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'Teacher Association research' – an innovative form of teacher-research

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Cameroon has had bilingual education at all levels of the school system since 1998. But ELT in the country has been fraught with various challenges. Cameroonian teachers work in very difficult circumstances, some of which include:

- very large classes – sometimes more than 150 pupils
- a multiplicity of first language backgrounds
- an acute lack of prescribed course books
- pupils learning in very high temperatures
- having only blackboard and chalk in a world where technological advancements are influencing classroom cultures elsewhere

Teachers are therefore compelled to adopt survival strategies that are, in some cases, not what official policy requires of them.

In April 2001, CAMELTA [the Cameroon English Language and Literature Teachers' Association] was created with the aim of breaking the isolation that had existed amongst English teachers and creating a platform for teachers to network and share best practices. Since its creation, CAMELTA has organised 12 annual conferences and many more seminars and workshops in its 10 regional chapters. Also in 2009 a research committee was set up, led by a Vice President in charge of Research and Projects. This V-P (R & P) was charged with setting up research projects relevant to the needs and strengths of its members.

After a number of failed attempts to start up action research projects, partly because most teachers were unfamiliar with this, a way forward was finally defined in 2013. At the CAMELTA 12th Annual Conference the notion of 'Teacher Association Research' was formulated in a plenary presentation by Richard Smith relating to specific problems, needs and opportunities which had become apparent in the course of the conference and the TESOL Symposium which had preceded it. In brief, these were as follows:

- General dissatisfaction with conditions of primary and secondary school teaching;
- Understanding the nature and extent of difficulties, as a basis for proposing change;
- Sharing currently isolated success stories;
- Collecting such success stories;
- Unlikelihood of most CAMELTA members being able to carry out individual research, due to time and resource constraints as well as lack of research experience.

The last factor, in particular, is what led Richard to propose a change in title of his talk, from 'In difficult circumstances, the power of teacher-research' to 'In your circumstances, the potential of CAMELTA research'. Rather than introducing small-scale teacher-research as planned, it was

suggested that CAMELTA could take up some questions of importance to the membership and then mobilize to gather data. Advantages could include:

- gathering a large amount of data if the association as a whole could be mobilized
- empowerment of participants as researchers, serving as a basis for future projects, including more individual projects.

The response to the idea of a large-scale, common CAMELTA research project was very positive – participants wrote their perceptions of the idea, their teaching challenges and their suggested research questions and topics on slips of paper distributed during Richard’s session. More than 300 feedback sheets were gathered, and it was agreed that the idea would be discussed by the CAMELTA committee.

Shortly after the conference, the research committee approved the research idea and members of CAMELTA are now undertaking (with the support of IATEFL ReSIG) the first of a series of research projects emanating from the inventory of research topics and questions gathered during the 2013 conference.

This first phase of the research involves a three part open-ended questionnaire eliciting individual teachers’ accounts of successful English language lessons as well as how they have attempted to solve a major language teaching challenge. The questionnaire is being distributed to CAMELTA members in the 10 regional chapters. Responses will be collected and forwarded to CAMELTA’s V-P (R & P), Eric Ngea Ntam, who will supervise the typing out of responses. In all, more than 1000 responses are expected by the end of December 2013. The IATEFL ReSIG will work together with the CAMELTA research committee to analyse the data and to report the findings at the CAMELTA 2014 conference, in the CAMELTA magazine and the ReSIG newsletter. This is the process in summary form:

- The topics and questions written during the conference were typed up by Eric and sent to Harry and Richard in the UK.
- Emerging major areas of focus were identified by Harry and Richard, with Eric’s participation.
- Harry and Richard designed a questionnaire, which was amended by Eric.
- Seed-funding of £200 for this project was agreed by the IATEFL ReSIG committee (for typing up responses, photocopying and postage).
- Responses will be gathered together, typed up (with the ReSIG funding) and sent to the CAMELTA research committee, who will collaborate with IATEFL ReSIG for analysis.
- Results will be disseminated to all members at the next conference (August 2014). An interim stage is likely to involve presentation of findings at the IATEFL conference in Harrogate (April 2014). It is hoped that CAMELTA’s lead person Eric will have a chance to report on the experience and, most importantly, will benefit from interacting with different Associate representatives (at Associates Day) and also experienced researchers (at ReSIG events).
- Writing-up of the process (for the benefit of other associations) and of findings (for CAMELTA benefit) will occur in September – December 2014. This will include reflection on and critical evaluation of the above procedure, for possible improvement.

- It is intended that this will be an annual process – possibly with different topics previously gathered, or gathering new ideas or topics at subsequent conferences.
- Possible formation of a Research SIG within CAMELTA, to take on more of the above work, ensuring that research becomes embedded within the teachers association.

Given that this is a new research direction emanating from one of IATEFL's Associates, we hope that it might encourage other teacher associations in developing country contexts to generate ideas about good practice from within their membership rather than continuing to depend on ideas generated elsewhere and 'imposed' on them. CAMELTA's can be a pilot project which will set the pace for more refined ideas about teacher association research within IATEFL and its associates. We are grateful for this opportunity to share and reflect on experience to date and to map out a possible way forward for further context-relevant research within CAMELTA and across IATEFL Associates.