Language Teacher Research in Asia
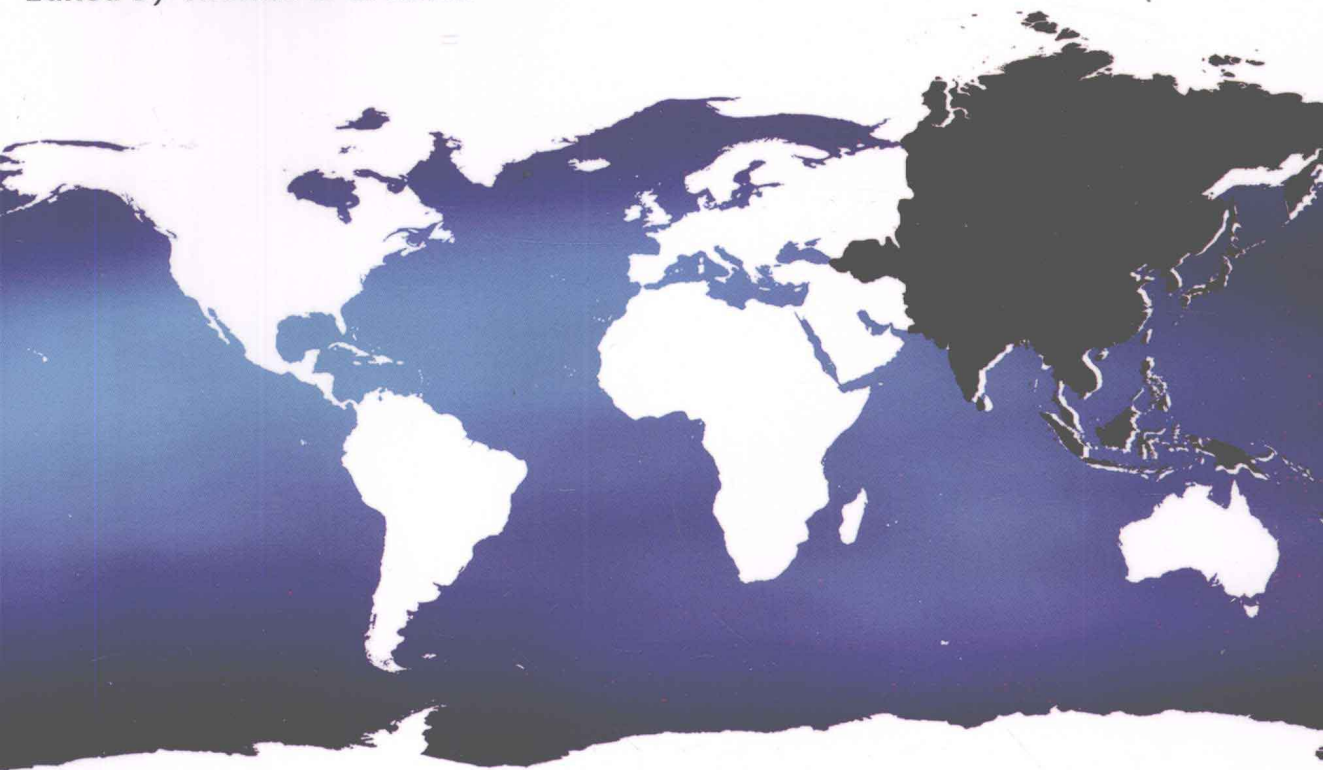
Edited by Thomas S. C. Farrell

Language Teacher Research Series

Thomas S. C. Farrell, Series Editor

TESOL Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc.

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Acknowledgments

Series Editor's Preface

The Language Teacher Research Series highlights the role language teachers at all levels play as generators of knowledge concerning all aspects of language teaching around the world. This idea may seem alien to many language teachers. Often, they either think that they have nothing to say about their teaching or that what they have to say is of little significance. Teachers generally are accustomed to receiving knowledge from so-called *real* researchers.

In my opinion, language teachers have plenty to say that is valuable for colleagues around the world. One of the main reasons for the Language Teacher Research Series is to celebrate what is being achieved in English language classrooms each day, so we can encourage and develop communities of like-minded language teaching professionals who are willing to share these important experiences.

