Empowering ourselves through action research
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In this paper I discuss some major principles of teacher-research and suggest action research as one practical approach to conducting classroom-based investigations and studies. Two philosophies of action research are discussed: the ELT version and the more common critical methodology employed by critical researchers.

Content Decisions
For a long time before the TESOL Arabia conference I was certain that I was going to focus on the ELT version of action research: a tool for professional development and learning about one's teaching (Nunan, 1994; Freeman, 1998). Given the socio-political context of the UAE, the limited time of the session and the possible unfamiliarity of some of the participants with educational research, I was resigned to the idea that my main aim was to present action research as a research methodology informed by English language teachers’ attempt at self improvement. This approach is a conservative view of action research, which is common in mainstream TESOL research publications (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001; Nunan, 1993). There is a strong rationale for this approach especially for teachers new to the world of educational research. I was not, however, satisfied with this view and saw it as incomplete despite its popularity. The second approach to action research is the methodology employed by the critical research paradigm and critical theory as a tool for change, emancipation and challenge to the status quo (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). I will revisit this dichotomy in approaches to action research after locating it within the wider context of teacher research.

Teacher research
There is now an increasing expectation in many educational institutions especially those at tertiary level for ELT teachers and instructors to be involved in some form of research. This is mostly considered as part of a teacher’s professional strategy, and in many cases these kinds of strategies are planned and designed by the management without consultation with teachers. In this paper the assumption behind teacher research and action research in particular is that it is totally driven by the teacher without any coercion or pressure from educational authorities such as programme directors or heads of departments. Research can only contribute to one’s professional growth and empowerment if it reflects the genuine interest of the researcher. In reality ELT teachers do not join the profession to become researchers. Furthermore, the demands of the job are such that by the end of the day one is pleased to have covered
the daily instructional plan and to have met students’ demands (Freeman, 1989). A large number of ELT teachers are overworked and underpaid and in many parts of the world they have to cope with the added stress of job uncertainty and possible unexpected redundancies. The marginalisation of ELT teachers, especially those who are non-native speakers of English, is well documented (Pennycook, 2001; Braine, 1999) as well as teachers’ struggle to resist and fight oppressive forces in their professional lives (Simon-Maeda, 2004). One can argue that with this kind of reality and conditions research will be just another unwelcome burden. After all, teachers are paid to teach not to collect data, analyse it and draw informed educational conclusions. However, this view, though realistic, does not do justice to teachers who are the backbone of any educational institution. Their contribution is countless and needs to be recognised through encouraging and supporting them to do research. This is one major way of including teachers in professional and academic decisions.

In many, if not most, EFL and ESL situations teachers play a passive role in curriculum research, materials development and selection, and evaluation. These issues are often left to researchers, administrators, program managers, and “experts”. This situation is the outcome of the separation between theory and practice and between managers and practitioners. Traditionally there has been a clear separation between professional development and research. Teacher research bridges this gap as it is an attempt to transfer theoretical knowledge into practice (van Lier, 1994). It is also one way of integrating curriculum development and teacher development (Roberts, 1998).

The term research might conjure up the image of complicated and lengthy procedures and techniques, mind boggling statistical analyses and abstract theories completely detached from classroom practice. This perceived separation of theory and practice is another reason for teachers’ reluctance to enter the world of research. Van Lier mentions some of the reasons why teachers find it difficult to conduct classroom research:

> those of us who work in teacher education know that one of the most difficult things to balance in a course is the tension between theoretical and practical aspects of the profession. ...Theory and practice are not perceived as integral parts of a teacher’s practical professional life. ...This situation is the result of communication gaps caused by an increasingly opaque research technocracy, restrictive practices in educational institutions and bureaucracies (e.g. not validating research time), and overburdening teachers who cannot conceive of ways of theorising and researching that come out of daily work and facilitate that daily work.

(van Lier 1992:3)

Freeman offers five propositions that constitute his theoretical framework and rational for teacher-research.
First, research needs to be redefined in order to make it a central part of teaching. The gap between research and teaching needs to be reduced and the friction between the two distinct responsibilities of the teacher and the researcher needs to be addressed. For a long time researchers have been seen as producers of knowledge and teachers as responsible for implementing this knowledge and delivering or facilitating it to learners. This distinction in roles between researcher and teacher is still present in
some research-oriented universities where teaching fellows are not contractually expected to conduct research. Their main task is to teach.

