

Introduction

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This book emerged from our combined interest in, and experiences of, conducting or supervising research on language teacher cognition. We planned the contributions in such a way that we hope will be helpful to emergent researchers, particularly Masters and PhD students – and, perhaps, their supervisors – in understanding some of the practical implications of collecting qualitative data, with a focus on this particular field of research.

The book aims to fill the gap between conventional research methodology books and published reports of research such as are found in academic journals. While volumes on methodology may explain how and why a particular approach to data collection should be used, they tend not to give specific and detailed examples of the ‘messiness’ of research – what may go wrong and how to overcome the obstacles that invariably get in the way of a smooth research journey. The constraints of writing up a report of a research project for a journal in, usually, 5000 or 6000 words mean that all too often accounts of how data are collected are cursory and ‘rough patches’ may be smoothed over. It is an all too common experience of qualitative researchers that their best-laid plans and schedules, as Robert Burns said, ‘gang aft aglay’ and they have to improvise on the spot in order to make the best of what may sometimes be a bad lot. But sometimes, too, these ad hoc decisions lead to surprisingly interesting outcomes and may even turn the project into a much better one than was originally conceived.

It is worth starting this introduction by explaining why this collection of case studies focuses on language teacher cognition, a field of research that has expanded rapidly over the last two decades. As Simon Borg makes clear in the following chapter, it is evident that what teachers do in the conduct of their professional activities is shaped, though not entirely determined, by what they believe and know. Interestingly, while this phenomenon has been well understood in mainstream educational circles since at least the 1970s, it

is only relatively recently that the language teaching profession has started to investigate the implications. This recognition is largely due to Borg's seminal work in his many publications, and especially in the overview of empirical studies and the methodological framework he developed for further research (Borg, 2006). Without such an impetus, none of the studies reported in this volume – and indeed the book itself – might have been possible.

All the contributors to this book believe, and we anticipate our readers will agree, that teaching is more than merely transmitting information. Indeed, the management, motivation and sustainability of learning can be understood only by exploring what teachers believe and do in their specific working contexts. After all, teachers are the executive decision-makers of the curriculum: it is they who put into practice the principles and procedures devised or mandated by others, such as course-book writers, methodological experts and officials of ministries of education. Failure by such people to take into account what teachers believe and know about language teaching will lead to failure to realise the intended curriculum.

However, the exploration of language teacher cognition is an extremely complicated matter. In the first place, the goals of language teaching have expanded over the past few decades – for example, from understanding linguistic structures at sentence level to communicative competence at discourse level to intercultural communicative pragmatic competence, in a world where acronyms reflect the changing awareness of the English language itself, ESL and EFL transmogrify into EIL and ELF. So, it is essential, but far from easy, to find out what teachers know and believe about fundamental issues such as: the place of grammar in the language learning curriculum and, indeed, what is understood by the word 'grammar'; the most appropriate ways to teach the language skills and sub-skills; the respective roles of teachers and learners in innovative approaches to language teaching, such as task-based language learning; the appropriate classroom use of the learners' first language; how language learning could and should be assessed or evaluated – and many other matters.

What teachers believe and what they know about any of these issues is a complex nexus of interacting factors. One of the most important initial influences on teachers' cognition is their experience (good or bad) of their own language learning at school, college or university. To a greater or lesser extent, professional training or development programmes, whether pre-service or in-service, also affect teachers' knowledge and beliefs. Many teachers also increase their awareness of their role by reading books and articles by influential authorities, and perhaps by attending conferences and seminars. Teachers also learn from their own past and present professional experiences as teachers, and by interacting with their learners,

their colleagues and other teachers in a wider community of practice. The influence of ‘significant others’ in their personal lives – spouses, partners, family, friends – cannot be discounted. Finally, the imposition of authority – whether by school principals, inspectors, examination boards or ministries of education – also shapes teachers’ knowledge and beliefs.

Although teachers may have strongly held beliefs, they do not always put these into practice. The reasons need to be understood by exploring the specific contexts in which they work, each of which is itself a complex and dynamic system (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008) in which physical, temporal, cognitive, social and cultural factors interact to provide affordances for, or constraints on, the practical application of beliefs about teaching and learning, which in turn influence what teachers believe and know. Teaching and learning occur within certain physical and temporal boundaries, which will tend to affect the teacher’s ability or willingness to act in accordance with his or her beliefs; for example, fixed seating arrangements may hinder effective group work, or the wish to introduce a new topic may be inappropriate at a specific time. Understanding teachers’ practices should be tempered by awareness of the nature of the cognitive and affective styles and strategies among their learners; a belief in cooperative learning may be thwarted by a realisation that – at this stage at least – the specific group of learners are unaccustomed to such practices and would resist its adoption. Indeed, because teaching and learning are quintessentially social activities, unpeeling the complexities of the interaction of cognition and classroom action requires deep engagement with the conditions operating in the environment.