In this manner, the TESOL community can extend its understanding of English language teaching in local, regional, and international settings. The series attempts to cover as many of these contexts as possible, with volumes covering the Americas, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and New Zealand/Australia. Each account of research presented in the Language Teacher Research Series is unique in the profession. These studies document how individual language teachers at all levels of practice systematically reflect on their *own* practice (rather than on other teachers' practices).

When practicing language teachers share these experiences with teachers in other contexts, they can compare and contrast what is happening in different classrooms around the world. The ultimate aim of this series is to encourage an inquiry stance toward language teaching. Teachers can play a crucial role in taking responsibility for their own professional development as generators and receivers of knowledge about what it means to teach English language learning.

How This Series Can Be Used

The Language Teacher Research Series is suitable for preservice and in-service teacher education programs. The examples of teacher research written by practitioners at all levels of teaching and all levels of experience offer a window into the different worlds of English language teachers. In this series we have attempted to impose some order by providing authors with a template of headings for presenting their research. This format is designed so that language teachers with varied expertise and educational qualifications can pick up a book from any region and make comparisons about issues, background literature, procedures taken, results, and reflections without having to work too hard to find them. The details in each chapter will help readers compare and evaluate the examples of teacher research and even replicate some research, if so desired.

This Volume

This volume of *Language Teacher Research in Asia* documents different forms of practitioner inquiry that involve systematic, intentional, and self-critical inquiry about language teaching in different Asian settings, including K–12, higher education, and courses in other formal educational settings. It will be interesting to compare and contrast these Asian research stories with studies from other regions in the series.

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Language Teacher Research in Asia

Thomas S. C. Farrell

In recent times language teachers throughout the world have been encouraged to reflect on their own professional development by engaging in such activities as self-monitoring their teaching, initiating an action research project, engaging in group discussions with other teachers, writing a teaching journal, analyzing case studies and critical incidents, participating in team teaching and peer coaching, and so on (see Richards & Farrell, 2005). This self-initiated professional development may be necessary because teachers have felt neglected when it comes to implementing new curricula or have felt a lack of ownership in the materials they are using, and as a result they may have also felt a lack of self-worth (Ruddock, 1991). In an address to English language teachers in Korea some 7 years ago, the well-known language educator Donald Freeman (1998) suggested that language teachers are best suited to carry out research in their own classrooms because they are "more insiders to their settings than researchers whose work lives are elsewhere" (p. 6). Freeman maintained that this form of teacher research is functional because the language teachers can "generate new understandings and knowledge" (p. 6) of their own workplaces.

In *Teacher's Edition,* an excellent language teacher journal in Vietnam, Doan Thi Kim Khanh and Nguyen Thi Hoai An (2005) surveyed 202 Vietnamese teachers of English to find out their attitudes toward classroom-based research. They discovered that teacher research has "not been accepted as a normal part of the teaching process" and "ordinary teachers appear not to think that they

themselves can play a key role in doing research and generating knowledge" (p. 4). Of the 202 teachers surveyed, 60% responded that they had conducted some research. Of those who had conducted research, 53% reported that they had undertaken research only once and that in many of those cases it was a requirement of an advanced degree.

When asked to identify problems with conducting research, the respondents replied with three main reasons, which may be common regardless of location:

- Lack of time (31%)

- Lack of experience (31%)

- Lack of theoretical knowledge (26%)

The survey participants said that no course in their undergraduate teaching showed them how to carry out research on their own practice. So within the context of Vietnam, the lack of time (teachers may teach up to 12 hours a day), experience, and theoretical knowledge all seem to be valid problems associated with teachers conducting research on their own practice. If this same survey were conducted in other parts of Asia, similar results would probably be recorded. Time is probably the factor most often given by teachers for why they do not conduct research on their own practice. In the case of these Vietnamese teachers, lack of experience in conducting such research was given equal weight as a reason for not conducting teacher research.