Second, research needs to be seen as an “orientation toward one’s practice. It is a questioning attitude toward the world, leading to inquiry conducted within a disciplined framework” (Freeman, 1998: 8).

Third, Teacher-research can give teachers some control over what they are doing. By asking questions, examining phenomena, and questioning procedures teachers will turn into producers of knowledge. Instead of working in isolation with their students, they can create a discipline of teaching through doing research. ELT Teachers rarely communicate their knowledge of teaching publicly and systematically. They are more likely to informally discuss procedures of teaching and what they do with their students, reflecting knowledge and wisdom of practice, without turning their knowledge into evidence through the disciplined procedures of research. It is this situation of relying on informality and intuition and personal experience rather than on disciplined research that is “the barrier to the creation of a discipline of teaching” (Freeman, 1998: 9).

Fourth, teachers need to raise questions about what they do in classrooms, how they teach and how their students learn. To do inquiry in the form of research, they need some knowledge of research procedures, which needs to be provided in a supportive atmosphere by experienced researchers willing to bridge the gap between research and teaching.

Fifth, teacher-research needs to be made public, so that it has an impact on the public domain and other’s practice.

To these propositions I add that teacher-research, in whatever format it is conducted, has to be generated and initiated by teachers and not imposed on them. This is a fundamental condition for teachers to conduct research. Talking about teacher research in her context of the forum participants wrote:

School teachers in the UAE are now required to carry out action research as part of their job. I don't think that you can force people to do things and expect them to do them properly. In my M.A. research with Bath University, the funny finding was that UAE teachers pursued development activities that are prescribed as part of their annual appraisal report. I don't think that our teachers would carry out action research by choice. They are overworked. In my opinion, it is not fair to make teachers do research while supervisors do not do it themselves. It is not fair.

This quote shows how imposed research can be counterproductive and may lead to frustration, resistance and an atmosphere of distrust.

**Action research: The ELT version**

In the last three decades the ELT and applied linguistics literature have presented action research as one strategy or option for teachers to pursue professional development (Nunan, 1990, 1993, 1994; Wallace, 1998; Burns, 1999; Baily, Kurtis & Nunan 2001). What the ELT and TESOL disciplines did was modify or tone down the critical dimension of action research to suit the fundamental philosophy of learners’
unquestioned need to learn English all over the globe and teachers’ need to find out the most effective approaches and techniques to support this learning. With this neutral and liberal view of ELT, the focus of action research has been on classroom-based issues. Richards and Lockehart define action research as “teacher initiated classroom investigation which seeks to increase the teacher’s understanding of classroom teaching and learning, and to bring about change in classroom practice” (1994: 12). It is also seen as a disciplined way of reflective practice with a focus on finding practical solutions to daily classroom pedagogical problems and challenges. It should be “systematic and entails gathering evidence on which to base rigorous reflection” (Mingucci, 1999: 16).

This domesticated and pedagogically neutral version of action research is not different in its process from the critical version. The research steps or cycles have been borrowed from the original version as put forward by Stenhouse (1975) and Kemmis and McTaggart (1992). Bailey, Kurtis and Nunan (2001) suggest eight steps to conducting action research which are divided into an initial cycle and a second cycle. Steps of the initial cycle are:

1. Identify a problem
2. Preliminary investigation
3. Reflect/ form hypothesis
4. Plan intervention and act
5. Monitor/Collect data
6. Observe the outcome

The second cycle includes two steps

1. Reflect
2. Plan intervention and act

The cycles allow for original questions and aims to evolve over time. The stages cannot always be delineated or separated. Burns (1999) argues that action research should be considered as a process of interrelated phases perhaps even more than a cycle. She reports that teachers participating in various action research projects saw it as an experience of interrelated phases rather than a set of linear or even cyclical steps. The phases these teachers reported were the following:

1 exploring
2 identifying
3 planning
4 collecting data
5 analysing/reflecting
6 hypothesising/speculating
7 intervening
8 observing
9 reporting
10 writing
11 presenting
For the sake of brevity, clarity and practicality I suggest five main stages in the process of action research