Borg (2006, and in his methodological analysis in the subsequent chapter of this volume) points out that among researchers there is a wealth of, and perhaps some confusion about, terminology, and it may be worth indicating how some key terms are understood by the authors of the eight case studies in this book. *Assumptions* may be regarded as axioms which enable us to make pre-judgements about the world around us; for example, a teacher facing a new class of learners will assume that, in a number of respects, they will be similar to classes she or he has previously taught. After working for some time with these new learners, the teacher will *perceive* that there are similarities with, and differences between, this class and previous ones, and new, somewhat tentative *attitudes* will emerge. With further experience, these attitudes will tend to be refined, rejected or reformulated and then incorporated into a set of firmer and more stable *beliefs*. What distinguishes a belief about something from a *knowledge* of something is that respected members of one’s community accept it as a fact. Thus, in pre-Copernican times, ordinarily people did not believe that the sun revolved around the

earth: they *knew* it. It is in this comprehensive sense that the authors regard cognition as being contextually situated and socially distributed.

The above discussion clearly points to the need for research into teacher cognition to be exploratory, in the sense made clear by Allwright (2006), who argues, among other things, that researchers should seek to describe and understand the complexity of classroom teaching, and to recognise that idiosyncrasy within a particular setting is a more important phenomenon than what is common across classrooms. Thus, classroom research should not be reductionist in the sense of looking for simplistic, generalisable findings that can apply beyond the specific context; rather, accounts of classroom research should be sufficiently transparent and honest to enable the reader to judge the trustworthiness of the reports and, where appropriate, relate the findings to his or her own context. Such research also needs to be longitudinal, in order to account for the inevitably changing relationships over time between key issues, and participatory, so that meanings behind behaviour can be explained by the key actors. Finally, explorations of teachers' beliefs and classroom practices should adopt a judicious blend of methods of data collection in order that the information that emerges can be compared, contrasted and triangulated to provide thick descriptions of the context, which in turn can lead to rich interpretations (Geertz, 1973) of the extent of convergence and divergence between what teachers believe and what they actually do.

The authors of the case studies in Chapters 1–8 are themselves emergent researchers, in most cases having recently completed doctoral projects in various countries. All of them have employed multi-methods of data collection in their studies, but each has selected only one of these methods to report in this book. They recount 'tales from the field' (Van Maanen, 1988) by introducing the aims and context of their study, briefly reviewing relevant published studies on the topic and explaining the methodological issue they have decided to focus on. The next part of their account is more detailed information about their study and examples of the data they have collected. These descriptions are followed by a discussion of the methodological implications arising from their particular project, and their story is completed with a reflection on the lessons they have learned from the experience. The second author of each chapter is an internationally recognised researcher and scholar, with a particular interest in the methodological approach discussed in the case study. Each provides an insightful commentary on the tale from the field from the perspective of a well informed outsider.

The third part of each chapter throws the issues back to you, the reader, by providing discussion points and questions for you to consider, and if possible discuss with others, and activities to try out if you yourself are

planning to collect qualitative data using the approach described in the chapter. An ideal way to use these questions would be to join with other researchers, possibly colleagues conducting research for graduate dissertations and theses, and use them as starting points for exploring one of these methodological approaches. Equally, the ideas for small-scale action could be tried out among a supportive group of research colleagues, to gain insights into the pros and cons of using different methods.

The focus of all these chapters is on exploring the beliefs and practices of (language) teachers about various issues related to their profession. But the lessons the authors have learned are relevant to other qualitative research topics, whether of teaching and learning situations or of wider social issues.