So, even though language teachers in Asia have been encouraged to engage in their own teacher research, the actual process requires time, commitment, and a certain amount of skill. Naturally, many language teachers in Asia have at one time or another encountered some aspect of their professional practice in or outside the classroom that puzzled them, and that is a first step toward engaging in language teacher research. The next step would be to carry out a small-scale study of that puzzling aspect.

As Freeman (1998) pointed out, "Teacher research is about seeing what you do in your teaching and how it impacts on your students' learning" (p. 6). This is exactly the process followed by many language teachers who submitted manuscripts for inclusion in this *Language Teacher Research in Asia* volume. All of the submissions were of the highest quality and addressed very important aspects of language teacher research, and they could fill several volumes from Asia. Unfortunately, only a certain number of topics could be selected for the final collection.

Language Teacher Research in Asia thus presents research that was conducted by language teachers at all levels, from high school English teachers to English language teacher educators reflecting on their practice. The countries represented cover both north and south Asia. The chapters are presented in alphabetical

order of the first author's name to indicate that no one topic and no one Asian region or country is more important than another. As you will see, the chapters follow a template so that readers can compare across chapters, looking at aspects such as the research issue, background literature, procedures, results, and reflection.

In the chapter "Teaching Character Depiction in Narrative Writing," Antonia Chandrasegaran and Siok-Chin Yeo outline the procedures they used to help high school students in Singapore improve their writing after conventional methods of teaching yielded less-than-encouraging results. The findings of their research suggest that teaching genre practices and the thinking underlying the practices can lead to better writing of the same genre.

Next, Sumalee Chinokul's chapter, "Expert and Nonexpert Teachers: Do They Use Different Processes While Learning to Teach?" discusses how one language teacher educator reflected on her role as teacher of the teacher when she was assigned to teach a course in methodology of English language teaching in Thailand. She conducted this research not as a classroom experiment but simply as part of normal classroom procedure. Her main research question was "How do expert teachers and nonexpert teachers differ in their processes of learning to teach English as a foreign language?" As a result of her research, Chinokul said that she gathered concrete evidence and samples to give course participants some benchmarks to help them further progress in learning to teach.

The chapter by Duong Thi Hoang Oanh, titled "Learner Autonomy in an Asian Context: Independent Learning and Independent Work at the University Level," explains how this English as a foreign language teacher addressed her observation that autonomy is seldom and ineffectively practiced in university English language classes in Vietnam. The author thought that she had encouraged students to work on their own. But, in practice, she found that she was still in control of her students' outside work and that the goal of this work was set by the teacher, not the students.

The chapter titled "The TESOL Methods Course: What Did They *Really* Learn?" outlines how a language teacher educator in Singapore, Thomas S. C. Farrell, explored how much his students learned as a result of taking his TESOL methods course. Although the students as a group had taken on new concepts as presented in the course, many individual postcourse concept maps indicated that the students had not yet linked these new concepts in any coherent manner.

In "Understanding Chinese Students' Teacher Dependence," Gao Xuesong (Andy) reports on an inquiry into a group of tertiary Chinese students' language learning experiences, with a focus on their teacher dependence during the learning process. The findings lend tentative support to his speculation that his students' dependence on their teachers might stem from strategic goals in a context in which education is widely viewed as a pathway for social promotion and teachers are seen as preselection agents.

The next chapter, "Challenging Tradition: Creating a Self-Access Language Learning Center in an East Asian Academic High School" by Chris Hale, outlines how the author created a self-access language learning center in a Japanese high school where teacher-centered, lecture-style lessons were the norm of classroom language instruction. The results suggest that regardless of the students' preference for teacher or student-centered learning, a self-study center can be beneficial in helping students achieve their goals.

Xuelin Liu and Christine C. M. Goh's chapter, "Improving Second Language Listening: Awareness and Involvement," outlines the steps the authors took to improve their learners' weak listening abilities. These teachers realized that in order to help their students improve these skills, the students needed to first become aware of their learning needs and comprehension problems. As a result of this research, the authors discovered that their students developed greater awareness of themselves as second language learners.