1. Starting at the beginning
Whether action research is conducted in cycles, phases or steps the teacher will need to start with a question or an interest in a particular pedagogical area. One can keep a journal to note down any reflection on teaching and learning that comes to mind. Puzzling classroom episodes and misunderstandings can be turned into questions. Students can also be a source of research questions for they often make remarks about their learning experiences and difficulties that they encounter. If peer observation is possible, comments made by teachers can also be noted down for possible use as classroom research questions. The questions should be important not trivial, and answerable (Nunan 1992, Chamot, 1995). Some questions, although important, are not practical for action research. An example of an impossible question to answer through action research is, “Will my students get rid of their fossilized errors by the end of the academic year?” or “what writing levels will they achieve by the end of the program?” These questions require longitudinal studies with the administration of pre- and post-tests. ELT and TESOL teachers can look at a number of areas to formulate research questions (also see appendix):

- classroom management:
  - organizing group and pair activities; handling transitions between activities
  - task instructions:
    - how you give them; how the students interpret them
  - teacher behaviour:
    - questioning and comprehension check techniques
    - giving feedback on learner errors
    - praising
    - wait time and its effect on students’ participation
    - simplification of speech
  - student behaviour
    - student participation pattern
    - student language use in whole class and small group work
    - subject comprehension problems
  - materials
  - syllabus/curriculum
  - testing
  - nonverbal behaviour

To collect data teachers can be guided by questions such as the following:

- What beliefs do my learners hold about learning and teaching?
- How do these beliefs influence their approach to learning?
- What learning styles and strategies do my learners favour?
- How do my learners perceive my role as a teacher?
- What form or structure do my lessons have?
- How do I communicate goals to my learners?
- What patterns of language use occur when I teach?
- Why do student resist a particular activity or approach
This is only a sample of questions teachers can use to reflect on their own teaching and to embark on small-scale research. Every classroom has its own dynamics, rituals, and routines that can inspire reflective questions. Action research targets a particular group with particular needs. Teachers need to develop questions appropriate to the specific situations they have in their classrooms. Freeman (1998) puts forward a teacher research model that is cyclical in nature and starts with inquiry that unfolds into questions. Inquiry, according to Freeman is a “state of mind that allows you to be unsure, off-balance, intrigued, and wanting to find out more about something in your classroom” (1998: 34). I think this “state of mind” is in a way the psychological condition or prerequisite for research. It is a type of academic and intellectual curiosity about the nature of learning in general and language learning specifically that can shape our research questions. I need to add here that the above suggested research questions reflect the ELT version of action research with its focus on issues of effective teaching methodologies for better learning outcomes. This is of course done without looking into the role of the political and socio-cultural context of learning or other crucial issues such as the politics of language and education and the politics of knowledge. This is the domain of critical action research, which I will discuss later on in the paper.

2. Methodology and data collection
The methodology of a research project depends on the nature of the research questions and the purpose of the study. An explanatory study seeking to establish cause and effect or correlation between variables will most likely involve an experimental design or a quantitative survey with a set of inferential statistical analyses. In contrast, An ELT explorative study seeks to understand the way people learn and the meanings they construct for themselves in the learning process. For this purpose researchers often use open-ended or unstructured interviews, open-ended questionnaires, diaries or journals. What novice teachers need to do is to become familiar with the most common research tools so that they can select the most appropriate for their research projects. Because research can be daunting and demanding teachers are advised to work collaboratively (Burns, 1999). It is beyond the scope of this paper to address collaborative action research but it can help teachers with the practical complexities of collecting data, and issues such as lack of release time as administrators are often not supportive of teacher research even when it is part of their evaluation.

As stated above teachers can collect data in various formats through different tools. For example, a structured interview can be effective in collecting data concerning students’ attitudes and thoughts. In a structured interview the teacher has to prepare and write the questions ahead of time. The questions should be clear and not lead learners to expected answers. Only the prepared set of questions is used whereas in an unstructured interview teachers do not have to follow or use a ready set of questions. At the end of a class they can ask a student his/her opinion about a particular activity and then note down the answer.