In Chapter 1, Judy Ng discusses her use of questionnaires with lecturers in a private university in Malaysia. The survey was intended to be a scoping study for her main project by obtaining key biodata from her respondents, eliciting their attitudes and reported practices of giving feedback on their students' written assignments and – importantly – recruiting volunteers to participate in the subsequent phases of the project. As Judy reports, she encountered a number of unanticipated difficulties, which led her to make several ad hoc decisions in the field. Ultimately her project veered away from its original purpose, but this shift actually led to a more valuable study than was originally conceived. Her story is commented on by J.D. Brown, who has long enjoyed an international reputation for his interest and expertise in quantitative research designs, but who has also recently published an extremely useful chapter (Brown, 2009) that discusses how to devise qualitative questionnaires. In his commentary on Judy's case, he suggests that the data-gathering phase of any study, but especially in interview/questionnaire research, is likely to be the most difficult. This is because the researcher may have to rely on the goodwill of people who have generally critical attitudes towards questionnaires as a result of past experience. It is necessary to overcome these difficulties in order to get a good response rate and credible data. But this does not mean that research should be rigid and inflexible; rather, like Judy, he has found that anomalies in his own research often lead in interesting and useful directions.

The second chapter focuses on the adoption by Nguyen Gia Viet of narrative frames (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008) with Vietnamese teachers attempting to apply task-based language teaching (TBLT) in their high-school classes. Viet reports that this form of guided composition scaffolded the participants to reflect on their classroom experiences and to give expression to their beliefs in their first language. The frames also enabled him to gather data which could reasonably easily be compared and analysed. In his discussion of the methodological implications, Viet reports his

experience of administering the frames, focusing especially on the novelty of this technique for both himself and his participants, and on linguistic, ethical and validity issues. His commentator, Martin Bygate, is at the forefront of TBLT methodology (e.g. Bygate, 1999; Van den Branden *et al.*, 2009). Viet's study prompts Martin to pose and discuss three issues: the contextual background in which a particular data-collection procedure is used; the question or puzzle that the procedure is intended to illuminate; and, most importantly, the quality of the data which it generates. After fully addressing these points with regard to Viet's case study, he points out that narrative frames, like other self-report instruments, are likely to produce ambiguous data which need to be further investigated by the researcher.

Andrew Gladman's case study in Chapter 3 discusses his use of focus groups (Morgan, 1996; Morgan & Krueger, 1993) in a liberal arts college in Japan. This institution employs an unusual team-teaching practice in which a specialist in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) and a specialist in the academic subject of the class integrate their specialties to team-teach English language and the academic subject in parallel. His intention was to elicit the participants' key concerns about team-teaching and the development of effective partnerships. Andrew discusses the methodological implications of his study in terms of the small number of participants in each focus group, the fact that they were well known to each other and his researcher role as an institutional insider. The commentator on Andrew's case study is Donald Freeman, whose contributions to the field of research on teacher professional knowledge (e.g. Freeman, 1996, 2002) have been not only extensive but also highly influential. In his commentary, he points out that there are two views on the use of language in a focus group: one is that people use the session as an opportunity to talk about what is on their minds; and the other is that the language used in such a social situation actually creates thinking. After pointing out that Andrew's work illustrates the first of these positions, Donald suggests that the strength of the focus group as a research tool lies in *how* it recognises, acknowledges and capitalises on the specific social conventions of who says what to whom, when and how.

In the fourth chapter, Le Van Canh reports on the sociocultural and institutional factors that affected his use of semi-structured interviews with a group of Vietnamese high-school teachers. Despite being a very well established data-collection method, interviewing is far from being an easy or routine option, as it requires both linguistic and interpersonal skills, as well as context sensitivity (Roulston, 2010). Canh relates the difficulties he overcame to gather the teachers' knowledge and beliefs about grammar teaching, which he then compared with what they did in their classrooms.

Interestingly, he found a strong convergence between beliefs and practice and he explains why this should be so. Alan Maley's commentary is built on his long experience of working with many teachers in Africa, Europe, China, India and, more recently, Vietnam, as well as being a series editor for resource books for language teachers. His comments cover logistical, contextual and methodological issues, as well as the actual findings of Canh's study. With regard to the first three areas, he acknowledges both the problems that Canh encountered and his success in overcoming them. With regard to the final point, he suggests that while the findings of this case study are in themselves unremarkable – and indeed his own recent experience corroborates them – the strength of the empirical study lies in the meticulous ways that Canh collected his data, which thus established his status as a competent researcher.

