INQUIRY AND RESEARCH SKILLS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS BY KENAN DIKILITAŞ AND ALI BOSTANCIOĞLU

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ABSTRACT

Published in 2019, Inquiry and Research Skills for Language Teachers is written to assist teacher educators in the design of research methodology courses in English teacher education programs. Conceived in the authors' conviction that most research courses do not succeed in empowering teachers' professional practices, the book resorts to Exploratory Practice to configure an approach that appeals to the interrogation of pre-service teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward research to increase engagement and foster inquiry skills. In the book, Kenan Dikilitaş and Ali Bostancıoğlu lay out a step-by-step guide for teacher educators to design research courses that are more connected to the realities of future teachers, in the hopes of achieving a long-lasting effect on teachers' professional identities. The book addresses an audience that is familiar with the challenges teachers face when trying to bridge the gap between theory and practice and implement evidence-based teaching.

KEYWORDS

HOW TO CITE

In *Inquiry and Research Skills for Language Teachers*, Dikilitaş and Bostancıoğlu (2019) offer English teacher educators an alternative for the design of research methods courses in English teacher education. The book is a response to the authors' perception that research courses usually fail to prove their value for the professional development needs of future English teachers. Research methods courses are common in pre-service teachers' education. Unfortunately, many English teachers report that such courses have little to no practical impact on their classroom practices. This is the case of the authors, whose experiences as students of research methods courses were not particularly beneficial.

The little impact that research courses have on English teachers' education is part of the larger problem of English teachers' lack of engagement with research. The literature on research skills displays that many teachers perceive teaching and research largely as unrelated activities and, consequently, do not adopt the latter within the core of their professional practices. Teachers' lack of involvement with research has been extensively discussed in literature for decades (Borg, 2007; 2009; 2010; Hancock, 1997). Part of the solution to this problem, according to the authors, lies in offering courses that prioritize the development of an inquisitive mindset, rather than the teaching of 'hard' technical research skills. Throughout the book, the authors advocate for an approach that delves into future teachers' beliefs and emotions toward research, by means of constant reflection and a focus on exploratory practice.

In the introduction to the book, the authors share with the readers the rationale behind their proposal. They recall the negative experiences with methods courses during their formative years and argue that research and inquiry skills should play a more significant role in English teacher education. They champion the idea that research courses should be more realistic and designed in forms that are more attuned to the needs of teachers. The authors discuss Exploratory Practice as the main theoretical tenet of their proposal since this type of practitioner research fosters reflection, relies on students' creativity, and validates students' interrogation of their contexts. The authors invite teacher educators to capitalize on Exploratory Practice since it results, they argue, in a higher level of student engagement.

In the first chapter, the authors underscore the importance of motivation in the development of research skills. They intend to '…produce a book that could address pre-service teachers' negative attitudes and help them develop positive attitudes toward research through an enjoyable process of learning to do research' (Dikilitaş and Bostancıoğlu, 2019: 3). In an attempt to legitimize pre-service research, they compare it to canonical academic research. In their view, pre-service teacher research should be simpler, personal, contextual, and practical. They also state that it should address pre-service teachers' spaces and learning histories, and focus on personal and dialogical reflection. Interestingly, they call for pre-service teacher research courses to be designed bearing in mind that students will become teachers rather than researchers, a reality that many research methods books fail to address. Additionally, the authors discuss a diversity of concepts to establish the foundations of their proposal, including the types of knowledge that pre-service teachers can access, the idea of research as professional development, the importance of a growth mindset, the characteristics researchers should have (Dörnyei, 2011), the inquiry process (Duran and Duran, 2004) and the idea of reflection as a form of learning. The authors underline the latter, putting it at the core of a research mentality, and emphasizing that individual and shared reflection is an essential tool in the education of language teachers.

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83

In Chapter 2, the authors proceed with more practical aspects. They adopt the concept of puzzles (Allwright, 2003), as opposed to research problems in an attempt to make the research experience more accessible to students. In the authors' view, puzzles are more personal, subjective, reflective, and explorative than research problems. A clear and easy-to-use taxonomy of sources from which students can derive their puzzles is presented. The authors suggest students should focus their research on their experiences and/or those of others. When focusing on their own experiences, students can investigate puzzles about their own learning or teaching. When about others, puzzles can be about learners, teachers, or parents. I found this classification simple but effective in helping students identify ideas they can investigate, a task that many students find challenging when first confronted with research courses. The chapter continues to discuss some collaborative and didactic techniques to help students identify and establish their puzzles. Toward the end of the chapter, some examples of such puzzles are presented.

As with all courses on research methods, this book offers information on conventional themes in research education, such as data collection, analysis, ethics, and quality criteria. In Chapter 3, the authors discuss interviews, questionnaires, and observations as the most accessible tools for pre-service teachers. The authors resort to the concept of Pedagogically Exploitable Pedagogic-Research Activities – *PEPRAs* - (Hanks, 2017: 267) and argue that the construction of data collection, or generation tools, as they call them, can also be used as a pedagogic activity. In Chapter 4, the authors address epistemological, ethical, and methodological principles of research. In regards to epistemological principles, the authors succeed in exemplifying the iterative nature of the research process, and the need to develop data collection techniques that are consistent with research puzzles. They also do a good job explaining how students can consider validity and reliability in the data collection/generation processes. In the second part of the chapter, the authors propose a number of activities that can be used to generate data while being observant of the aforementioned principles. It is worth mentioning that these activities are conceived mostly for in-service teachers, unlike all previous discussions, which presents ideas for undergraduate courses. This ambivalence remains throughout the book.

Data analysis and report writing are the subjects of the next two chapters. Chapter 5 is perhaps one of the most conservative sections of the book. The authors present basic levels of qualitative and quantitative analysis, focusing on thematic analysis and descriptive statistics. The information presented in this chapter is useful to novice researchers with no experience in data analysis and who do not have access to specialized software. Chapter 6 provides insights into how quantitative data should be interpreted in a matter that is consistent with the identified puzzles. The authors also present some of the generic conventions of written and spoken reports. More interesting and useful is a short section that addresses how pre-service teachers can use their research experiences to reflect on their own ideas, beliefs, and practices and establish possible avenues for their development and identity construction.

Chapter 7 gives readers an interesting insight into how reflective writing can be used throughout the research process. The authors present a diversity of foci that students can use to reflect, develop critical thinking toward their own learning and teaching preferences, and gain a more abstract understanding of their own positioning within the field of English language teaching. I found this chapter notoriously useful for teacher educators who wish to use reflection to enhance students' inquiry and research skills. The ideas presented are accompanied by examples from the authors' research courses, which makes this chapter relatable and easily applicable.

The final chapter features six research methodology courses from Argentina, Brazil, Turkey, Japan, and Pakistan. Each course is described briefly, with a focus on the context, the content, the tasks, and the types of assessment used. Of particular value are the reflections by the courses' authors. Teacher educators can use this chapter to get an insight into different approaches to the teaching of research and benefit from the lessons learned by those who designed and taught the courses.

Written in a friendly, easily accessible language, *Inquiry and Research Skills for Language Teachers* is a practical and original book for teacher educators who understand the value of research, but acknowledge the difficulty that teachers face bridging the gap between theory and practice and incorporating evidence-based teaching into their professional practices. The book's most important contributions include the techniques, activities, and suggestions for helping students identify viable and engaging research topics, as well as the use of reflective writing to capitalize on the lessons learned through the research process.

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