Think-aloud interviews are another introspective method. A student can be asked questions while completing a reading or a writing task. The teacher can ask the student “Why did you choose this answer?” or “What were you thinking at the time?” Classroom observation is one of the most efficient tools of data collection. With a clear question in mind, the teacher can observe his/her classroom using an audio recording or a video recording if possible. This should be done systematically. For example, segments of fifteen minutes can be video recorded throughout a period of
one week. Teachers can also take notes while teaching. This might seem difficult or impractical, but with good time management teachers can note down important episodes that can help them answer their research questions. Field notes can serve as ongoing data analysis. Teachers can note down descriptions of observed classroom events, physical context, interaction patterns, and any other information that is related to the research question. There are of course many other research tools at the disposition of the teacher and for a comprehensive survey see any of the published educational research manuals such as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2002).

3. Studying the data
Data analysis does not have to be daunting if the researcher does it systematically. There is more than one approach to data analysis. According to the research questions and tools used in the research, teachers will generally conduct either a quantitative or a qualitative data analysis or a mixture of the two. With qualitative data teachers will need to engage in four activities: naming, grouping, finding relationships and displaying (Freeman, 1998). In the first activity, naming, the teacher has to label the data by giving them names. These names are known as “codes”. If, for example, a teacher is investigating her students’ writing errors, she might use codes from outside the data that she prepares a priori such as “grammar”, “spelling” or “punctuation”; or she can use the students’ errors as a source of codes. For example, if the omission of the morpheme “s” occurs very often in the data, the teacher can use the error “she go” as a code. When codes are directly taken from the data or interpreted by the researcher based on facts in the data, they are called grounded codes. In the second activity, grouping, the researcher puts together categories or groups based on the codes. In the third step, the researcher needs to find relationships or patterns between the data. It is these categories that make up the structure of the data, and the nature of the relationships between them helps the researcher interpret the findings. Finally, the data have to be displayed. These can be done through various tools like flow charts, bubble diagrams with arrows or an outline of headings. These tools show how the patterns intersect and help the researcher concretise the interpretation of the data.

With quantitative data either descriptive or inferential statistics need to be used depending on the nature of the sample and the kind of generalisations expected from the results. In general, however, educational action research is context specific and is not concerned with generalisations and the establishment of scientific predictions.

4. Action
Once data are reviewed and interpreted, an intervention plan has to be developed and tried out. It is this step that is the fruit of action research. With data in hand teachers can plan to monitor and modify their teaching practices. A teacher who thinks that he/she controls classroom talk and allows his/her students few opportunities for interaction can video several sessions and study the pattern of language use in his/her classroom. Teachers often control interaction and talk distribution is often unbalanced (Shamim, 1996). For such a project, video recorded classroom observation is the ideal data collection tool as it enables the teacher to study his/her talk across various instructional contexts. An intervention plan can include various group and pair activities where the teacher facilitates instruction but does not dominate it. The type of questions used by the teacher could be the source of his/her control of talk. If this is the case teachers have to modify their questions and try to use divergent questions. These are the sorts of questions that encourage students to use their own language and use higher thinking abilities. Convergent questions, on the other hand, lead to short
responses and their answers are already known to the teacher. Teachers might find out that many of their ESL/EFL students need more *wait time* when asked direct questions and strategies to avoid silence and communication breakdown (Rose, 1999). After the intervention the teacher should not stop there. It is important to check if the action taken to deal with a particular situation has led to any change. For the above example, the teacher can video his/her class for the same amount of time and then see if the change in his/her classroom management and type of questions has increased the learners’ share of classroom talk. The teacher can also invite a colleague to observe the class while focusing on some points such as particular patterns of interaction, teacher talk and student appraisal strategies. Critical reflection on intervention and diagnosis of action are as important as the action itself.

**Action Research: The critical version**

This is the version of action research that is most common in educational and social studies literature. According to Kurt Lewin (1948), one of the founders of action research, it is concerned with producing something. It is about changing and improving the social conditions of people’s existence. Kemmis and McTaggart (1992) and Atweh, Kemmis and Weeks (1998) do not confine it to problem-solving. They argue that action research is about posing questions; it is participatory, has a critical goal, strives to be emancipatory and is self-reflective. Kemmis and McTaggart state that it:

- establishes self-critical communities of people participating and collaborating in all phases of the research process: the planning, the action, the observation and the reflection; it aims to build communities of people committed to enlightening themselves about the relationship between circumstance, action and consequence in their own situation, and emancipating themselves from the institutional and personal constraints which limit their power to live their own legitimate educational and social values (1992: 22).

