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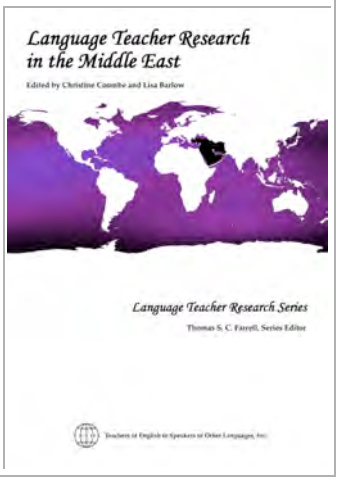
Language Teacher Research in the Middle East			
Author:	Christine Coombe & Lisa Barlow, Eds. (2007)		
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As part of TESOL's Language Teacher Research Series, this book presents a collection of action research from English language teachers in the Middle East. Series editor Thomas Farrell sets the stage for this collection in the introduction, stating that the "ultimate aim of this series is to encourage an inquiry stance toward language teaching" (p. viii) through individual language teacher's systematic reflection "on their own practice" (p. vii). Coombe and Barlow expand upon this concept in the initial chapter, explaining: "Teacher research involves teachers directly in the selection of immediate, compelling, and meaningful topics" (p. 1). Thus, this book promotes the field of second language pedagogy by establishing the presence of the teacher-researcher and impacting the field through public presentation (Freeman, 1998).

The remaining twelve chapters of the book cover a range of topics with oft-time similar themes. For instance, Chapters 3, 5 and 10 consider student perceptions of good teaching. More specifically, Chapter 3 looks at the validity of students' teacher evaluations which, although designed for native-speaking students at North American universities, are adopted by Middle East institutions "without tweaking the instruments to fit the educational context" (p. 21). Chapter 5 uses an open-ended questionnaire to compare student perceptions of NESTs and non-NESTs at institutes of higher learning in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. In Chapter 10, the authors use semi-structured interviews to elicit notions of best teaching practices as perceived by both teachers and students.

Student group work is the focus of Chapters 6, 9 and 11. In Chapter 6, the author evaluates student opinions of working in mixed male-female groups, a potentially provocative topic for this region. Chapter 9 presents the results of a procedure to facilitate

student participation in group work using de Bono's Six Thinking Hats Model (de Bono, 1999). Chapter 11 weighs the benefits of group feedback compared to pair feedback in an EFL English writing class at a Saudi Arabian university.

Chapters 2, 8 and 12 deal with student motivation. How anxiety differently affects arts-oriented students and science-oriented students is reviewed in Chapter 2. Chapter 8 takes up the issue of motivating low-achievers through the implementation of learning contracts, concluding that the benefits of such teacher-student agreements are at least questionable. The author of Chapter 12 also considers methods for improving the performance of low-achieving students, specifically multiple-repeater students, and reports some degree of success. The author of Chapter 4 analyzes the results of a study considering typical L2 English spelling errors of Arab learners. Chapter 7—the only chapter dealing with pre-university level students—evaluates how a strictly exam-based curriculum influences language instruction at a Pakistani High School in the U.A.E. Finally, Chapter 13 presents one teacher's predominantly positive experiences using Moodle, a computer-mediated Course Management System (CMS), in a first-year writing program.

Though the issues the contributors focus on here are not new to language teacher research, they are nonetheless relevant and offer insight into areas such as the use of technology in the classroom (Chapter 13) as well as student perspectives on the value of non-native speakers as teachers (Chapter 5) in today's ever more globalized society and the expanding field of English as an International Language (Braine, 1999; Llurda, 2005; Shin & Kellog, 2007). More importantly, this research presents pedagogical perspectives solely from the Middle East and Arabian Gulf region. Yet this circumscribed focus is undercut by one of the book's greatest shortcomings: the lack of variety in countries represented. Despite the fact that the title and cover art suggest a representation of research from the entire Middle East—from Turkey in the northwestern region; Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan in the northeast; and Yemen and Oman in the south—8 of the 12 studies in the book were authored by language teachers in the United Arab Emirates. One study was co-authored by teachers from Kuwait and from the U.A.E., two studies are from Saudi Arabia, and one study originated in Tunisia.

All but one of the research settings is an institution of higher learning with students in pre-university language-preparatory programs, with the previously cited exception (Chapter 7) of grade 11 and 12 female high school students. Having had teaching experience in such a university-prep program in the United Arab Emirates, I found that the situations described frequently seemed familiar. I discovered myself nodding in agreement with observations describing "numerous examples of segregated activities" outside the classroom (p. 65), teachers relying "on an accepted helplessness and pessimism about the system to justify the lack of initiative" (p. 91), and administrators "imposing a syllabus and curriculum which leaves no scope for the teacher to give the learners the autonomy necessary to foster critical and creative expression" (p. 101). Nevertheless, an observant reader will be able to cipher out region-specific pedagogical snapshots, such as typical classroom distributions of student ethnicities and educational experience, as well as gender issues in student-teacher interactions. In this regard, the

book may serve as an introduction to the region for language teachers considering opportunities there, offering insight into pedagogical conventions, student behaviors, administrative practices, and teacher expectations.

One of the more subtle yet noteworthy aspects of this book, however, is its evidence of teacher research enriching teachers' professional careers:

> I learned from this project that action research is important for me to question my own assumptions about what my students can and cannot do...research does not always have to be complicated . . . . I believe this experience has added a powerful tool to my teaching repertoire. (p. 110)

> Teacher research . . . can help us challenge stereotypes and suggest alternative meaning-making systems . . . while empowering the students and ourselves . . . action research is a useful and nonthreatening method of self-evaluation. (p. 172)

Indeed, this book presents motivating examples of the benefits of teacher-research and offers these teacher-researchers an opportunity for greater impact on how the field views teaching and learning, thereby also reinforcing teacher-research as its own genre (Freeman, 1998).

Language Teacher Research in the Middle East provides language teachers seeking opportunities in the Middle East practical advice on the context of teaching in that region, particularly in institutions of higher education in the United Arab Emirates or other countries of the Arabian Gulf region. The research presented here has a number of common themes with which readers will be able to easily identify, for example student motivation, student perceptions of teachers, and classroom dynamics. Yet more importantly, the book is a means for teacher-researchers to present their findings and influence the field. Teacher trainers - or other educators wanting to highlight the benefits of teacher-research - will find this book a valuable resource.

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