Initiating an action research programme for university EFL teachers: Early experiences and responses

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A B S T R A C T

Accounts of how teacher educators begin to plan, develop, and support action research programmes for language teachers are rare, as are descriptions of the responses of the teachers who participate. This article documents and analyses the initial processes of introducing and supporting a new programme of action research for language teachers at the Universidad Chileno-Británica de Cultura (UCBC) in Santiago, Chile. To evaluate the setting up of the programme and how the teachers have perceived it in its early stages, the authors, who are the programme facilitators, have conducted a meta-study. Data include workshop and meeting recordings, workshop observation notes, a reflective account, and a teacher questionnaire. The findings indicate that the teachers value the input and collaboration provided by an initial workshop, and subsequent meetings and discussions, very highly, but that issues of time, student involvement, and academic literature are areas for further debate and development. The article ends by drawing out the broader implications for UCBC and for others wishing to initiate similar action research programmes.

Keywords: language teacher education; action research; teachers as researchers; facilitation of action research

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Introduction

In recent years, action research has increasingly been adopted in university-based English language programmes (e.g. Çelik & Dikilitaş, 2015; Lehtonen, Pitkänen & Vaattovaara, 2015), as well as elsewhere, as a way for teachers to investigate teaching and learning issues perceived as relevant to them within the contexts of their own workplaces. Action research is an inquiry-oriented teacher education process that can lead to greater understanding of local teaching issues or challenges, and the discovery of new approaches and solutions for meeting those challenges. Several studies have documented the process of facilitating a completed action research programme for professional development in various contexts (e.g. Atay, 2008; Borg & Sanchez, 2015; Burns, 2015). However, to our knowledge, there are no studies on the decision-making processes and experiences of facilitators of action research in the early stages of setting up such a programme with a group of teachers in a specific context.

In this study we aim to fill this gap by documenting and analysing the early processes of introducing an action research programme for English language teachers at a university in Chile. We examine our own responses and those of the teachers concerned as they prepare to undertake action research. Our aim is to share these experiences with others who may be responsible for university-based English language teacher development and who are considering using an action research approach, as we did, for the first time.

We begin with an overview of action research, and its features and process. We outline, in particular, why action research can be considered to be an approach that is teacher-centred, one that enhances teachers' learning and enables them to gain agency within their own contexts of work. We argue that action research is a powerful way for teachers to extend their professionalism and to understand their work and their learners in much deeper ways than might otherwise occur. We then describe why the programme was introduced and why an action research approach was selected. We also explain the model for the programme, our own roles within it and the methods by which we are tracking the initiation of the programme and the teachers' reactions. We conclude by touching on the lessons learned so far about introducing such a programme and discuss what implications there might be for action research facilitators in other contexts.

Literature review

Traditionally, much professional development for language teachers has focused on acquiring formal qualifications or attending externally offered and often short-term professional development workshops or courses. These options are intended to enable teachers to learn about recent theories, trends and approaches in ELT that they are subsequently expected to adopt in their own classrooms. Such approaches to teacher education, which are often organised centrally and designed to improve teacher knowledge and upskill teaching practice, have been referred to as a form of "sponsored" professionalism (Leung, 2009). This orientation to professionalising teachers' work is underpinned by a "collectivity" approach often related to generalised requirements or standards considered appropriate by educational bodies or professional associations. As Leung states, however, "it does not necessarily coincide with individual teachers' views on professionalism" (p. 49).

A more recent conceptualisation of teacher professionalism relates to that of teacher learning in local contexts of practice. Leung refers to this type as "independent professionalism" (2009, p. 50) which aligns with socially and politically sensitive forms of professional activity within teachers' own workplaces. The concept of teacher learning recognises that the cognitive dimension of teachers' work is not simply based in individual acquisition of professional knowledge, but that it

is situated in and socially mediated by the contexts in which teachers operate (Burns & Richards, 2009). While it has long been seen as important for teachers to be informed about current theories and trends in language teaching methodology (e.g. Richards, 1990), it is now more widely recognised that it is the localised norms, assumptions, and conditions of teachers' practice and their own sense of agency within these contexts that will have a greater impact on how they are able to conduct their teaching (e.g. Freeman, 2016).

Golombek and Johnson (2011), drawing on Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), argue that knowledge about teaching cannot come only from researchers and theorists who are distant from centres of practice, but must also emerge from "insiders", that is the teacher practitioners who are themselves the prime actors in the daily life of schools and classrooms. They refer to such knowledge as "experiential", relating to the ways teachers themselves "interpret and reinterpret their experiences... to articulate the complexities of teaching" (p. 187). They note the power of teachers' own narratives to legitimise these local ways of understanding and interpreting their teaching practices.

