

## **Reflections on the IATEFL Research Special Interest Group Pre Conference Event ‘Communicating and Learning from Research’ (Liverpool, 2019)**

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In today’s world where researching, questioning, interpreting and synthesising information are among the most important skills that an individual needs to possess, teacher research is considered to be one of the best practices that lead to teacher learning and professional development (Dikilitaş & Yaylı, 2018; Gallagher-Brett, 2019; Rebolledo, Smith & Bullock, 2016; Snoek & Moens, 2011). The benefits of teacher research as well as the dynamic interaction between academics and teachers in relation to research constituted the focus of the IATEFL Research Special Interest Group (ReSIG) Pre-Conference Event at the IATEFL 2019 conference in Liverpool. The event, which I had the pleasure of attending, was entitled ‘Communicating and Learning from Research’, and was truly a success.

I first saw the event advertised on the ReSIG website in October 2018. The theme of the event and the names of the two plenary speakers, Anne Burns and Richard Smith, immediately drew my attention. The call for proposals for poster presentations was addressed to language teachers actively engaged in research or whose professional learning process involved doing research, research mentors who supported teachers in doing research and academics who might like to talk about the knowledge that they gain from teacher research. Learners were also welcome to participate. Being an English language teacher working in Higher Education in Cyprus, having been continuously involved in research which informed my classroom practices and also pursuing a PhD in the area of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Teacher Education, the call for proposals appeared really alluring. This was definitely an event that should not be missed.

I immediately contacted my supervisor, Dr Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous, informing her about the event, and we soon compiled a proposal which revolved around my PhD research in the area of ESP Teacher Education. The title of our proposal was ‘English for Specific Purposes Teacher Education: Glimpses of a Technical Action Research Study’. The email informing us that the proposal was accepted was received with joy. After some weeks, with much excitement and enthusiasm, I received the news that I had also been granted the ReSIG scholarship to attend the event.

The Pre-Conference event took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019, at the ACC Liverpool in a spacious and comfortable room. The morning session began with a plenary talk by Anne Burns titled ‘What can teachers learn from academic research?’, during which the speaker stressed the fact that, even though teachers are expected to refer to academic research and be inspired by it, most of the time this research is too inaccessible and incomprehensible. Prof. Burns highlighted the importance of teachers’ engagement in research for the development of their personal identity, practices, confidence and generally for their professional development. She also emphasised the need to establish a relationship and find a balance between academic and practitioner research.

While Anne Burns was talking, I thought of how true what she said was, and how much research helped me as an ESP practitioner to develop professionally. ESP is a field of language teaching, which by definition relies heavily on the specific needs of different groups of learners, who learn English ‘with an identifiable purpose’ Johnson and Johnson (1998: 105). In this context practitioner’s research is of paramount importance, since practitioners need to be involved in extensive needs analysis procedures, look for authentic or authentic-like materials and tasks to use with their learners, very often design the programmes that they will teach, and of course deal with many other issues as in every other language class. I could understand very well what Anne Burns described as the challenge of finding a balance between academic and

practitioner research. The fact that I was a language teacher working in an academic environment very often made me feel as if I was walking a tightrope, reconciling the dual roles of teaching and surviving in academia. Nevertheless, I felt lucky and blessed at the same time that I had somehow managed to combine both.

Anne Burns' interesting and highly engaging plenary talk was followed by concurrent poster presentations in a very friendly and relaxed atmosphere, during which presenters from different parts of the world, ranging from Mexico to Australia, had the opportunity to present their research and talk about their educational contexts. Presenters and attendees engaged in interesting discussions regarding research at different levels of education and set against different educational backgrounds. This session was an opportunity for me to meet teachers, academics, PhD students and people who worked in ministries of education in their countries talking about their research and the knowledge that they acquired from it. What was absolutely fascinating for me was the chance to hear about the challenges and the obstacles faced in places where teachers lacked resources, because of poverty, war or censorship and deprivation of freedom of speech. As the time passed, I felt more and more that I was surrounded by people who spoke the same language as me, and I was assured that becoming a member of the Research SIG and attending this event was the right thing to do. It had not often met other strong supporters of action research who valued and understood its significance, people who were even pursuing a PhD doing action research, like me. This was a community that I was happy to be a member of. This very enlightening and thought-provoking poster session was followed by a lunch break, during which I had the opportunity to mingle with professionals attending other Special Interest Groups' Pre-Conference events in the same venue.

The afternoon session commenced with the second plenary talk by Richard Smith with the title 'What can academics learn from teacher research?' Richard Smith shared with the audience his own story about being a teacher, teacher educator and an academic, and talked about the fact that many people identify themselves as both teachers and researchers. He stressed the importance of action research, and how much academics could learn from it, and he expressed the view that academic teacher educators as well as teacher associations should embrace teachers and help them in their efforts to become knowledgeable teacher researchers. I gained a lot from Richard Smith's plenary talk. First of all, once again I heard about the value of action research in a world where traditional academic research still dominates. Moreover, it made me understand how necessary it is to integrate practitioner research into teacher education programmes to supply teachers or future teachers with the knowledge that is required in order for them to become teacher researchers. This is something that I had already begun to introduce in my teacher training endeavours, but I would definitely try to implement more persistently in the future.

Richard Smith's inspiring talk was followed by another poster presentation session. During this session, I had the pleasure of presenting the action research study I had been involved in previously, which explored the topic of English for Specific Purposes Teacher Education that still remains a very poorly-researched area. This round of poster presentations provided me with the opportunity to meet teacher researchers and academics from different parts of the world and exchange views on various issues pertaining to my research and research in general. However, what was most exhilarating of all was the fact that I met professionals who could really comprehend what it meant to be a teacher researcher, people who understood how it felt to carry what Xerri (2016: 1) referred to as 'split personality' yet a 'unified identity'. This session was concluded with all the poster presenters reflecting on this experience and the feedback they obtained from delegates. Recalling all the positive comments heard and all the smiling faces, I am confident to say that the event was a great success.

Before the event came to an end, a follow-up discussion on the plenary talks took place, moderated by yet another legend in the field of Applied Linguistics, David Nunan. During this discussion, I felt that all the participants agreed on the value of teacher research, despite the fact that this kind of research is not usually published in academic journals, and therefore largely stays hidden. This brought to my mind McNiff's (2002: 12) reference to 'the 'butterfly effect', where the beat of a butterfly's wings locally can have repercussions in far-flung global terms', meaning that every single research study, no matter how small in scale it is, carries its

own insights that could prove useful for the future of language education. It made me think that, even though it shouldn't be imposed on teachers, practitioner-research could be a way to encourage more skillful, creative, inventive, confident and empowered language teachers.

The ReSIG Pre Conference Event in Liverpool was a very insightful experience, and I wholeheartedly thank the ReSIG for granting me the scholarship to attend the event. For me it was a wonderful opportunity to socialise, widen my network of professionals in language teaching and language research, discuss issues related to my research and research in general, learn about other educational contexts, make new friends and catch up with old ones, and most importantly feel like an active member of this community. I returned to Cyprus with a suitcase filled with new knowledge and experiences and of course unforgettable memories of the picturesque city of Liverpool. Looking forward to the next one!

### References

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