in their departmental courses and make use of all kinds of resources that will be related to their academic studies effectively and to communicate in written and oral contexts in English to continue their professional and social lives. In this respect, every year the school serves 1500-2000 students who are newly admitted to different majoring programs offered by Çukurova University according to their level of English starting from A1 to B2 or upper levels. Each classroom at YADYO is led by a team of two or three instructors. The staff of our school includes 70 professionals (65 full-time instructors, 2 assistant professors and 3 administrators). Our instructors are highly qualified, most holding MA degrees while almost 20 have PhDs. Some of these instructors also work part-time or full-time in different academic units of the school such as the Testing Office, Curriculum and Material Development, Self-Access Center, Project Office and Staff Development Unit.

**How did we start the project and why?**

I have always been a profound enthusiast of action research in every phase of my professional life, including my roles as an EFL instructor and an academic researcher. So, when I first heard about the June 2014 IATEFL ReSIG Conference hosted by Gediz University, despite being late for the abstract submission,
I still wanted to become an audience participant and experience the atmosphere of the conference. To me, the conference was a great success not only in terms of my having the chance to listen to the invaluably fruitful and inspiring talks given by respected plenary speakers, Richard Smith, Anne Burns and Dick Allwright, but also the learning and sharing environment provided by the conference organizers to all the participants of the conference. Just then and right there, I really felt that I was dying to be a part of that community who gave their hearts to teacher research. At that moment, I couldn't wait to meet Kenan Dikilitaş, the father of the wonderful project that the conference was all about. We had a very nice conversation with him about how he started the project in 2010 as the head of the professional development at Gediz University to help the teaching staff engage in classroom research with and for their students to develop professionally. His idea was great and manageable and a similar kind of project could be started at YADYO as well to improve the dynamics of professional development at our school as the existing Staff Development Unit (SDU) had not been working very effectively in terms of organizing “structured” developmental activities for the teaching staff within the school. This was mostly because of the teachers’ heavy workloads and related time constraints. For the last six years, the only developmental activity which could be offered by SDU had been some workshops or seminars given by guest speakers.

Kenan Dikilitaş was very motivated about spreading the idea of his project and determined and resourceful about helping the creation of different teacher-researcher teams across Turkey. During our conversation, he suggested that I should form a team of teacher-researchers at my institution and become a part of the following year’s conference with our own project. He offered guidance and made me believe that I could handle being the leader of such a research team. He sounded so encouraging that when I was back home, I told my colleagues all about my experience at Gediz University, shared the publication of the previous conference with them and asked for volunteer participants for such a professional development activity. Eight volunteered. That was it. I had my own research team. Finally, at the beginning of the 2014-2015 academic year, our own research project started as a continuous professional development activity (CPD) at YADYO, under my leadership.

**What did I do to support researchers?**

The project served as a journey of enquiry to improvement in the EFL context both for me as the leader of the team and the eight instructors who voluntarily took part and accompanied me on the way to personal and professional development. We were a group of 9 professionals, 5 with PhDs, 2 with MA degrees and 2 PhD. candidates. According to the survey I conducted, the participants reported the following reasons for joining our group.

- Develop new teaching strategies
- Interact with colleagues
- Engage in teaching-related research
- Learn about Action Research
- Harmonize with change
- Improve teaching in a systematic way
- Go further in professional life
- Be part of a group who can understand one another’s problems
- Collaborate and share classroom experience with colleagues

I was lucky as the leader of this group in the sense that all the participants somehow had some understanding of action research because of having been involved in academic research previously. However, we needed to have a kick-off session to share our project expectations, build a supportive environment for organizing our existing knowledge about action research and share this prior knowledge. In short, the first thing we should do was to develop a shared understanding of action research among the participants of the group. Therefore, 2 weeks before the kick-off session, I sent an e-mail to the group members explaining what the project would entail, the date and time of the meeting and asking them to arrange the time of their lessons accordingly. I also attached Anne Burns’ book “Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching, a Guide for Practitioners” to my e-mail recommending everyone to read mainly the first two chapters (‘What is action research?’ and ‘Planning the action’) before coming to the session. After all, I tried my best and advised others in the group to remind one another to read the book for the successful continuity of the project whenever and wherever I saw them, even in the ladies room and the corridors of our school, causing bursts of laughter and fun. Our project had started to bind us in its own ways and I was happy to feel that way.

