ACTION RESEARCH IN LANGUAGE AREA: Preparing English Language Teachers as Researchers

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Abstract: Action research is useful not only in preparing future teachers but for all teachers to continue to grow and develop as reflective practitioners. This article presents an overview of the components of action research (selecting an issue, refining the research question, and undertaking data collection, analyzing multiple forms of data, developing and implementing new instructional strategies, and making the research findings public). An example of an action research project on giving feedback on student writing is used to illuminate these steps.

Keywords: Action research, linguist, researcher

1. Introduction

Action research generally involves inquiring into one's own practice through a process of self-monitoring that generally includes entering a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting on an issue or problem in order to improve practice. Action research can have 'specific and immediate outcome which can be directly related to practice in the teacher's own context' and is an extension of the normal reflective practice of many teachers, but it is slightly more rigorous and might conceivably lead to more effective outcomes.

In Language field such as second language education, action research has usually been associated with the study of classroom actions rather than addressing social problems associated with language teaching. The action research for language teachers is 'an approach to collection and interpreting data which involves a clear, repeated cycle of procedures'. Action research is conducted by practicing language teachers because they themselves are valuable sources of knowledge regarding their own classroom situations and as a result change can be implemented more credibly because practicing teachers will find the results more credible and valid for their needs [2].

However, action research is different from usual research conducted by academics, and while academic research is valuable in its own terms, it often has little practical application for practising teachers. 'The topics, problems, or issues pursued] are significant, but not necessarily helpful to teachers on the front line'[2]. Therefore, preparing English language teachers should involve more than providing techniques, recipes, and tips. For teachers to develop their practice after finishing formal preparation, they must be able to question and improve their teaching practices in response to changing conditions and experiences [1].

Not only can action research be integrated into teacher preparation programs so future teachers can try out teaching methods and approaches, but it is also a useful way for current teachers to investigate issues in their teaching. Therefore, this article will give an overview of the discussion points and include examples of action research questions that master's students have investigated. The Prince of Songkla , henceforth (PSU), School of Education curriculum integrates action research into the teaching methodology coursework of students in the TESOL/foreign language education program. Grounded in the PSU social justice mission, our teacher education program requires students to design, implement, and evaluate an "innovative unit" drawing on the pedagogical and theoretical approaches they have studied. One aspect of the social justice mission is intentionally to prepare reflective teachers who craft their pedagogy from a student-centered, constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Students in the teacher education program are either pre-service teachers doing an 8-week placement or in-service teachers using their own classrooms.

2. Action research in English Class?

Action research consists of investigations initiated by teachers who want to improve their teaching practice by understanding it more fully. An action researcher may undertake a solo project in his or her classroom, or involve colleagues in investigating a question of shared interest. One principle of action research is that the end goal of any investigation of one's teaching is change which may lead to future investigations about the effects of such change. The action research cycle includes the crucial final step of making public one's research findings so that others may benefit from new knowledge. The action research cycle consists of six steps, beginning with finding a starting point-identifying an issue, problem,

or situation in one's teaching to investigate. Looking at the teaching and research literature can also help us understand how others have approached the issue and provide ideas on how to investigate it.

A general format for an action research question might be: "What happens when I _____?" For example, my students have posed these questions: What happens when I create a unit to teach adult immigrants about nonstandard varieties of English? What happens when I use a computer-based mathematics game with my elementary ESOL students? What happens when I try out different types of responses to student writing? What happens when I set up cross-age tutoring between sixth graders and kindergartners? Clearly, similar questions can be asked in instructional contexts at all levels. In higher education settings, such questions might be: What happens when I use dialog journals in a writing class? What happens when I ask small groups to work collaboratively to investigate specific research topics? What happens when I use authentic materials, such as weblogs, websites, TV shows, and magazines, to ground instruction in popular culture?

The next step is to clarify the question. As a broad question may be difficult to answer, it is important to narrow and focus the question, linking it to specific methods of data collection. For example, a pre-service teacher, Eisya (R1), who was interested in questions related to responding to student writing, first reviewed some of the literature on feedback to writing and then asked, "What happens when I respond in three different ways (direct correction of errors, circling errors without correcting them, and providing holistic feedback) to student writing?"