Among a range of recent 'reflective' ways of learning that have emerged in professional development for language teachers, Golombek and Johnson (2011) point to teacher inquiry through action research. Spreading into the field of English language teaching in the 1990s (e.g. Burns, 1999; Edge & Richards, 1993; Freeman, 199; Wallace, 1998) and strengthening considerably over the last 15 years (e.g. Borg & Sanchez, 2015; Burns, 2010; Edge, 2001; Rebolledo, Smith & Bullock, 2016), action research has been seen to have a significant impact on the way in which teachers can envisage and understand their work. Among the benefits noted for teachers who participate in action research in their own workplaces are greater self-efficacy, more positive views of teaching, deeper engagement with their learners, enhanced research skills, broader understanding of how their work relates to theoretical concepts, increased meaningfulness in relation to their work, and stronger sense of their own professionalism (Borg, 2013; Burns, 1999; Edwards & Burns, 2016a; Johnson & Golombek, 2002).

In addition, Richards (2003) points to the value of action research as a powerful way to introduce teachers to the field of research in TESOL in general. As he notes: "It is powerful because, although it demands the same standards of inquiry as other legitimate forms of research, it goes beyond mere discovery and embeds the findings of the research in a process of professional self-discovery and development" (pp. 236-7). He argues that the "traditional" structure of action research consisting of plan, act, observe, and reflect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) is one that can be introduced "naturally" into classrooms and integrates relatively easily into regular classroom teaching. The model reflects a cyclical or spiralling process where four "moments" or stages of action research may occur iteratively over several cycles. In brief these stages are:

> Plan: develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening
>
> Act: act to implement the plan
>
> Observe: observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs
>
> Reflect: reflect on these effects as the basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of stages.
>
> (Burns, 2009, p. 290)

The model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) was adopted in the present study. Although it has been subject to criticism (see Burns, 2009), its value lies in its relative simplicity to follow and its adaptation for different research purposes. Action research, therefore, becomes a more realistic research option for many teachers, since it fits within familiar processes of planning

their work, trying out activities in their classrooms, and reflecting on their efficacy. The difference is that in action research these processes combine with systematic gathering of evidence to support new insights and claims about teaching and learning.

There is growing evidence in the literature of an increased interest in practitioner research, whether it be through action research, exploratory practice, or reflective teaching. This interest in practitioner research is emerging in a great variety of international contexts and initiatives are being introduced to meet local needs and conditions (e.g. Borg & Sanchez, 2015; Hayes, 2014). There is also evidence that action research can act as a major trigger to research engagement and participation on the part of teachers (see for example Edwards & Burns, 2016b). It was for these reasons that a programme of action research was selected in the university context in which this study is set. Our account of this emergent institutional teacher research programme describes how it has been developed so far in the Chilean university context; it adds to the literature on such programmes in different international contexts and may provide a navigational tool for others wishing to embark on such an initiative.

From the outset, we have envisaged the 2016 programme as a pilot, with a view to running future cycles with a larger number of teachers. In order to evaluate the impact of the 2016 programme and to improve it for future cycles, we decided to conduct a larger 'macro-project' focusing on its initiation and development and the responses of the five participants. In this paper, we present the research carried out for this macro-project so far, that is, until April 2016, focusing on the following research question:

What have been the responses of the participating teachers to the programme during the training and initial stages of implementation?

In the sections below we outline the context, programme design, participants, and data collection and analysis.

Methodology

Background and context

The Teachers' Action Research Programme is a new initiative at the Universidad Chileno-Británica de Cultura (UCBC) in Santiago, Chile. The UCBC was founded in 2006, and is a small, niche university that aims to develop highly competent bilingual (Spanish-English) professionals who can contribute to the development of the country. At the moment, the university offers undergraduate degree programmes in Pre-school and Primary Education with a minor in English, Secondary School English Teacher Training, and Spanish to English Translation.

Since its inception, the university has focused on establishing and improving the undergraduate degree programmes it offers, and its accreditation by the British Accreditation Council in 2015 is a testament to this goal. Research, as in many other private universities in Chile, has generally played a minor role. The main research activities until 2015 were occasional collaborative projects carried out with researchers from British universities, and small-scale research projects carried out by teachers as part of the UCBC's annual Teachers' Research Project Award (established in 2013). Nonetheless, there has been a growing sense that research should be a more integral part of the university's endeavours since it offers important possibilities for enhancing teacher development and improving degree programme teaching. This shift in attitude was also underpinned by increasing pressure on private and public universities from the Chilean Ministry of Education to produce more research; as part of the accreditation process for Chilean universities that the UCBC

is undergoing, the university was specifically required to demonstrate research plans and products in 2015.

While the importance for the UCBC to develop its research was recognised, the question remained of how this could be achieved. In a survey carried out in 2015, many UCBC teachers, most of whom hold a master's degree, expressed their interest in research but a lack of experience and confidence in carrying it out and publishing the outcomes. Having observed the impact of action research programmes established for Chilean school teachers (e.g. Smith et al., 2014) and teachers in language institutions in Australia (e.g. Burns, 2015), the UCBC decided that a similar programme could constitute one of its main strategies for research development. Action research seemed to be a practice-oriented and teacher-friendly approach that would enable teachers to develop their skills in carrying out and publishing research while at the same time maintaining the university's traditional focus on improving its undergraduate programmes. Consequently, the first author was invited by the second author (the Programme Coordinator) to develop and facilitate a joint programme; the second and third authors are local mentors for the teachers involved.

Programme description

The programme is structured over one year in order to provide teachers with on-going support in a collaborative context that will help them to develop and implement their projects, and to write them. Participation in the programme was voluntary. We established which teachers wanted to participate and what their topics of interest would be during the last months of 2015, and then a three-day workshop was held in January 2016. The workshop was run by the first author, and had been planned by her in conjunction with the local Programme Coordinator. The principal aims were to develop teachers' understanding of what action research involves (which was illustrated by case studies) and their research plans, and help teachers to define their research questions and objectives. January was chosen for the workshop as classes end in December, and so teachers had more time to attend the workshop. They could also begin their action research project in the new academic year, due to start in March 2016. Since it is common for teachers to take their holiday in February in Chile, no activities were programmed for that month.

The main implementation ('acting' and 'observing' stages) were planned for the first semester, which runs from March to July. The data analysis, reflection and write-up were scheduled for the second semester, which runs from August to December. From March to December, it is planned that the participating teachers and local mentors will continue to meet as a group and on an individual basis with the mentors, where necessary, to discuss progress and queries, approximately every 2 to 4 weeks. The first author will continue to provide guidance during this period via Skype and email with the local mentors, and have occasional contact via Skype with the participants. Table 1 summarises the major stages in the programme.

Table 1
Outline of UCBC Teachers' Action Research Programme 2016

Period	Activity	Outcomes
September (2015)	Initial invitation to participate sent via email to teachers	Teachers confirmed their intention to participate between September and October.
December (2015)	Induction meeting	The meeting was held with participants to outline the programme, and to confirm their topic of interest.
January (2016)	Initial training and project development	3-day workshop with the first author. Information about action research was presented. Teachers developed their own project objectives and plans for implementation and data collection.
March – July	Implementation and data collection	Participating teachers and local mentors continue to meet as a group regularly from March to December. The first author provides guidance throughout the programme and has occasional contact via Skype with participants.
August – September	Data analysis	
September	Presentation of projects to the UCBC community	
October – December	Project write-ups in the form of research articles. Recruitment of participants for 2017 programme.	

Participants

Funding was available from the UCBC to enable up to six teachers to participate in the programme. This would cover their participation during the three-day workshop in January, and four hours per week in their timetable between March and December. All fourteen English language teachers at the UCBC were initially invited to participate, via email from the Programme Coordinator in September 2015. They were informed that they would be able to research an area that interested them, individually, with a partner, or in a small group. Informal follow-up conversations took place with those who expressed an interest. Six teachers wanted to participate, and were asked to consider a topic of interest in preparation for an induction meeting in December. At the end of December, one of the teachers then withdrew due to a problem that was beyond her control.

The five current participants are four female Chilean teachers, and one male British teacher. They have all taught English in Chilean schools and universities for at least ten years, and have a wide variety of educational backgrounds: three have Masters' degrees in related areas, one has a PhD in literature and one has not studied at postgraduate level. None had previously carried out action research. By the time of the workshop in January, three of the teachers had agreed to work together on a project for integrated assessment and had a clear idea about what they would like to achieve; the two remaining teachers had a general idea of the issue they would like to research, but were not sure about how to address them. The projects, as defined by the end of the January workshop, are shown in Table 2, and as can be seen, they vary considerably.