The kick-off meeting went in the way I expected and planned earlier. We started the meeting by clearing our understanding on how to conduct action research in our own classrooms using Anne Burns’ suggestions in the
book. We also shared our previous experience and stories about action research we had conducted earlier. In the second part of the session, I introduced the teacher-research program suggested and prepared by Dikilitas (2015, p. 53). And as a whole group we agreed that his program should serve as our roadmap until the end of the year so that we would be ready and able to present our studies at the IATEFL ReSIG International Teacher Research Conference held by Gediz University, 17–19 June, 2015. Dikilitas’s suggestion was to split the research engagement process into four stages for conducting individual projects and completion of the related activities by the team members in due time (see Table 1).

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Considering our workloads and other time constraints we decided to have our sessions monthly, nevertheless promised to have one-to-one meetings when required and divided the stages into 2-month periods: (Stage 1: October-November), (Stage 2: December-January), (Stage 3: February-March), (Stage 4: April-May). We also set the date and time of our next meeting promising to observe our own classrooms to identify the purpose and scope of our research and to choose our questions, data collection and analysis strategies by then. Everyone in the group was expected to come to the next meeting with a draft outline of her research plan including me. As part of my interest in emotional intelligence, particularly empathy, I decided to conduct my own research in my own classroom as one of the participants of the research team. I really wanted to empathize with the possible struggles my colleagues might experience during the process and thus understand and help them better.

In our next meeting in November, almost everyone was certain about what puzzled them in their classes. We shared our scopes, purposes and research questions with one another during that meeting. Critical reflection which was supplemented by critical friendships among the group members caused motivation and provided direction for our projects. We refined our research plan outlines until the December meeting. At the end of Stage 1, with the help of the two meetings held, private talks in the offices, chats in the corridors and everywhere available, text messages on WhatsApp and above all the ongoing support and feedback from Kenan Dikilitaş, we were ready to move on to the 2nd Stage of our research engagement process, mainly the data collection period.
All in all, at the end of the 1st Stage, due to the need to work on similar issues going on in the classroom and the foci of topics for research, two research partnerships emerged out of our research team. The other 5 instructors including me preferred to have our individual projects. The focus areas preferred by the teacher-researchers were mainly about improving writing, speaking, learner autonomy, language learning attitudes and motivation. The research topics represented in this volume include those related to personal goal setting, supporting autonomous learning, using creative writing activities, and encouraging peer assessment and peer collaboration.

How I felt about the group development
From my point of view as the leader of this group, the main concerns of forming a usual AR group for CPD purposes could be about attitudes towards action research, developing the required research skills for carrying out individual studies, selection and development of a research topic, reviewing the literature. However, considering the participating ELT instructors and their backgrounds, our case was different. Although our group research started as a voluntary CPD activity and the group members were very enthusiastic to conduct research in their own classrooms, the time to be devoted to come together as a whole group and spare for individual studies turned out to be very limited. So, no matter how challenging the problem was, I needed to do something in the best possible way to lead the participants of the group to arrange their time for meetings and consequently create some extra time for the continuity of the individual studies.

With this aim in mind, I decided to help the participants become a professional learning community who act and study together to direct their efforts toward improved student learning (Hord, 1997) and care for one another’s improvement. The creation and the growth of our caring community with a sense of team spirit helped us solve our time problems to a great extent. Despite the fact that we could only have two formal sessions to cover many issues in two months, we were able to complete our research outlines to go on our way and ready to continue with the requirements of the 2nd Stage (Dikilitaş, 2015, p.53). Our research group model was also based on Kuh’s idea of Critical Friends Group (CFG) whose focus is on individual teacher practice as well as shared knowledge and collaboration among colleagues (Kuh, 2006).

In order to make this idea work for our own situation, we took our own responsibility as participants to help one another in terms of completing our research outlines in due time. We discussed our research questions, research tools asking for critical feedback from the group members via e-mail, small group meetings, coffee-table talks… We cooperated wherever and whenever possible to have better research outcomes and perform our best as a research group to go further. Our cooperation and collaboration for the betterment of our individual teaching practice and our students’ learning continued until the end of the 4th stage of the research engagement process even when we were presenting our individual projects at the June 2015 IATEFL ReSIG Conference in İzmir. In short, the philosophy of our group, which was based on being a caring community within the school environment, helped us considerably to compensate for the time which couldn’t have been arranged properly for the whole group meetings during the research engagement process.
Additionally, I believe that the profile I displayed as their leader also affected the continuity and the productivity of this action research community as well as the devotedness of its participants. During that time, first of all, I was sincerely ‘me’, conducting my own classroom research with my language instructor identity, and suffering from the same problems about time. I was thus understanding instead of judging them (empathy). Also, I was always ready to provide support whenever needed (availability). The ambiance I intended to create during the group meetings and the personal conversations were always trusting, supportive and caring. In that respect, it was very rewarding to see that the content of the feedback given by the group members regarding me as their leader, the expectations met and the gains provided by being a part of this research group were all consistent with my own personal reflections. Some of the gains reported by the participants were as follows:

- synchronizing personal philosophy with teaching practice,
- sustaining collaborative learning through personal conversations and caring talk,
- being listened to and feeling understood,
- learning from one another and having the chance to ask for and get help from others in the group,
- understanding self and the research process while talking to others in the group,
- cooperating with the research partner in terms of complementing each other, boosting one another’s vision and learning from one another,
- feeling valued and accepted to be asked for recommendations for betterment of others’ research in the group,
- having meetings, discussions, sharing opinions with the other group members and getting informed about new topics in the field,
- reflecting on personal teaching experience and thus evaluating and fine-tuning teaching styles, strategies, and approaches,
- improving time management skills throughout the process to meet the deadlines to be followed by the research group,
- observing the students more and thus noticing individual differences for better classroom practice.

Besides the positive outcomes, the survey results also revealed some problems the participants faced other than time during the research engagement process. For example, a participant teacher reported that following a research cycle was challenging, requiring a constant review of the tool and expected outcomes when compared to academic research, whereas another found narrowing the initial focus of research, putting ideas into words and planning actions difficult. At the research design stage, my support as leader was felt particularly valuable by some of the team, though others felt they benefited from my mentoring more constantly throughout the process.

What I learnt from this experience and what change I could make to my supervising/mentoring in the future by justifying the impact of this experience on me?

I had numerous personal and professional gains throughout this leadership experience while conducting the project. First of all, it was great to feel that all the participating group members enjoyed being a part of this teacher-research project and benefitted from what we shared not only on a professional but also personal basis. The values like trust, unity, co-operation, responsibility, caring, courage shared among the group members helped me mirror myself in front of my own and others’ eyes. In this way, I also had the chance to monitor, check, revise my values and characteristics as a leader. I once again realized that a good leader should be tolerant, open-minded, and reflective and above all equipped with all kinds of mental and spiritual tools to keep a group going and be successful. I also felt how strong a leader’s influence could be in terms of creating change for the better. Moreover, I had the chance to review different sources of information and kinds of literature to be able to have a command of conducting action research and help the group members in supervising their individual projects.

It’s certain that doing action research has a powerful impact on teachers’ professional development especially for the betterment of individual teaching practice and student learning. Therefore, I wholeheartedly believe that the practice of action research group projects should continue as part of CPD in schools. To me every group is unique and has its own spirit and dynamics as well as learning needs. Accordingly, staff developers should fight against the teachers’ problems such as workload and related time constraints by offering manageable, time-saving training programs that involve classroom research especially in the form of action research groups at their core. While preparing
and mentoring these kinds of programs, they can make use of the ideas behind different forms of professional development such as the Professional Learning Community (Hord, 1997) and Critical Friend Group (Kuh, 2006) like I did and can get satisfactory results.

References


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Attitudes towards “Teacher Research”

Mine Bellikli

Background to the research

This paper illustrates my first year trainer experience at Atılım University. Atılım is a private foundation university established in 1997 where English is the medium of instruction. To support the preparatory school which provides nine-month English Language Programs to students, we as the Department of Foreign Languages (DFL) with 15 full-time and 8 part-time teachers offer four different two-year courses.

DFL administration is very important to instructors' development. Various approaches have been implemented to encourage instructors to refresh their subject based knowledge and to equip themselves with updated information. To list some we tried:

- Observations with experienced teachers or colleagues
- Reflective practices (sharing best/worst classroom experiences)
- Group discussions
- Staff meetings
- Workshops with external experts

Financial support and encouragement to give presentations in other university conferences are also offered to DFL instructors. There wasn't any team or unit for development. All the above mentioned activities had been done on a voluntary basis by the help of people in charge of the administration of the department.

Contributions to these activities were not satisfactory, however. Attendance of the activities was on a voluntary basis. Therefore, instructors didn't feel obliged to attend the activities. They came up with different excuses like: some of them think the sessions don't align with the knowledge and skills that they need to improve, some of them say because of time constraints they don't