Demystifying Research III :

How do I begin researching?

Prof Geetha Durairajan

Thought seed: [1]

All of us as current, prospective, or future teachers and as prospective researchers, almost always are very sensitive to what and how we do many things in life. Very often even entertainment choices have rationales or simple reasons for our choices. For example if we live in a metropolitan city and decide to entertain ourselves, there would be a wide range of choices between different movies in languages that you know, or the same movie in different dubbed versions: if you had to pick one for a free day to keep yourself entertained, what are the processes that you would adopt to finally arrive at picking one? What filters would you install in your mind? I would probably look at the cheapest popcorn option and probably choose the theatre/ cinema hall that offers my favourite popcorn flavour at the most affordable rates over another theatre playing the same movie that is far away, hiking my travel costs. Think deeply, are the filters static or are they dynamic and dependent on your mood? What are the other areas where we use filters to help us decide our choices and options in life? If the decision is about a life partner or a roommate or a career shift, what will your priorities be and how will you decide? For many of us the choice that leads to the easing of disturbances in our heart and mind will be attractive. This is what makes it a personal way of handling choices. Think of incidents where you had to say 'yes' to some things and 'no' to some others. Think of the processes of elimination that you employed routinely in your life.

Over the years, many students have come to me with questions about what to research, how to do research, where to begin, etc. I wrote a little bit about this in the first column where I said that good research originates in something you have experienced as a teacher in the classroom: it could be about something that worked well or did not and that the need to find an explanation for this 'working or non-working' is a very good place to start your travels into the domain of research. Such a foray may not , however, work for all teachers/researchers. You may be one of those students who has just finished his/her masters, and has decided to 'get that Ph D over and done with' before looking for a job. In which case, instead of a teacher with a problem looking for a solution, or an explanation for an unexpected success, you

---

[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, 2022. *Thought seeds in Anthrogogic Learning Contexts.* Journal of Indian Education. Vol.48, Issue No.2. (forthcoming).

become a research student in search of a problem that can be researched. In the field of English language education, which is an applied field and most learnings for researchers stem from the classroom, this may not be the best place to begin your research work, but that is reality for you. Alternatively, you may be a teacher who has not been able to locate and get an overarching perspective on this 'failure or success' in the classroom and therefore wishes to look at journal articles or go to google, (as it happens these days) to find a research topic. I am a retired professor and my research students around twenty years ago went to the library to look for ideas and research articles. We used to get so daunted by the 'tomes' or m phil/ph d theses. So many topics, so many theses, all lined up in marching order. Trust me when I state that no aspiring author or researcher ever found a topic by looking at those theses. This, however, is no cause for despair: none of us goes with a tabula rasa or a blank slate to look for a research topic. If nothing else,we at least know that we are interested in writing about or researching an area of language, (could be grammar or vocabulary, or it could be one of the skills). We also know whether we are interested in teaching or testing, in problematising materials or the methods that can be used to enable that one aspect of language to be learnt. Regardless of this wee bit of narrowing down, the many glances and quick read throughs of even the relevant tome-like theses in the library reference section always left me feeling totally inadequate. The same feeling is likely to hit you if you go to any university web-site, locate the online library and search for and find online, the theses, which have been done in the area of work you are interested in. That is never a good place to begin. Too big, too complicated, too much

everything. It is better to start with at least the area that you are interested in exploring and google those specific keywords. Articles, compared to theses are smaller and easier to handle, but even with that narrowing down, today, in the 21st century with gargantuan advances in technology, key words like second language writing for example, in a search engine like google scholar will give us pages and pages of article titles. At this point, I suspect that reading up ten theses on the topic would be easier, for this list could be in the hundreds.

What does a potential author of an article, or a researcher do in such a situation? Unless you are visually impaired and therefore, using software, you have to 'listen' to the computer reading out all the articles, word by word, here is where your skills of skimming and scanning need to be used very diligently and intelligently. All you need to do is to look at titles, and abstracts, and then, narrow down from the hundreds, to a few that you are likely to be interested in. Next, based on interest, you may eliminate the work done in second language writing in a foreign language context, and if you are working in a college, all work done with children and adolescents. Within that, you may also decide that you don't want to carry out an experiment in the quantitative paradigm, (because, like me, you may also be scared of mathematics and statistics) but want to stay with something which only requires qualitative data analysis. Once these eliminations are done, and to some extent, you are left with maybe about fifty articles to read and decide on the area of work, (not the actual topic), it is still better to quickly skim through and see what interests you the most. However much you would like to rely on what has been done before, somewhere,

your gut instinct of what topic interests you must and will kick in.

Once this narrowing down and selection is done, if you are working somewhere, you can always get permission to try out a little bit of work in your own college/university and if possible, to just weave that little 'experiment' into your own teaching. Remember, though, that you might need to work on ethical permission issues that will crop up. A little documentation of this whole process, analysis of the data you have collected (since it is second language writing, definitely the tasks you gave them and the answer scripts of the students) and your own notes, will get you going.

However, before we look at how to collect data, what kind of data to collect, what is primary and secondary data etc. and how to analyse the data and write it up there is another problem that needs to be discussed. In any area, there will be seminal articles written by those well known in the field: as a potential researcher, when you read the books available (on task based teaching, for example), and a few articles, the same names (Ellis, Nunan, or Prabhu for example) will come up again and again and their main arguments may also be summed up in these articles. As new authors it is very easy to assume that this is a new discovery and that the writing up of this 'theory' or relevant literature is sufficient as an article. Many articles written by potential authors that have come to me for review fall into this category: a summary of arguments made is all that is there. Sometimes, there is a claim that there is a new 'method' or way of teaching grammar, vocabulary, or writing, for example. There is no trialling of the method, and no data presented or analysed. With this summary and description the article is seen as over.

This will be like summarising the entertainment page over a few weeks and stating that I would like to watch film X or film Y. Such a summing up cum description is not a research article. It can only be published in the education supplement of a newspaper or magazine. But all is not lost; the summaries of work done is needed, but that is only the beginning of a research article, not the end.

To know more about how to convert these summaries and make it part of your literature review, you will have to wait a little longer.

Prof. Geetha Durairajan, retired Professor, English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad