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Action Research as a Self-Improvement Tool in EFL

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Abstract

In this paper, action research method will be examined from the students' perspectives. Action research projects help the students to gain self-control of their learning experiences. Although action research projects are more common on higher academic levels such as graduate studies, researches show that such projects are easily adaptable in prep schools or any foreign language learning environment. Ensuring the autonomy of the students to control and manage a project, an action research project is a reliable method for EFL teachers. It also gives students a chance to individualize their learning experiences.

Introduction

In this paper, I would like to provide a theoretical and practical framework of using action research in foreign language learning. I particularly did not finish the sentence with "and teaching" as that would derail the focus of the paper. Almost all teachers would accept the colossal discrepancy between learning and teaching when it comes to classroom arena. Many language teachers painfully notice that most of what they have learned in college years is merely useless in real life teaching. That is by and large because education at schools mostly focuses on teaching rather than learning. However, in classrooms, rules that go for surface teaching are merely of little importance.

Having emphasized the crucial difference between learning and teaching, which I believe why most of the schools fail to teach English as a foreign language effectively, it must be noted that there is no single method that could remedy the problem. However, action research method would substantially help teachers who want to address the "learning" problems at their classrooms. The more teachers focus on learning, the better results would come in realizing the target goals of the instruction. As Freeman and Richards (1996) state "In order to understand language teaching, we need to know more about language teachers: what they do, how they think, what they know, and how they learn." There is no denying that we have great teachers at our schools who know how to perform a teaching activity. Nonetheless, the same teachers are not as competent and familiar with how the kids actually learn.

In conclusion, dramatic changes in EFL concepts and notions have begun a long time ago. "These teachers became participants in a collaborative culture of change." (Fullan 2000, 156-163) First, EFL teachers have noticed that they are not an orchestra chief any more. They are more part of the orchestra. Then, another step was taken when it became obvious that the effect of the teacher is not as theatrical as it seems to be. Change needs to come from data and the student must be the subject and object of the inquiry (Ferrance, 2000) Once student becomes the central figure rather than the stunt, most of the problems we face today would be gone much quicker than we could imagine. Action research is a surefire way to put the students under the *right* spot where they are actually supposed to be.

Literature on Action Research and Language Teachers

Definition of action research may come in great variety as it may involve all participants in a learning

environment. "Teacher action research is referred to in the literature as action research, practitioner research, teacher-as-scholar, practical inquiry, interactive research, classroom inquiry, or practice-centered research" (Downhower, Melvin and Sizemore 1990, 22-27). Also the following definition of action research is noticeable as it underlines the importance of uniqueness of each case. "Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers to gather information about the ways that their particular school operates how they teach, and how well their students learn. The information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment and on educational practices in general, and improving student outcomes." (Mills 2003, 5)

Connecting the students to the world outside of the classroom is a major benefit of those projects. "Wider and deeper collaboration. Engaging in the classroom research process encouraged teachers to build increasingly stronger networks of collaboration. Action research added a new dimension to grade level collaborations." (Giles, Wilson, and Elias, 2010, 7) As those projects would mostly bring the chances of gaining hands-on experience for learners, its impact will be much stronger and permanent in realizing long-term and permanent learning. As a result, the deeper connections to the real world you set between your students and life, the better outcomes in learning students would obtain.

In this paper, only one component of the total would be elaborated; learning. The role of teachers cannot be neglected in any classroom project. However, it has to be decreased as much as possible in order to attain learning based instruction.

In simpler terms, action research may be put as looking for answers by taking an initiative on a project/task. The benefits of using the action research method in a typical EFL classroom are numerous. If just one example needs to be highlighted, it honors student learning differences and rewards them handsomely. Action research tasks are the best tools to prove that differentiated instruction is under construction in your classes.

Let's do some needs-analysis and try to find answers to those questions: What could an EFL teacher do with this method? Why would a teacher pick a relatively unknown method when there are all the others tested and tried? Answers may show great variety but here are the answers that would come from research and personal experience.

First of all, all EFL teachers want to observe progress in the students learning and most want it to be quick and noticeable. On the other hand, it is perfectly known that noteworthy changes come very sluggishly, if they ever do come! "Foreign language teachers develop insights into their students from observing their behavior. Reflective teachers analyze the students' behaviors, identify potential problems, modify their teaching practices, and evaluate the results. Some ideas succeed others fail-sometimes surprisingly. This process is called action research." (Chamat, Barnhardt, and Dirstine, 1998, 1-10) As clearly indicated, solutions do not come from the researches done on the workbooks, rather on actions and changes internalized by the students. "Reasons for performing action research fall into three categories: to promote personal and professional growth, to improve practice to enhance student learning, and to advance the teaching profession." (Johnson 1995, 90-105)

Action Research Activities

Both beginning level and advanced level EFL learners may participate in activities that develop action

research skills. An action research project may involve different skills or just focus on one skill totally depending on the instructional goals. Tools to offer the students are much richer than one might think of; interviews, portfolios, diaries, field notes, photos, memos, questionnaires, check lists, journals, video tapes, case studies, surveys, records (meetings, classes, observations etc), self-assessments, projects, performances, and presentations.