Next, Stephen H. Moore's chapter, "From Chalkboard to Lectern to Chalkboard: The Journey of an Applied Linguistics Lecturer," discusses how a language teacher educator in Vietnam attempted to delicately balance his roles as an applied linguistics lecturer and a former English teacher when confronting how to address his learners' language problems. Moore came up with various action plans that could help educators trying to interface between language and content learning and teaching in an applied linguistics course.

In "'I Want to Study TOEFL!' Finding the Balance Between Test Focus and Language Learning in Curriculum Revision," Patrick Rosenkjar reports on research undertaken to inform a comprehensive curriculum revision project that the author initiated shortly after being appointed director of a university program. As a result of revising the curriculum and surveying all of the stakeholders, Rosenkjar discovered that test anxiety and preference for explicit focus on forms still looms large in the minds of his Japanese students.

Timothy Stewart's chapter, "Bridging the Classroom Perception Gap: Comparing Learners' and Teachers' Understandings of What Is Learned," outlines the author's multifaceted approach to task evaluation undertaken to match teacher and learner impressions of task appropriateness in a Japanese university setting. As a result of his research, Stewart learned more than he had expected about himself as a teacher, his learners' expectations, and his course.

Wang Ge, in his chapter titled "Does Project-Based Learning Work in Asia?" discusses how he looked into the feasibility of using project-based learning (PBL) in China for English learning. Using the hot issue of the outbreak of the medical disease known as SARS in his classes, Wang developed a three-project approach to PBL, consisting of group discussion, a written report, and a writing task. His results indicate that the success of PBL is dependent on appropriate project planning, implementation, and assessment in language instruction.

The final chapter, "How Does Course Content Affect Students' Willingness

to Communicate in the L2?" by Jennifer Weathers, describes how the author noticed various degrees of reticence among students in her oral English classes in China. Weathers outlines her attempts to get her students to speak more English in class by making various changes to her course content. As a result of her research, Weathers discovered that her students' responses seemed to confirm the important role that interest plays in her students' willingness to communicate in English.

This volume provides a small window into what TESOL practitioners are reflecting on in diverse settings in Asia. These TESOL professionals take enormous pride in their work, and now they also are willing to share their observations with other professionals. I hope that other teachers in the Asian context will not only read these wonderful articles but also replicate the topics they find most relevant to their context and compare the results. This approach is similar to one taken by a traveler who, before going on a journey, asks others who have visited his or her destination for their advice. In both situations, knowledge seekers can learn from others' successes and mistakes. To further that goal, this *Language Teacher Research in Asia* volume is designed to encourage more language teachers in Asia to embark on research and share their experiences with other teachers in the region and beyond.

Thomas S. C. Farrell is editor of the Language Teacher Research Series *at TESOL and of this* Language Teacher Research in Asia *volume. He is Associate Professor in Applied Language Studies at Brock University, Ontario, Canada. His professional interests include reflective teaching, teacher development, and methodology. His latest books are* Professional Development for Language Teachers *(coauthored with Jack C. Richards, 2005, Cambridge University Press) and* Success With English Language Learners: A Guide for Beginning Teachers *(2006, Corwin Press).*

CHAPTER **2**

Teaching Character Depiction in Narrative Writing (*Singapore*)

Antonia Chandrasegaran and Siok-Chin Yeo

Issue

This study explores the question of how to help high school students improve their writing after conventional methods of teaching have yielded less-than-encouraging results. Conventional methods include remedial grammar exercises, vocabulary lessons, and classroom activities to stimulate a flow of ideas (e.g., free writing, brainstorming). In Singapore schools, where the English syllabus is genre-inspired, more and more teachers are teaching descriptions of the organisational structure of narrative and other texts. The common thread running through the conventional methods and the more recent genre-based methods of teaching writing is their focus on the finished product. Teachers tell students, for example, that a good narrative must have correct past tense verbs, vivid characterisation, and stages such as *setting* and *complication*. Then teachers expect their students to produce these features. Although such product information is useful for students who already have the composing skills to achieve the desired qualities, it is of limited help to students who do not. How can educators teach students the thinking and the ways of using language that produce the desired qualities? This chapter describes one attempt at finding an answer to this question.