Table 2

Projects being carried out as part of UCBC Teachers Action Research Programme 2016

Project	No. of teachers involved
Impact of integrated assessment on the linguistic competences of second year students	3
Targeting and improving students' awareness of L1 transfer issues	1
Using verbal scaffolding to enhance oral production in a small group of low proficiency	1

Data collection and analysis

As discussed above, we consider this first year of the programme to be a pilot. Thus, our aim is to evaluate its implementation in order to feed what we learn into future cycles. Our research question concerns the responses of the participating teachers to the programme during the training and initial stages of implementation. In order to answer this question, we chose an exploratory-interpretive approach (Ellis, 2012), collecting qualitative data from a variety of sources which would then be examined for common themes.

During the three-day workshop in January, the data was collected in a variety of ways. First, the second author made observation notes of key comments and questions made by the teachers that arose during the discussion sessions about action research and the programme, as well as her own reflections. Second, the presentations by the teachers of their project ideas and the ensuing discussions were audio-recorded. Third, at the end of the workshop, teachers were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix 1) to give their responses to the workshop, to identify their expectations for the rest of the programme, and to make any recommendations for future versions of this three-day workshop (only four of the five teachers responded to this questionnaire as one teacher was unable to attend the workshop). Finally, a reflective account of the workshop was also written up by the three authors together during the following week. At the two subsequent meetings of the teachers and mentors that were held in March and April, during which teachers presented and discussed progress with their projects, audio-recordings were also made.

The data collected were reviewed to identify repeated themes: the written data (the second authors' observation notes, questionnaires and the collaborative reflective account) were analysed by all three authors; the audio data from the recordings were analysed by the second and third authors following repeated listening to the recordings. We found listening to the recordings of the discussions particularly useful for allowing ideas and issues to emerge. Those ideas and issues that appeared repeatedly in the different data sets were then explored further in a focus group which was held with the teachers in April. The focus-group was also audio-recorded and reviewed by the second and third author.

The following section presents the common themes that arose from the observation notes, questionnaires, reflective accounts and various recordings from the workshop, meetings and focus group.

Teachers' responses

The most notable themes that have emerged among the teachers' perceptions of the programme so far have been the positive views of the initial workshop and of the programme in general, and the reasons for these; collaboration with each other; time issues; student involvement; and accessing academic literature.

Views of the programme

The teachers' responses to the programme suggest that they see it as a very positive opportunity. In terms of the initial workshop delivered by the first author, it was clear that the teachers valued it for a number of reasons. First, the teachers began with varied levels of understanding about the nature of action research, and the presentation of what they saw as clear information and practical case studies during the workshop was clearly appreciated. The questionnaire responses showed that teachers felt they had gained:

> Clarity on action research. I had a vague idea of the nature of this type of research (Teacher A, Questionnaire)

> An idea of what AR is (not). (Teacher D, Questionnaire)

> Lots of information on AR. I mean, what AR is more clearly. (Teacher C, Questionnaire)

The case studies, presented as examples illustrating other teachers' action research, seemed especially important in this regard, as noted in one of the teacher's responses to the question about what they had most gained from the workshop, and also the reflective account of the workshop:

> Update on action research with projects that are interesting and applicable to our university. (Teacher B, Questionnaire)

> During the morning, Anne Burns presented some case studies of other teachers' action research projects and discussed the formation of research questions. Teacher A mentioned after seeing the video that she liked the fact that students were involved in the research – something she remembered Teacher C having mentioned on Day 1. Teacher C and Teacher D both agreed. The teachers seemed to find the case studies interesting to watch, and they seemed to help build confidence. (Workshop reflective account of Day 2).

Our impressions that the teachers were gaining confidence were supported later by their responses in the questionnaire.

> Confidence and trust on the process of becoming a researcher. (Teacher A, Questionnaire)

> Confidence on (sic) the fact that I can do this project collaboratively with my colleagues. (Teacher B, Questionnaire)

> Confidence (?). (Teacher D, Questionnaire)

Another important reason for the positive reaction was the teachers' realisation that action research could enable them to address issues related to their own professional activities; this not only motivated them, but also gave them a sense of empowerment that they could continue developing as teachers again:

> Teacher A and Teacher D saw the advantages of AR as being a route to change or refresh normal teaching practices. Teacher B mentioned that she thought teachers are used to receiving advice from external 'experts' but felt that as teachers are the protagonists they are better positioned to really determine what is needed in a given context. (Workshop reflective account of Day 1)

> I'm really looking forward to refresh[ing] my attitudes towards teaching. I've been teaching for a long time, and it has been interesting to see that you can always start again. (Teacher A, Questionnaire)

> To share our ideas and see how our projects evolve. (Teacher B, Questionnaire)