The third step is to define data collection contexts, timeframes, and methods (i.e., design the research project in advance). It is important systematically to collect data in multiple forms for the purposes of triangulation, that is, looking at the same phenomenon from different angles. Thus with Eisya's writing feedback question, she needed to specify in advance (for her unit/lesson planning) which writing assignments would receive which of the three types of feedback, how she would compare student responses to her feedback in subsequent drafts of their essays, and how she would elicit students' opinions on the different types of feedback. Depending on the question, some data, such as scores on previously scheduled quizzes and tests, are naturally occurring. Other forms of data collection include diaries/journals (kept by teacher and/or students); talk-aloud protocols (having students describe their thoughts as they perform a task); observations (recorded by regular field notes made by another observer or the researcher); audiovisual taping; lists of student names to be checked off while students engage in particular tasks/activities; student interviews; pre- and post-student questionnaires; and quasi-experiments (e.g., implementing an innovation in one class while teaching a similar class in the old way). In Eisya's action research project on writing feedback, she also had to decide what kind of coding scheme to use both for her feedback and for tracking students' uptake of her feedback in their subsequent essay drafts.

The fourth step consists of analyzing the data by looking for changes from previous behaviors or practices (i.e., did the innovation yield any change?) or by identifying patterns or recurring themes. Research findings, such as changes in quiz/test scores as compared with a similar ("control") class, may be quantifiable. However, action research more often tends to fall into the qualitative research paradigm, as many interesting and useful findings will result from the teacher researcher's interpretations of his or her own and students' experiences. Although analyzing qualitative action research data can be time consuming and subjective, it is useful in adapting instructional practices to specific groups of students, that is, more student-centered than quantitative approaches.

Fifth, action strategies should be developed on the basis of data analysis, then put into practice at the next feasible opportunity, at which point the effectiveness of new strategies can be investigated using the same research cycle. However, action researchers must be prepared to get unexpected or vague results from an investigation of a newly introduced change (or "innovation"). For example, in Eisya's case, none of the three approaches to giving feedback on student writing emerged as the most effective. However, her students liked the holistic responses better than line-by-line corrections or indications of where errors appeared in essays. Eisya also felt that holistic feedback prompted good revisions in students' subsequent drafts of their essays, but it was the most time-consuming of the three types of feedback for her to give. Her implementation of a change might therefore be to offer holistic feedback on some, but not all, student essays. Finally, new knowledge becomes public when it is presented to students and local colleagues; at conferences; and in newsletters, professional development workshops, journals, and so on. Eisya and several of her classmates in the course presented their action research projects at a local English language learner conference; TESOL and its state affiliates are other obvious places to present the findings of action research projects.

3. Ethical Considerations

It is crucial to abide by certain ethical tenets while conducting action research. The researcher should keep in mind the power relations existing in the classroom and avoid abusing one's authority as a teacher for the sake of investigating an interesting question. To this end, students should not be asked to engage in activities that do not help them or are not

part of a legitimate curriculum. If students are asked to do additional work or give out personal information, it should be optional. Students' information should be confidential: published or reported discussions of the research should use pseudonyms for students and possibly the institution. Also, most schools and many higher education institutions have strict rules about getting permission from students or their families if the research design goes beyond instructional variation. It may be wise (or required) to have students sign permission forms that explain the research question and project and note that findings may be disseminated publicly. It is important to make plans for the research well in advance, inform participants and others who need to know or approve the project, stick to the arrangements that have been made, and verify findings (interpretations) with participants, if appropriate their responses can also be data. Last but not least, thanking everyone who has participated and helped and sending copies of one's research findings, if appropriate, are important courtesies.

In preparing the students to do action research, this paper hope to provide them with a professional development resource that will serve them throughout their careers. Some students have kept their investigations going as they continue to teach reflectively. The principles of action research allow teachers at any level to undertake small-scale but often highly effective research projects that will enable them to improve their teaching practice indefinitely.

4. Conclusions

Action research serves the needs of the reflective professional well because it combines the mastery of the professional knowledge a teacher has built up over the years with the wisdom of everyday practice. Although there is no one universally accepted set of processes that constitute conducting action research, it is generally agreed that it focuses on researching an issue of interest to the teacher and usually takes place inside the classroom to determine what is currently occurring. Action research involves the teacher systematically collecting information about this issue and then acting on the information to make improvements to the issue.

In order to help teachers collect information related to their action research project, they can use such reflective tools such as teaching journals, classroom observations, narrative analysis and group discussions among other methods that are all covered in this book. Through a process, then, that includes planning, observing, analyzing, acting and reviewing, language teachers can learn a great deal about the nature of classroom teaching and learning as well as acquire useful classroom investigation skills.

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