There are of course different definitions and conceptions of action research reflecting various understandings of what it entails and what it should strive for. However, in spite of these differences they all converge around the concept of change. Movements such as the reflective teaching movement, liberatory and emancipatory education (Freire, 1972), critical pedagogy and feminism share some major principles and all consider action research as an effective tool for empowering those involved in it and improving their practices. The major tenets of critical theory have been influential in establishing the principles of action research. Being rooted in Kantian and Hegelian philosophy as well as the work of Habermas and the Frankfurt school, critical theory engages with questions of injustice, power, inequality, marginalisation, rights and wrongs. Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Young (1989, 1992) among others applied critical theory to education.

The field of TESOL has been slow at seeing the merits of critical theory (Pennycook, 2001, Troudi 2005). Despite a recent emergence of some TESOL studies embracing critical pedagogy, critical discourse analysis and transformative pedagogy (Ibrahim, 1999; Lin, 1999) TESOL remains mainly a conservative and mainstream area of
practice. In fact, a great deal of action research projects reported in the TESOL literature rest on a traditional view of language education which is to provide learners with the most effective skills and strategies to function in the target speech community. This is the strong legacy of the communicative competence movement of the seventies which still forms the main theoretical framework of TESOL literature and practice. There has therefore been a general reluctance and resistance to critical work and emancipatory action research in TESOL. It is a field that in many ways still sees social practice as a given and engages in educational practices that perpetuate and reproduce the inequitable power relations and structures that constitute society (Willet & Jeannot, 1993; Pennycook, 2001).

In a rapidly changing world replete with injustice, inequality and oppression TESOL needs to have a critical reconsideration of its main theoretical assumptions. As an educational practice that touches the lives of millions of learners around the world, it cannot continue to focus on communicative competence and issues of methodologies without linking them to questions of language rights, language policies, students’ rights to a language of instruction of their choice and a content that best serves their interests. Action research therefore needs to look into these issues along with the questions of teacher and student marginalisation. It is this ‘critical agenda’ that is currently absent from action research projects in TESOL. Troudi (2005) argues that criticality in TESOL, even though by no means the only approach, can be introduced as part of teacher education programmes. With this type of action research teachers will be able to “recognize the ways in which dominant ideologies and social structures work at coercing and oppressing” (Brown & Jones, 2001: 18).

There are many pressing issues that need to be researched within a critical action research framework. TESOL contexts differ according to local politics, cultures, religions, languages and socio-economic conditions and teachers will decide on what is most crucial to them. Some of these long neglected issues are:

- English only policy in the TESOL
- The status of the ESL teacher as a professional
- Job insecurity and low pay for TESOL teachers
- Pedagogical imperialism: the tyranny of communicative language teaching
- The spread of English and its effect on native languages
- Students’ choice of language of instruction
- Issues of justice, human rights, foreign occupation, terrorism as part of language content in TESOL syllabuses
- Students’ voice in assessment
- Job satisfaction and disenchantment

I take the English only policy to illustrate the role action research can play in such a critical issue. A collaborative action research project using an experimental design or an explorative approach can be used to pose questions and possibly convince those in authority that the English only policy in TESOL classroom is counterproductive, pedagogically groundless and ideologically repressive (Auerbach, 1993). If possible a group of teachers can have a control and an experimental group of equivalent language levels and teach one group through English only and the other with references and uses of the students’ first language. At the end of the term the two groups can be tested on English language performance and be asked about their learning experience. Many TESOL teachers have to abide by the English only policy even though it might be against their own professional principles. Many teachers live
a professional schizophrenia, torn between institutional policies and their own pedagogical principles. One way of challenging and possibly changing policies is by engaging in systematic and collaborative action research. Through collected evidence in the format of test results and students’ experiences, policy makers and administrators will be forced to take teachers’ voices seriously. Research has the power of convincing others. It is empowering even to the most marginalized members of the educational world: the teachers. Empirical research has long proved the fallacy of the English only policy as a pedagogical approach but it is action research conducted in local institutions with local learners that has the power to change the minds of those in decision-making positions.

References


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