> I'm really happy to be involved in this project. I feel enthusiastic for the first time in a long time. I feel hopeful that this research is going to help me improve my teaching practice and my academic English as well. (Teacher C, Questionnaire)

Regarding the development of the teachers' ideas about their projects during this first workshop, it was noticeable that even though we were members of the same community, teachers and mentors needed to pose many questions to each other at this initial stage of identifying issues and outlining the focus of the projects. It was as if there was a natural but real need for the facilitator, mentor teachers and participating teachers to share and compare our individual understandings and perspectives about the teachers' contexts. When the mentors listened to the audio-recordings from the workshop, the considerable amount of time needed for these discussions stood out. It highlighted the point that a common vision cannot always be expected, even for teachers working in the same institution, as each classroom is different. However, the extensive discussions generated during the workshop were clearly appreciated; the teachers valued both being involved in the work of others and receiving others' points of view as these data suggest:

> The teachers voiced their agreement and appreciation of the workshop and general confidence about the future. Teacher A commented that she liked the democratic aspect of the action research – both of the teacher researching their own practice and of involving learners in decision-making. (Workshop reflective account of Day 3)

> I really don't like workshops where we just sit and listen. This gave me the opportunity to collaborate with the work of others, and receive feedback from my peers. (Teacher A, Questionnaire)

Peer collaboration

The comment above reflects another key theme that has emerged from the data: peer collaboration. As we have reflected on the events of the workshop and meetings through the recordings and other data, it has become obvious that collaboration has been essential to help teachers develop their projects during the initial implementation phase. During our meeting discussions, collaboration has ranged from simply helping to improve phrasing in questionnaires, to grappling with deeper issues such as defining the aims of the projects and considering how to collect data. To follow up on these perceptions about the importance of collaboration, during the focus group discussions with the teachers we discussed what role it plays for them in the programme. They confirmed that face-to-face meetings and overt cooperation have been extremely "helpful" ways to receive fresh opinions and redirect actions:

> I think it's good to have face to face feedback somehow. Talking about what's going on at the time. (Teacher C, Focus group)

> It has been really helpful because we've received very good ideas that we've tried to incorporate in our project (Teacher A, Focus group)

> Yeah if you're going off on one direction and then everybody says 'oh no...' you might think you know where you're going but then people say 'no' you might be a bit confused… but that's still helpful (Teacher D, Focus group)

Expressions of support for collaboration were most strongly related to the initial project development stage and not so much to the present stage when teachers are already putting their plans into practice.

Time issues

The issue of time in doing research is seen both negatively and positively. More negatively, with the start of the academic year, teaching pressures are causing teachers to be more concerned about the time they can devote to meetings. Exposing their research progress and receiving feedback may imply a redirection in their plans, which teachers seem less willing to face because of the additional time involved. This issue was probed during the focus group, and the teachers requested shorter and more focused meetings, implying the need for a more pragmatic approach to help them continue:

> Just to check if we're on the right track, if we have questions (Teacher E)

> It [the meeting in March] was very interesting because it helped us clarify our ideas, also it was good that somebody else checked the rubrics and I have already implemented some of the ideas you mentioned... but I also agree [our meeting in March] was too long, I don't think I have enough time to comply with that rhythm of meetings, so long and so often…. I agree that it has to be something probably at the beginning as we are starting and we are probably not that clear about the ideas and we need some more help, but now that we are starting with the ideas I think it should be less and less, I think. (Teacher A, Focus group)

During the discussion, we agreed to set time limits for the presentation and discussion of each project, and to ask teachers to come to meetings with two or three specific questions for discussion. We were able to conduct the subsequent meeting in April within the time limit we had set (15-20 minutes per project). The mentors observed that having the previously considered questions enabled the discussion to focus on issues that were obviously of concern to the teachers.

On the other hand, more positively, the teachers have also noted the importance of being given time to stop and think about how projects are unfolding; time to verbalise thoughts and actions seems to have helped to clarify them:

> The idea of socialising what you're doing is a process where you verbalise what you're doing and you see 'oh this is wrong' or I realised it wasn't the best procedure, when you verbalise, when you socialise in those terms I see there is a contribution. The only idea of socialising what you're doing is help, because you verbalise and then you realise there are good things, and not really good things, things you could improve, and that happens when you share things with others. (Teacher C, Focus group)

These comments also reflect again the important role of collaboration where the opportunity to dialogue with others, while it might seem time-consuming, has a very positive impact on teacher development (Mann, 2005).

