

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 8 : 6 June 2008

ISSN 1930-2940

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**Action Research: Innovations Beyond Imposition in
Foreign/Second Language Teaching
“Practice to Theorize to Practice”**

Robotjazi Mohammad Ali, M.A. in TEFL

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“Practice to Theorize to Practice”

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Abstract

The main premise of this paper is to highlight the significance and outcome of a nearly ignored or forgotten phenomenon in the domain of teaching and learning enterprise and arouse the dynamic potentialities teachers as professional researchers possess in action.

Macro-linguistics has already paved the way for micro-linguistics where action research can serve as a systematic and planned inquiry of theory into practice and as an approach to promoting education through transition, and where the researcher searches for information and practical knowledge which encourage the teachers to grow adventurous and critical in their beliefs and reflection so that they can develop theories, draw premises, and dig rationales for their action or practice in their actual teaching milieus.

Action research with a systematically designed framework helps teachers give reasoned justification for their public claims to professional knowledge. Action research autonomously helps teachers acknowledge their leadership roles to promote and support their own reflective programmes and contribute to their repertoire they enjoy on teaching and learning different subjects and terminate their thoughts and reflection in practice which [will] serves as a basis for a prospective theory.

Since language development with all its perspectives is a socially criterion-based enterprise, it should be studied, investigated, researched and analyzed where it is manipulated as a subject matter of learning and teaching. Foreign and second language teaching, though different on some grounds, share basic and fundamental principles that go hand in hand in the real action research milieu.

Finally, I contemplate to end the paper with a case-in-point reflecting on the experience in my own career as an EFL teacher (17 years of experience) in high school level touching upon an experiential, individual action research.

Introduction

As an EFL teacher, I have always been wondering and reflecting on having transitions through my teaching career and making things happen. Studying and going through the theories or researches carried out- without any practice- by others makes you aroused and thoughtful for some, say, short time, but that is not the same thing where you as an individual involved in the action start inquires and then begin to find out the ways and solutions for the problem raised in mind.

Questions and solutions may frequent your mind until you commence acting as a researcher. Your students serve as your sample population and your colleagues as your collaborative group. Individually you scrutinize the subject matter and seek for collaboration from the others. Research, while one is in action and service, initiates and you come to a lot of questions or hypotheses, frameworks, procedures, implementation and finally findings and analysis for the problem in process.

We teachers well know that there are many things we desire to change: lengthening the time and period of working with a group as a class, lessening the stressful *imposition* from the ones on high in curriculum and teaching policies, dividing the class into homogeneous groups, and practicing our theories from practice. We can think of bringing technology into the classroom and observe the effects, think beyond the methods, practice theories and premises, make decisions, incorporate our findings into the teaching, and eventually help design the curriculum according to our findings and ask others to find out more about the subject matter with their further studies.

Teachers require flexible rather than strictly oriented criteria imposed on them throughout their teaching practice. Scientific, experimental, quasi-experimental findings etc. are well worth enough being attended; however, they handcuff and thwart the implementers and restrict them to contain findings that are time, place, and individual specific, and since they might be carried out by some, say, uninterested researches, they can be critically looked on and then scrutinized through action research. Time changes and we have to change accordingly. Modes of teaching and learning are true to their own nature and time. A theory-practitioner, here, say, a teacher, might be wrong if he insists on his implementation and application of a methodology designed for the situation of, say, 30 years ago.

Action research can help teachers critically observe themselves and their practice in actual classroom. It allows them to identify and address nearly any type of problem at a time and help them improve their educational practice. Once action research is oriented among the individuals, it can turn into a collaborative enterprise to compose a research club comprised of other teachers who have individually worked and have come to share their findings. Action research can reform schooling and develop the profession.

Action Research: What?

“Information is one when knowledge is double.”

The argument is not whether action research is collaborative or individual; rather it focuses on what action means and does. Action research originates from the inquiry a teacher in action or service digs in his mind which is later involved in his practice leading him to different studies where other questions arise. It is a systematic inquiry that can be collective, critical, self-reflective or individual, or collaborative. It is a systematic mode for teachers to gather information about the ways according to which their particular school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn. The information is gathered with the purposes of gaining insights, developing reflective practice effecting

positive changes in the school environment, and improving student outcomes that in its turn help improve school productivity (Mills 2003). Action research is conducted by teachers for teachers. Wallace (2000) observes that it is a small scale, contextualized, localized, and aimed at discovering, developing or monitoring changes to practice. According to Fullan (2000), the reflective qualities include a deep understanding of the organization, vision and insight, a quest for new knowledge, a desire for improved performance, self-reflective activity, and willingness to effect changes. They are in effect individual as well as collaborative cultures of change.

Action research also refers to the phenomenon that is in its turn a discipline that is to help identify the kinds of methods that best work with a specific group of students that is reflective of post-method condition. It helps to identify the problem and find solutions, and how content, teaching strategies, and learning activities can be varied to help students of differing ages, gender, ethnicity, and ability to learn more. Action research can end in persuading all the agents involved in schooling and even parents to participate in the enterprise. Action research teaches teachers skills required to work on problems specific to their classrooms and their schools. They learn how to ask a focusing question, define terms, collect relevant data, use an analysis process that rules out bias, and includes methods that yield validity and reliability. Then the findings become applicable to their individual situations. It can be concluded that action research is a deliberate search for truth, information, and knowledge, an inquiry that is internal and subjective as well as external and data-based. It is a planned, continuous, and systematic procedure to reflect on professional practice and try out alternative practices to improve outcomes.

Cycle of Action Research

As action research is basically a methodological process, it is by nature planned, continuous, and systematic. It tends to reflect on professional practice and the action-researcher uses alternative practices experimentally to promote outcomes. It develops through a spiral of cycles: reflecting, planning, acting, data-collecting, analyzing, reflecting, planning, acting, data collecting, reflecting (Schmuck, R. 1997). Since the researcher is an individual who is directly handling, manipulating and touching upon his own practices- and at times others'- it proves more helpful to create more practical, and tangible alternative ways to improve his practice. Moreover, if the action-researcher scrutinizes the traditional researches carried out, he will better decipher the area of question in focus and better and more analytically conclude his enterprise (ibid).

In the cycle of action research, the framework suggested by Kemmis and McTaggart (1998) seems to work best to its true nature: (1) developing a plan for improvement, (2) implementing the plan, (3) observing and documenting the effects of the plan, and (4) reflecting on the effects of the plan for further planning and informed action. However, Mills (2003), while approving Kemmis and McTaggart's frameworks, took further steps to develop the following format for action research that outdoes any other. The educator shall (the parentheses are the author's):

- a. reflect on the practice (the author's),

- b. identify strengths and weaknesses of his practice (the author's),
- c. describe the problem and area of focus,
- d. define the factors involved in area of focus (e.g., the curriculum, school setting, student achievements, instructional strategies),
- e. develop research questions,
- f. describe the interaction or innovation to be implemented,
- g. develop a timeline for implementation,
- h. develop a list of resources to implement the plan,
- i. describe the data to be collected,
- j. develop a data collection and analysis plan,
- k. select appropriate tools of inquiry,
- l. carry out the plan (implementation, data collection, data analysis), and
- m. report the results.

Burns (1999), too, formulated a less deductive approach that is mainly to carry out action research to explore what changes need to be made or what actions need to be taken in specific instructional setting. Unlike Kemmis and McTaggart's framework that mainly focuses on implementing an action plan, Burn's is to plan for action that more or less fetches a less systematic approach. Nevertheless, an educator, while being biased on systematicness of his plan, can get innovative and design a plan of his own while emphasizing on its being scientific.

The most widely used instruments to utilize for data collection in action research includes archival sources in schools (e.g., attendance reports, standardized test sources, lesson plans, curriculum documents), questionnaires, interviews, observations, videotapes, photographs, journals and diaries, and narratives. The framework suggested has already been worked out and was adopted for my own 6 month in-service research.

Why Action Research?

This is a motive neither to belittle nor to disparage the traditional research, but it is to manifest the cruciality of research in action with all practical and involved tangibility.

Educational research in theory can help educators reflect on and inquire about their own practice; however, in practice, it may not prove so helpful simply because the researcher is not/ may not be directly and independently involved in practice. Action research does help educators reflect on their own practice, collect data about their own practice, and create alternative ways to improve it.

Traditional research, however, may usually be carried out by some, say, disinterested scientists or researchers who are not practicing teaching- often with an excessive concern for objectivity and a wish to establish generalized truths. The advocates of action research aim at closing the social distance and cultural gap between scientists and practitioners and improving research methods on a daily basis in the classrooms and schools. Traditional researchers look at what others are doing or have done, and strive not to become personally involved within the study situation. Action researchers closely look at

what they themselves are or should be doing, reflect on what they are thinking and feeling, and seek creative and productive ways to promote their own educational conduct. So, unlike traditional researchers, action researchers are those who desire to improve their own service. A good synthesis, of course, of traditional research can greatly prove useful and beneficial to action researchers. Action researchers can tangibly use reviews of traditional research along with data from questionnaires, interviews and observations to guide efforts of continuous improvement.

Action research serves as a potential model for development in one's profession and career. It is an increasingly growing touch-upon of educational research with the intention of utilizing disciplined inquiry to improve schooling practice. As noted above, the general concept of traditional mode of researching is to seek new knowledge to act as a repertoire to a large audience. Action research, on the other hand, reveals a process of carrying out something with the documentation that is to promote a change (Calhoun, 1993) in a small population and then generalize the findings among other larger groups. Action search, while being claimed to be so-called informal, is interpretive, experiential, subjective, formative and qualitative model of inquiry where all the participants consciously contribute to the process (a point unlike the traditional modes of researching): the more collaborative it gets, the better results are to come out. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) have formulated a concise definition of action research that helps highlight its importance and applicability to the context of education:

“Action research is a learning process, the fruits of which are the real and material changes in (a) what people do, (b) how they interact with the world and others, (c) what they mean and what they value, and(d) the discourses in which they understand and interpret their world.”

To facilitate appropriate and corrective changes in beliefs and practice, educators need a model of professional development that brings groups of teachers together collectively, thus affording them opportunities to reflect and collect data on situations that are immediate to their needs, (Brockerville, 1997).

Action research is a form of professional development that is concerned with everyday practical issues encountered by teachers rather than the theoretical problems defined by pure researchers within a discipline of knowledge (Johnson, 1993).

Action research that is implemented with an intention of solving one specific problem in a teaching context can serve as a basis for other researchers and formulate a theory for further practice. It implies a deliberate planned intent to reach an outcome through a strategic action.

A Case in Point

“The joy is when it is discovered.”

As an English teacher in high schools of Iran for 17 years, I have always been wondering why nearly all of Iranian high school students do not possess a good command of English language (after 7 years of learning English as a foreign language) to communicate. My question has always been how I can innovate new methodology (or at least a few principles and techniques) which has not been attended well or devised yet. This reflection led me to launch a scrutiny of two selected groups of third grade students- 11th grade in Iranian formal education- of high school in Bojnord, Iran, and investigate their GPA and mark-reports. The reports were not so convincing and advantageous nor practical since their reports utterly contradicted their actual performance. After a second thought, I came across different influential factors terminating in their failure of developing their communicative competence.

After identifying the area of issue and focus, I had to wonder about determining where I had to start going from. I had to find a plan where I could develop my hypotheses or research questions. With an attempt to narrow down the hypotheses- after analyzing the textbooks, the background of their English teachers, and schools where they attended- I was aroused by the lack of culture incorporation into both their textbooks and their classrooms. The English teachers were, too, unaware of the culture of the people whose language they were teaching as a foreign language.

I administered two types of questionnaires eliciting information on their cultural awareness and understanding and their cultural needs (one indicating how aware they were of English culture and the other to what extent their cultural needs were guaranteed). The findings, as expected, were all indicative of students' lack of appreciation of the foreign language culture and showed strong eagerness to get to know the culture of the people whose language they were learning and that was both explicitly and implicitly suggestive of poor cultural awareness and understanding. The teachers, as well, were given a questionnaire to mark how much they knew of the culture of the people whose language they were teaching and revealed their lack of understanding the cultural grounds and confessed that at no time did they have any chance to present or talk about the culture of the foreign language.

