Demystifying Research[1]

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Thought seed[1]:

*Imagine you have a huge plate of sweets in front of you in a buffet: mysore pak, laddu, gulab jamun, gajar halwa, badam halwa, cashew burfi, etc. Supposing you had to choose **only one,** from the array in the buffet what would you do? Which one would you choose and why? It would be either the one you like the most, or the one you have never eaten but always wanted to eat. It is also possible that different people choose different items and it is usually in line with some preference or rationale. There are loyal choosers who will go with the same sweet every time and then there are wild experimenters. Is life not about choices and rationalising choices all the time? There are usually some parameters that are applied in accordance with time, place and purpose. What do you think? There might also be someone who would just 'grab' something that lies close by. Why do people do that? Think deeply. How are choices generally made when an array is available?*

Teachers and Research

As teachers, as a part of our professional development, we would like to carry out research work and write about it. Unfortunately, many of our teacher education courses do not teach us how to do this. More importantly, we rarely have degrees in the field of English Language Education; our exposure, as English teachers, is initially to literature, where the nature of research is very different.

In this column I initially plan to answer a few basic wh-questions: these include, what is research in the field of English Language Education (ELE), what is not research in ELE, who are the best researchers, why do we need to do research etc. There are many more questions that need to be answered but we will come to them in further columns.

Who is the best researcher? Many of us, as teachers, feel that we are not equipped to do research because we have not done courses in the area or because we feel we don't have the 'know how' for it. This is not true! All of us can do research and it is not difficult. Most importantly, in the area of ELE, or rather in any language classroom, it is the teacher who is the best researcher. No one else can carry out research as well as she can: the teacher is there in the classroom every day, and is experimenting with what will and will not work for her students

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[1] A thought seed is just that: a seed that is planted in the mind of the reader, left to grow, and fruit when it will. Thought seeds, unlike tasks, which are often pedagogic, are anthrogogic, (meant for adults) and open-ended; they may present a problem, but there need not be a clear solution that has to be found. This notion of thought seeds has been used in the field of language education by Dr Shree Deepa, who was inspired by the idea of dropping seed balls in a forest for them to germinate at will. (Deepa, S. 2022. Thought seeds in Anthrogogic Learning Contexts. Journal of Indian Education.Vol.48, Issue No.2. (forthcoming).

on an hourly, daily, weekly, monthly basis. The classroom is a gold mine of data, if we know how to mine it and how to use it to help us grow. We teach our students and that is our first priority but after that, what we do with our students' responses after we have given marks, feedback etc. is what becomes data.

What is research? Research is nothing but RE-SEARCHING that which we know. As teachers we try something out in class; this could be an extra activity to keep a few bright students occupied, or it could be a different way of teaching something to help students come to grips with what we are teaching. This does not mean that everything we do must become research. Our interest will not be in all aspects of language teaching. One person may be interested in creating new tasks/activities, while another in trying out a new method. A third may be interested in focusing on the use of technology, a fourth in formative assessment practices. The question that will come to mind here is, "How do I decide what to focus on in my research?"

What area should I research? Think of all the areas available in language education that interest you, may be one or more of the skills and sub-skills of language, or grammar or vocabulary, the use of technology, investigation of student attitudes, etc. anything that occurs to you as researchable. Put all of these on a huge plate. You again have to choose only one. Which one would you choose and why? Go back to the thought seed above to help you understand better.

It is best if we choose the area that disturbs or bothers us the most. Such a choice is crucial particularly if you are selecting an area for your doctoral thesis. Remember that you have to live, sleep, and eat with this topic till it is done. If

you lose interest half way through, because you find it boring, it will be like living out a love affair that is over! You may have been told: read, find research gaps in the literature and select your area! I disagree! Find something that bothers you: if something small, write an article, if big, write a thesis or do a post-doc or apply for a project. Once you know it is researchable, you can find the arguments in the literature to support your arguments, findings etc. At the same time, such 'freedom' does not mean that you try out a few activities in class to teach vocabulary or grammar or listening, list them and state that it is research.

What is not research? There are occasions when we read up on ways of teaching an area in language, (vocabulary or grammar or listening comprehension, for example), document what we have read, list the various ways in which these skills can be enabled, add a note on how we tried it out, state, "believe me, it worked" and feel that the documentation and the listing of tasks/activities is sufficient to make it a research paper. THIS IS NOT RESEARCH. To make it into a paper, there has to be a theoretical rationale behind the tasks, and there must be evidence, in terms of student responses from the tasks to prove that the method adopted, actually works. Let us take an example from teaching vocabulary. There are a wide range of activities for this, available freely on the net. Listing a few of these, after collating arguments from the literature available on aspects of teaching vocabulary does not a research paper make! Instead, if, for example, you believe that playing language games with words can enable better vocabulary learning to happen, select a few relevant games, play them in your class over a period of time (twice a week for three months, or every day for a month, as you see fit).

Remember to keep a record of all games played, (all materials used) and all student responses. You will then need to analyse their answers and see what kinds of words got learnt. You may also want to give a short vocabulary test before and after the first and last 'game playing' period to use as a check on whether vocabulary growth has actually happened. If you can, you could actually talk to your students and ask them whether they liked playing these games, whether they felt it was fun, or boring, what they liked about it etc. This informal (either whole class or individual) discussion, when documented and analysed, will serve as secondary data.

In a similar manner, any aspect of teaching that bothers us as teachers can become a research paper. In the next issue through this column we will explore together a few case studies to understand a little better what research in the classroom is all about and how data can emerge from classroom activities.

Till then, put on your research hats and wait…..

ELTAI READING MOVEMENT

ELTAI has launched Reading Clubs in educational institutions with the primary objective of creating a 'culture of reading' among school and college students. This initiative is based on a research-based framework that takes into account differences in age, gender, interests, and location.

Objectives of the Reading Club:

❏ To create a love for reading in students and enable them to become better, lifelong readers;

❏ To enable them to reflect on what they read in order to lead them to become effective writers and speakers;

❏ To familiarize them with different text types (genres) and enable them to engage in appropriate reading strategies; and

❏ To employ synchronous (both virtual and physical meetings) as well as asynchronous modes – Web tools, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Blogs, Reading Logs, MOOCs (audios, videos, quotes, blurbs, reviews, etc.) to sustain their interest.

ELTAI would like to have MoUs with institutions that are willing to implement this initiative and help to achieve these objectives collaboratively. Institutions interested in this project may please write, expressing their interest, to: indiaeltai@gmail.com with a copy (Cc) to Dr.Maithry Shinde, the Coordinator of the project at: **maithry@stmaryscollege.in.**

For a brief description of this initiative, visit our website at: http://eltai.in/reading-clubs/.

For an outline of the respective roles and responsibilities of the host institution and ELTAI, visit the website at: http://eltai.in/roles-and-responsibilities-of-the-host-institution-and-eltai/.