Student involvement

Another area that provoked enthusiasm during the January workshop, as indicated earlier, was the idea of involving students in the research process, that is doing research 'with' students, and not 'on' them. In the teachers' initial plans for their projects, student involvement was generally limited to seeking student feedback after new teaching strategies were introduced in class − what could be described as a 'traditional' or more technicist interpretation of action research. In the follow-up meetings, with encouragement from the mentors, teachers incorporated opportunities for student involvement at early stages so as to orient their new teaching strategies more effectively according to students' perceptions and needs. One of the teachers explained how students were invited to help develop a plan of action:

> The students today […] were getting many ideas to some of the questions… and one of the questions I asked them was what activities we could do in class to deal with the problem, so they were coming up with a few ideas and it was good because the ideas they were coming up with were the same things I was thinking about doing anyways (sic). So in that way they were involved. (Teacher D, Focus group)

However, as the comment hints, teachers have also shown some reluctance to increase student participation further as time has gone on, possibly because they feel they have already involved students enough:

> Well I don't really know if they are that involved because we had done the [focus of the research] before so we have been working on it, reading it,… thought of two activities to help them get used to it … but that is how they have collaborated but they have not really provided items for evaluation.(Teacher E, Focus group)

In some cases the teachers' reluctance may be because they have concerns about the time constraints involved in exploring students' opinions and ideas more extensively, as it could hinder further progress on their research. In other cases it may be because the teachers essentially visualise their projects as the implementation of their own ideas, that need to be tested to come to personal conclusions.

Academic literature

A final emerging issue is the question of the use of academic literature to support the development of action research. As Burns (2010) has noted, some have argued against the use of literature on the grounds that it can introduce an overbearing influence on teachers' research; in other words, they may feel they are required to conform to formal theoretical perspectives rather than work with local interpretations. More recently, in this vein, some action research programmes have recognised the need to render the research process 'teacher-friendly' and to de-emphasize academic norms, especially for overburdened school teachers (e.g. Smith, 2015). This stance highlights the importance of considering an appropriate course of action in relation to a given context (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

At the UCBC, most teachers have some experience of using research literature at postgraduate level, and, as noted, they had time assigned each week to carry out their research projects. Moreover, as discussed, the University needs its teachers to develop their academic research skills. We decided to discuss the current debate over the use of academic literature for action research in the January workshop. We also incorporated time for a group visit to the university library where the first author gave an overview of the orientation and focus of different journals, and the teachers searched for literature relevant to their projects.

> The UCBC librarian demonstrated how to use the on-line catalogue to search the journal database. AB also outlined the function of the different journals held at UCBC. The teachers then spent some time looking for articles relevant to their projects in order to complete a homework task (report on a text read the next day, regarding its RQs, methodology, main findings and relevance to their study). Teacher C and Teacher D stayed after the official end to continue their search. The session in the library was a little disjointed as Teacher A and Teacher B were under time pressure and had come during lunch to advance their work. Nonetheless, the teachers seemed interested and keen to find useful texts. (Workshop reflective account of Day 2)

For the follow-up activity, teachers were asked to find one text and discuss its relevance to their project, as explained above, during the next workshop day. Some of the teachers initially found it difficult to select appropriate literature in the time given and one suggested extending this opportunity in future workshops.

> Maybe, some more time to research on references because we only had an hour or so and it was too short. (Teacher C, Questionnaire)

However, during the follow-up activity, they were keen to talk about the articles they had identified, and seemed to be motivated by finding research studies that they could draw on. One teacher clearly saw the opportunity for their research to be informed by the literature as very important and was keen to see further development in the resources available to teacher researchers at the university:

> Budget to be assigned to researchers to buy literature related to future projects and which should be part of the library collection for future reference. (Teacher B, Questionnaire)

The three teachers conducting research as a group had in fact accessed research literature prior to the workshop since they had attended a presentation by an expert in their area of integrated language assessment who had recommended resources which they used to develop their assessment rubrics. Subsequently, in one-to-one conversations between the participants and mentors, it has been evident that, unsurprisingly, teachers with less research experience have found it harder to find and utilise relevant literature. Since the teachers are researching and aiming to publish in a university context, it is appropriate to expect them to draw from the research literature. However, it cannot be assumed that they have the same level of expertise in doing so.

The data we have collected and analysed suggest that the programme, which was developed to support teachers across the year as they complete their research projects, is working effectively to this point. Teachers clearly feel more informed about action research, its design and key processes, and more confident to undertake practitioner research as a result of the initial intensive three-day workshop. They have "an idea of what AR is (not)" as one teacher put it, and more "trust on the process of becoming a researcher" in the words of another.