The Method

To assess the students' command of English to which they had been exposed for at least seven years through the designed curriculum, textbooks and foreign language policies in Iran, I, in addition to my careful observations, test-piloted standardized Nelson reading, vocabulary and general IELTS tests touching upon their linguistic knowledge, and the tests targeting the cultural aspects of the foreign language they were learning were administered. For example, they were, through contextualized spoken and written tests, asked how they would act in such different situations as restaurants, cinemas, offices, airports, bus terminals, etc. The results analyzed indicated that the students did better in reading and vocabulary portions (though too poor); however, they manifested a very poor command on writing and speaking skills and more importantly on cultural grounds.

Structuring a Framework for Research

The framework of the research highly influences the value of the findings. Thus, it is essential to consider the measures and procedures to be taken and followed prior to the implementation of the research:

- What measures best fit the study at hand?
- What population is going to be studied?
- What is the timeframe for the study?
- What technology or facilities are required to carry out the research?

After sharing my purpose with my colleagues teaching English, I came to this point that I would not be able to touch upon all the components and skills of language all in the time span I could get while trying to push over the syllabus I had already been imposed. Therefore, I decided to consider only cultural grounds to be manipulated in the six month period I had in front.

The two classes, each of which consisted of 30 students, met twice a week for one and half hours each time and I requested the principal to provide me a VCR and a CD player, a monitor and high quality loud speakers for the experimental group (students' sound discrimination ability proved too poor). For fifteen minutes a week in every session we met (only class A, as the experimental group), I played some certain chosen mini-episodes of teaching films for lower-intermediate developed by Oxford University, including Follow me, Look Ahead, and Interchange series emphatically illustrating the way English people live their life. After the presentation, for five minutes I tried to handle the cultural similarities and differences and ask them the cultural whats and hows on the part played. It is worth mentioning that in both classes the medium of instruction was English. After six months, I administered a post test (reading, vocabulary, speaking and writing adopted from Nelson, Interchange 1 and 2 by Jack C. Richard, 2005, third edition) to both classes and surprisingly the results were amazing. The experimental group scored very high not only in the reading, vocabulary, writing and speaking tests and cultural understanding but also in their own English textbook exams.

In light of the statistical analysis (SPSS and Excel Microsoft, V. 12) and conclusions, I found out that the incorporation of culture into the classrooms not only promotes the students' cultural understanding but also highly affects their general command of the foreign language they are learning.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I have to reemphasize the importance of action research beyond imposition in the classrooms. It helps teachers be innovative and it restrains them from any likely failure of passivity. It encourages the dynamics that eventually pays. One should practice to theorize to practice. Teachers can rigorously serve as researchers whose findings can be practiced by themselves and others.

The impact of action research as self experience on teaching career provides one with valuable framework to continuously transform himself as a teacher. He can be no longer tied up to the restrictions of prescribed professional development; rather he can go beyond method(s) and curriculum prescribed which finally leads to the societal development. Action research helps develop skills and allows understanding of one's knowledge to get more profound and evolve into a life-long process of inquiry. Action research solves or at least helps find the likely solutions for one specific problem being experienced by an individual teacher; however, it might be an unfelt and intangible problem to other teachers to which they might not have given a thought.

Questions are raised, solutions are given! Solutions raise questions! The cycle repeats. Action research incorporates inquiry into learning already inherent to teachers' practice and helps them share conceptualizations, significance of problems, data collection, theoretical, personal and professional reflections, action and a renewal of the spiral to promote student and teacher learning. Teachers are intrinsically researchers and they should be encouraged to carry out researches. I strongly suggest encouraging the foreign or second language, especially English, teachers to reflect on their practice and try to incorporate culture of the foreign language into their classrooms and find out a space for discussion and evaluation of their ideas. The final point is that technology integration and incorporation, too, can be separately studied for further exploration.

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