It is advisable to provide the students the above-mentioned activities as a check-list. A brief explanation of the activity would be certainly appreciated by the student. Skills attached to that particular activity might be worth stating in the activity sheet. The selection of the project may be done by the instructor's advice or may be just left to the students' interest. However, a student would most probably need assistance in the implementation of the project especially in the first experiences of doing an action research project.

The selection of the activity would become self-evident when the targets are set. For example, if the focus is to improve speaking skills, then it may be reasonable to go for tasks that would eventually produce communication. "In another activity, learners can examine a local English language newspaper, comparing its article topics, writing style, sections, photographs, and layout to those of a local native language newspaper. The students can then discuss what these aspects reveal about both cultures and how this can influence who reads the newspapers and which advertisers support them." (Duzer and Florez 2003, 3)

Asking students to report an activity would be a great chance to improve both note-taking and narration skills. Any special event such as a conference or a field-trip may provide the chance for the teacher to assign an action research task. Teachers should be aware of what is going on around them in the school, in the city and even on TV. Once they catch something worthwhile, all they have to do is to announce the event and ask who would be interested to participate.

Assigning event-based research projects is not the only way to integrate the research tasks into the course. Students may pick the method e.g. survey and go from there. The ignition process of the research is numerous and that totally based on the needs analysis of the teacher or the curriculum guideline objectives.

It is advisable to reward each successful completion of the research by some bonus points or anything that would encourage the students for the next one. Students may get assistance from their peers or teachers. An instructor should always keep in mind that this project does not mean to be burden but just the opposite; to be fun!

Research projects may be a part of a portfolio or even be used as a stand-alone portfolio project. Whatever students record their researches would go into the portfolio and might be assessed holistically. The last ten-minutes of a course are highly recommended for the presentations of completed projects as those moments are considered to be most boring period. This way, instructors ensure that those dull moments are not wasted but used for something that would enjoy all. Being creative always pays!

Action Research Strategies

Although it is mentioned in the activities section, a deeper perspective on strategies would be

worthwhile. When a unit is set in the weekly syllabus, the teacher may ask the question of how to ingrate an action research project into the daily or weekly plan. If a possibility is seen, there may not be always one, and then the right method and targets are set. To speak on more concrete terms, let's take a unit that target to teach Simple Present Tense. At this point, the creativity of teacher would decide the attraction of the task gets. If you say, "Write down what you do after you wake up until you come to school", not much interest should be expected for the task. Nevertheless, if you ask students to put a part of your day on tape, to watch it together and to talk about it for ten minutes, you would see many hands up.

Interviews are commonly used for action research projects. Assume that you are teaching a topic covering Simple Past Tense; you may assign the students to interview their father's on how he first met his wife and how they developed a relation that would eventually lead them to marriage. Keeping the topic and the method interesting and personal would definitely raise the chances of pulling more students into the project.

Another option could be to encourage the students to bring their child toys and tell what they used to do with them in their childhood. A few sentences linked with their personal experiences would do it to teach *used to* much more effectively than doing the fill in the blank exercise in the grammar workbook. The more tangible the task is, the more effective learning process becomes.

In-class strategies might also be very helpful for every now and then. You may ask the kids to bring the photos of their dream holiday spot and talk with their desk mates about why and when they want to go there. It would be a strong tool to sharpen speaking skills providing that the topics and tasks are kept interesting.

Conclusion

Action research might be considered as a nice "add-in" for your daily course plan. It provides richness to your program either as an in-class or an extra-curricular activity. The variety of methods, the connection to real life situations, and the effectiveness of the action-based tasks would definitely bring an extra strength to most language learning goals. Instructors would be experienced in this method within a few years and be able to fine-tune the activities to the needs of their particular students. Once integrated to the course plans, it would smoothly blend in the daily flow of the course and show its efficiency from the first day.

It might be fair to point out some of the difficulties and drawback of administering action research projects in the classroom. First of all, it requires time and creativity both from the instructors and the students. Therefore, if you have a highly unmotivated and disinterested group of learners in the classroom, you may have a hard time to find volunteers for your projects. On the other hand, who knows, this may give you a chance to see if an action research project may change the attitude toward your course. Some pre-planning is definitely needed to direct the students to more fruitful projects. Within time, though, teachers would have the feelings to pick the right projects that would lead the students to the desired results and stay away from too fancy ones.

All in all, action research projects are valuable components of today's action oriented teachers. "This research project has [validated](#) for me the importance of trying new and varied activities in my foreign language classroom instead of a traditional lecturing style of teaching. Students enjoy helping each

other learn as they work together in groups. It is clear to me that students have the ability to have a major impact on their own learning and that of their peers when they work together.” (Halley 2005, 1-6) Many EFL teachers are now aware of the significance of doable activities as a strong way of motivating the kids. Language teachers may not easily give up on the workbook or other type assignments, but they should certainly look for novelties that will make them stand-out from the crowd. An action research project will certainly pave the way for you toward that goal.

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