Discussion

The study has a number of implications for the further development of this programme at UCBC. First, providing training and workshops to support action research is an important facilitative condition for teacher research engagement, as other studies have also shown (see Borg, 2013; Çelik & Dikilitaş, 2015; Mann, 2005), which needs to be continued in future years. A second implication is the need to continually reflect on and refine the programme as it progresses across the year and to respond to those reflections. For example, one important issue is the teachers' sense of time pressure (cf. Burns, 1999; Dajani, 2015; Denny, 2005; Tinker Sachs, 2000). While on the one hand, the opportunity for collective discussion is valued, there is an increasing sense of the need to

balance the time spent on research with the time required for teaching. By changing the meeting specifications (time limits and specific questions), this potentially significant obstacle appears, for now at least, to have been circumvented. A second issue that has surfaced has been the question of utilizing the literature (cf. Green, 2006; Naidu et al., 1992). It would be beneficial to reflect on this aspect in more depth with the teachers before they begin to write up their projects, and again at the end of the programme, to shape further recommendations for next year.

Another interesting insight that has implications for further developed is the variety of assumptions from which teachers view and make sense of their context in relation to research. One area that emerged for the teachers was to do with the participation of students in the research (cf. Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Timperley et al, 2008) and in future this area could be explored in more depth in the initial workshop. Teachers' assumptions about other areas that come to the fore can be analysed further as the programme proceeds. These assumptions can be discussed collectively to foster continuing development of the projects. Such reflections and responses cannot occur, however, if teachers are asked to do research and then left to continue it on their own; rather the research is facilitated by maintaining close contact with the teachers involved, listening to their views and perceptions, and collaboratively reflecting on how best to respond (cf. Al-Maskari, 2015).

Finally, even though their projects are very different, these UCBC teachers also clearly appreciate the opportunity to work together. In responding to external imperatives to develop a greater focus on research and publication, the UCBC could have adopted a top-down and instrumental approach to instructing teachers to become research-active, 'overnight' as it were. Instead, the more gradual introduction of a collective and grounded "bottom-up" approach seems to be encouraging these pilot programme teachers, at least, to feel supported in their movement from teacher to researcher (Edwards & Burns, 2016b; Kiely et al, 2004). Yucel and Bos (2015) note the reluctance to adopt a research identity that can grip teachers who have taught for many years and who feel "ensconced" in a "comfort zone" of "ease and security" (p. 35). They contend that stepping outside this zone to conduct research involves considerable readjustments of professional identity, which we would argue should not be underestimated by institutions undergoing such change. The teachers' (clearly valued) collaborative experiences potentially provide the institution with important insights about how to continue to develop a stronger research culture.

Conclusion

In this article, we have recounted our analysis of the early stages of instituting a new teacher research programme in a particular university context. In so doing, we have aimed to illuminate some of the "design features" of programmes "which aim to develop teachers' attitudes, skills and knowledge for teacher research engagement" (Borg, 2013, p. 228). While the study may have limitations in focusing on only one institution and involving a small number of participants, we would argue that it provides valuable insider or'emic insights into the first tentative steps into a new mode of teacher development within a particular institution. We believe, along with Borg, that such accounts are relatively scarce, and that there is a lack of research evidence regarding the ways in which programmes supporting action research are planned and put into action. Our aim has been to illustrate, both for ourselves and for others interested in promulgating action research within their institutions, what features of such a programme seem to promote and support early teacher research, what constraints may be encountered, and what implications can be drawn from these experiences. In particular, the exploratory findings we have highlighted here may begin to make a contribution to the agenda of outlining some of the key characteristics and conditions for such programmes and of generating broader guidelines and frameworks for the field of practitioner action research.

In terms of wider implications for those wishing to initiate similar research ventures, there are a number of key points that can be made. One overarching factor that shapes the development of research engagement by teachers is the institutional attitude held towards research. There is considerable evidence that positive attitudes on the part of the wider institution (as in this case) and a commitment to developing a research culture provide teachers with greater motivation to become research active and to feel that their work is recognised (e.g. Borg, 2013; Edwards & Burns, 2016a; Handscomb & McBeath, 2003). Where these are present, it is important for such messages to be conveyed explicitly to teachers (again as in this case) so that they are keenly aware of such support; where they are absent, interested teacher developers and would-be teacher researchers may need to establish a 'self-support' network either within the institution or beyond (see Edwards & Burns, 2016b, for a discussion of teacher researcher self-support strategies).