In Chapter 5, Simon Humphries reports his experience of observing four Japanese teachers of English to explore and compare their use of traditional textbooks and more recent, communicative-based textbooks. As elsewhere (e.g. Richards, 1997), these teachers were nervous, even suspicious, of being observed and/or video-recorded. Despite their reservations, Simon obtained useful data to complement the information he obtained by interviewing his participants. Among the methodological implications he draws out are the effect of the 'observer's paradox' (Labov, 1972), especially when the researcher is an institutional insider. He also ponders the questions of what to do with unusable data, whether or not the observer should, even when invited, intervene in the lesson, and the difficulty of concentrating when observing lessons. Simon's commentator, Jerry Gebhard, has spent many years observing teachers in a wide range of countries, including Japan, and has long been interested in exploring teachers' beliefs (e.g. Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999). In his commentary on this case study, he points out that the issues Simon has faced are common in observational studies and he makes a number of practical suggestions about each of them, based on his own and other published studies. He concludes with the point that classroom observation is not just a way to collect data, but the unexpected issues that arise make such research 'an adventure in exploration and new discoveries that keeps the researcher (or teacher) fascinated, animated and renewed'.

In the sixth chapter, Jinrui Li reports the 'think aloud' (TA) procedures she used with her participants – university tutors in New Zealand – to explore their cognitive processing during their actual marking of written assignments submitted by their undergraduate students. Most previous studies applying TA have been undertaken in controlled (quasi-) experimental conditions, but Jinrui explains why she felt that it is more valid to capture 'cognition in flight' (Vygotsky, 1978) in natural settings

with participants actually carrying out a real-world task, rather than a task specifically designed for research purposes. In her discussion of some of the methodological implications, she considers whether the researcher should be present or absent during TA sessions and the effect that such presence might have on the participants. She also addresses the extent to which TA can represent actual cognitive processing and the multiple roles which have to be played by the researcher. The commentary by Thomas Farrell, an extensively published researcher of classroom processes and teacher reflection (e.g. Farrell, 1999, 2007), begins by pointing out that knowing more about how markers assess undergraduates' written work is of great importance to those who teach in university settings and he commends the use of TA procedures to research this issue. He discusses three particular matters with regard to Jinrui's study: the researcher's presence or absence during a TA session (a matter about which he tends to disagree with Jinrui); the probable necessity of giving participants practice in TA procedures; and how best to analyse TA data.

Next, in Chapter 7, Jonathon Ryan discusses his use of stimulated recall (SR) following interactions between pairs of English-speaking teachers and non-native English-speaking undergraduate students (SL2) in a New Zealand university. The particular focus for his investigation was to understand how miscommunication might occur when a listener does not understand a speaker's reference to a person, place or object. His participants, paired as 'speakers' (some of whom were students) and 'hearers' (some of whom were teachers of English as a second language), watched extracts from a Charlie Chaplin film, *Modern Times*, and the hearer was briefly called away while the speaker continued watching. When the hearer returned, the speaker related what had happened in the film while the hearer was away. This interaction was video-recorded, after which Jonathon held an SR session with the hearer to identify what may or may not have caused strained communication or miscommunication. Susan Gass is an authority on the use of SR techniques (e.g. Gass & Mackey, 2000; Polio *et al.*, 2006) and thus her commentary provides a valuable perspective on both SR as a research tool in general and on Jonathon's study in particular. She regards his study as innovatory, in terms of its both topic – miscommunication – and the story-telling method which he adopted. She notes that Jonathon encountered many of the same practical difficulties that others have found in applying SR techniques. She also points out that in his report he acknowledges these problems frankly and took sensitive steps in his research to overcome them.

The final case study (Chapter 8) is of the use of oral reflective journals with a group of Timorese English-language lecturers at the National University of Timor-Leste. Jenny Field is a member of a wider curriculum renewal

project involving, among other things, the introduction and normalisation (Bax, 2003) of computer-mediated language learning. She explains why she decided to ask the teachers to reflect on their initial perceptions of the software by completing a series of discussions with a colleague and thus jointly to produce an oral journal. She presents and briefly discusses examples of the transcribed speech, some of which was spoken in the national language, Tetum. Jill Burton has published frequently in the area of teacher reflection and journal writing (e.g. Burton, 2005; Burton & Carroll, 2001) and in her commentary on this case study she commends Jenny for having thought carefully about the merits of different methods of data collection and their effect on her participants. In doing so, however, she wonders whether Jenny had considered, as fully as she might have, her own requirements to obtain sufficient data to meet the aims of the project. This challenge is often the case where the researcher has to change roles, as Jenny did, from colleague to investigator – a common problem for new researchers.

We hope our readers will enjoy the discussions that follow, and find points of interest and practical value in the various suggestions made by the case study authors and their commentators. As we have said, we also hope that readers will continue the conversations by reflecting and acting on the questions and issues raised at the end of every chapter, preferably with others in their community of research practice.

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