The search for workable alternatives to product-focused methods of teaching writing motivated the two authors to explore, separately at first, the possibility

of trying out methods that would focus student attention on thinking processes that align with particular genre practices. The second author, being a teacher with more than 10 years of experience with Singapore students, was aware of the disappointing limitations of additional remedial grammar lessons, vocabulary lists, and brainstorming for improving essay writing. Her classroom experience with narrative writing had shown that students could not use the grammar structures retaught, the new vocabulary learnt, and the ideas generated through brainstorming to create a text that readers could recognise as an interesting story. She wondered if the problem lay in her students' thinking processes. At the same time, having read about genre theory in a postgraduate course of study, she had a hunch that the solution might be to teach explicitly some of the discourse practices of short story writers. She discussed this hunch with the first author, a teacher educator, friend, and mentor, who suggested looking into a combination thinking and genre approach. In the rest of this chapter, the pronoun "we" is used to indicate actions and decisions taken by the two authors in consultation with each other.

One recurrent weakness that we noticed in students' narratives was a lack of purposefully selected detail that would construct vivid depictions of characters. Details either were absent or when present did not contribute to an overall effect. We hypothesized that students might learn to generate and select details judiciously if they knew how to think during the generation and selection process. If we could teach them the mental operations for establishing a point of reference for language and content choice, they might write better narratives. We further hypothesized that, to be effective, the thinking and mental posturing during the writing process would have to be presented to students as social practices of the narrative genre. Instead of approaching narrative writing as the production of correct sentences, the student would need to assume the role of a storyteller, whose social goal is to influence the reader's feelings toward the characters in the story. Otherwise, the story would tend to be little more than a skeletal recounting of events.

To test our hypothesis, we decided to focus on teaching methods of character depiction in the 7 weeks we had for conducting the research. We chose character depiction primarily because the characters in our students' stories tended to be pasteboard figures. Another reason for choosing character depiction is that a reader's response to a story is much influenced by the image that the reader constructs of the main characters, and that image is shaped by the writer's choice of language and meaning.

The main aim of the study was to find out if explicit instruction in specific genre practices and related thinking processes for constructing characters would improve students' narrative writing. The specific questions that drove the research were whether explicit teaching of genre practices and goal-directed thinking in depicting characters would

- Raise student awareness of the need to form a sociorhetorical intention when describing a character.

- Result in the use of a wider range of epithets (descriptive words) appropriately selected to match the student's rhetorical intention.

- Result in the creation of appropriate ideational tokens that evoke the qualities the student intends the character to display. (An ideational token is an expression that suggests, rather than directly describes, a character trait or the character's emotional state.)

Background Literature

From a cognitive perspective, writing is a decision-making process (Flower & Hayes, 1981) that requires "active thinking and problem solving" (Kern, 2000, p. 29). The problem to be solved in writing, according to Flower and Hayes, is the rhetorical problem consisting of the following elements:

- The writer's purpose—what effect the writer intends to create for the reader.

- The audience or target readers—their needs, previous knowledge, and so on.

- The context of situation in which the writing (and reading) take place (e.g., writing under examination conditions with an imposed word limit).

For the student asked to write a narrative, the rhetorical problem is how, within the time and word limit allowed, to generate and organise ideas into a story that the teacher would find interesting.

Flower and Hayes's (1981) research on writers' thinking processes led them to observe that "writing is a goal-directed process" (p. 377). Skilled writers engage in "goal-directed thinking" (p. 378) as a means to solving the rhetorical problem. Furthermore, the goals that guide the writing process of good writers are high-level rhetorical goals pertaining to writer purpose and reader effect, not local sentence-level goals. Applied to narrative writing, a high-level goal might be "I'll make the reader feel sympathetic toward the main character." Unskilled writers, on the other hand, tend to stay fixated on local goals such as spelling or sentence-level grammar accuracy (Hayes, 1996).

Although writing involves goal setting and goal-directed decision making, it is also a process of engaging in the sociocultural practices of a community of language users. Story writers, for instance, engage in the social practice of creating "a sense of suspense" in the reader, who then feels impelled to read on "to find out 'how it all ends'" (Rothery, 1996, p. 96). Producing suspense and creating