Moreover, institutions that have traditionally focused on teaching rather than research need to be aware of the extent of the change that faces teachers who must now move towards becoming researchers. For many teachers, inexperienced in carrying out research, this change may be too overwhelming, especially in situations where there is little or no support for developing research skills (Borg, 201; Lehtonen et al, 2015). It can be productive, as in our situation, to 'begin small', by inviting interested teachers to be part of a volunteer group. A collaborative, networked approach, seen to be very important to the teachers in our study (see also Dajani, 2015), can then be taken towards planning a series of mutually-agreed workshops and meetings across a defined period of time. Informing teachers in advance of the overall structure of the programme across this time-period provides them with a sense of the commitment and time they are investing (Edwards & Burns, 2014).

Providing an initial workshop or discussion where teachers can explore the idea of action research and develop plans for their own projects is valuable as we discovered in our programme. Not only does it initiate further ideas about research opportunities for those interested and give them the opportunity to decide if they wish to be involved, but it also allows them to come to some common understandings and agreements about what constitutes action research and the kinds of practice-oriented investigations that can be undertaken (Rebolledo et al., 2014). Such workshops could include discussion of some initial readings in the area (such as those listed below), or of teachers' experiences of attending external presentations relevant to action research or to the topics selected, if these are possible. If collaborators external to the group are available (e.g. teacher colleagues, from the same or other institutions, who have already conducted action research; more experienced researchers willing to work with the teachers from time to time; local academics interested in collaborating with practising teachers), it can be very valuable to include them, either in person, or virtually, as the opportunity arises.

As our account of our experiences suggests, other factors are also facilitative of initiating action research. Allocating time for discussion and research is well-recognised as one key factor (e.g. Borg, 2013; Burns, 1999). While institutions may be reluctant to set aside time for teacher research, those wishing to create a productive research culture need to seriously consider the implications of not providing adequate time allocations. Building some research time into teachers' timetables both recognises the additional role teachers are being asked to take on and acknowledges that research has a distinctive role to play in teacher quality; it also potentially allows for qualitatively better outcomes from the research (Rust & Meyers, 2006). Another factor which, as we have noted above we are still exploring, but would seem to be important, is teachers' access to the professional literature, whether it be used to motivate and guide their research or whether it be seen as a further reference source against which to compare and evaluate research outcomes. It is likely that local conditions and requirements for research outputs will shape the way the literature is integrated into teachers' action research.

There are two areas we have not touched on in this article in any detail, but which are also longer-term considerations, both for our programme and for others: (1) how the outcomes of the research can be progressively built into the ongoing curriculum and teacher development of the institution; and (2) how teachers' research can be publicised (see Burns, 2014; Mumford, 2016). Regarding the first, teachers should be envisaged as active generators of knowledge whose work is fundamental to the success of the institution in that it determines the quality of learning and the status and competitiveness of the institution. Thus, it is beneficial for the outcomes of teachers' research to be recognised by the institution and evaluated for the role they might play in the development of the goals, contents, materials, and tasks associated with the curriculum. In this regard, the institution may need to consider how the research can be disseminated to other teachers and how they can be encouraged to take up the research-based pedagogical resources developed by their colleagues. This dissemination could form a key part of internal teacher development programmes, where peer-to-peer teacher collaboration is encouraged.

Regarding publicisation, at this stage in our programme, teachers are in the initial research phase and have had limited opportunity to disseminate their work. Nevertheless, how the research is to be promoted, disseminated and publicised is an important consideration from the beginning. While publication is clearly central within a university context such as UCBC, initiators of teacher research programmes can build in a variety of ways from the beginning that may provide a pathway into research presentation for novice teacher researchers, such as reporting at local staff meetings, presenting papers at teacher professional development and conference presentations, developing posters which can be displayed locally or at conferences (as has already happened in this programme), and contributing to teacher professional development blogs or teacher newsletters (see Burns, 2010, 2014).

It remains to be seen how such issues will continue to play out in the current project. In the meantime, we have begun to discern, as we have aimed to outline here, some of the key drivers of the programme as well as interesting areas for further investigation. What is important, in our view, is that those involved in facilitating such a programme work closely with teachers to draw continually on their experiences and sense of developing identities as researchers to guide and mediate its success.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire on 3-day workshop

1.   My immediate next step is …

2.   What three things did you gain most from the workshop?

3.   Is there anything you would have changed about the workshop?

4.   What are you most looking forward to?

5.   What are you most concerned about?

6.   What further support do you need before the next workshop?

7.   Are there any other points or comments you'd like to make at this stage?