



EVALUATING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTION RESEARCH COURSE IN AN IN-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the effectiveness of Action Research Course, one of the five component courses of the in-service English teacher training program implemented by National Foreign Language 2020 Project in Vietnam. The primary purpose of the course is to help in-service teachers of English develop the ability to do action research in their teaching context. How effective the course is, what alternative strategies can be used for the implementation of the course, what problems prevent the course from meeting the need of the course's participants, and what improvements should be made were examined in this study. The evaluation on the implementation of the Action Research applies Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP) model, which is developed by Stufflebeam to assess strengths and weaknesses of the course for accountability and improvement. A total of 30 in-service teachers of English were interviewed and course documents were reviewed to generate data. Data analysis reveals that the course is effective to develop in-service teachers' ability to do action research though improvements should be made to textbook and practice session of the course.

Keywords: Action research, CIPP model, evaluation, in-service teacher training, The National Foreign Language 2020 project

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is trying to enhance the language teaching and learning through many changes made to the national education system such as the university entrance examination, and the shift from traditional teaching method to the modern one. The National Foreign Language 2020 project (NFL 2020 project) was implemented according to the decision No. 1400/QD dated September 30th, 2008 with the aim to enhance language teaching and learning in Vietnam. One of the primary purposes of the project is to retrain the in-service teachers of English to better satisfy the requirements of the current language teaching context (National Foreign Language, 2008). The training program which is developed in accordance with English teacher competency framework (ETCF) has five components: language proficiency, testing and assessment,

language teaching methodology, information communication technology, and action research.

However, whether the in-service teacher training program really meets the expectation is still not fully explored. Some studies have been done to answer such question (e.g. Huong & Marie, 2016; Phan, 2015). Such studies have not applied any models of evaluation and they reveal the fact that the training program is in need of improvements. Besides, the component “Action Research” is not the main focus of the study.

The evaluation on the implementation of the Action Research applies Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP) model, which is developed by Stufflebeam (2014) to assess strengths and weaknesses of the course for accountability and improvement. The evaluation seeks the answer for such questions “How are the objectives of the course aligned with the needs of students?”, “What are alternative approaches/ strategies of the course”, “How is the course implemented in accordance with the outlined syllabus?”, “What improvements should be made to better the training course?”

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Evaluation is defined as “a process of determining the merit, worth or significance of things. Reports on the results of this process is called evaluation” (Scriven, 2003, p. 15). Stufflebeam (2003, p. 34) defines evaluation as “the process of delineating, obtaining, providing, and applying descriptive and judgmental information about the merit and worth of some object’s goals, design, implementation, and outcomes to guide improvement decisions, provide accountability reports, inform institutionalization/dissemination decisions, and improvement decisions, and understanding of the involved phenomena”.

Many evaluation models have been created to serve the needs of educational evaluation. One of the thoroughly-developed evaluation models is CIPP model developed by Stufflebeam (2014).

2.1 CIPP Model

CIPP model is defined as “a comprehensive framework for conducting formative and summative evaluations of programs, projects, and evaluation systems” (Stufflebeam, 2003, p. 31). This model originated in the late 1960s to “help improve and achieve accountability for federally funded U.S, public school projects, especially those keyed to improving teaching and learning in inner-city school districts” (Stufflebeam, 2014, p. 318). CIPP model is designed and develop with the focus on “learning by doing” (Stufflebeam, 2014, p. 318). With the underlying theme “not to prove but improve” (Stufflebeam, 2003, p. 58), the model focuses on providing information that will enable the regularly assess the program or services and make effective and efficiency use of resources, time and technology to serve beneficiaries appropriately.

CIPP model has four dimensions: Context, Input, Process and Product evaluations which aim at different purposes of evaluation. Context evaluation assesses needs, problems, assets and opportunities in a defined environment. Input evaluation is used to prescribe a program, project or intervention so that improvements could be made to satisfy intended beneficiaries. Process evaluation aims at providing a continuing check on a plan’s implementation and documentation of the process, which consists of changes in the plan, major omission and/or poor execution of the specific procedure. Product evaluation is conducted when there is a need

to measure, interpret and judge an enterprise's achievements (Stufflebeam, 2000; 2003; 2014; Zhang et al., 2011; Vo, 2017).

CIPP model is thoroughly developed and has been applied in hundreds of evaluations on many kinds of programs and services. The model has been applied to multiple evaluation situations and in many fields like agriculture, aviation, business, communication, distance education, elementary, tertiary, government, health care, international development, law, psychology, religion and sociology (Guerra-Lopez, 2008).

In this evaluation, context evaluation helps to see to what extent the objectives of the course aligned with the needs of students; input evaluation is made use to examine whether strategies selected for the Action Research (AR) course are suitable and what other strategies can be used. Process evaluation helps to identify strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the course and product evaluation provides chances to judge the course's achievements in comparison with the learning outcomes provided in the syllabus of the course.

2.2 Description of Action Research Course

Action research is one of the five components of the in-service teacher training program launched by National Foreign Language 2020 project since 2008. The course is carried out to help in-service teachers of English to develop their profession through doing action research. More specifically, in-service teachers of English can apply action research to solve their problems in their own teaching context as action research is defined as “a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 7), or “a form of procedural practical improvements” (McKernan, 2008, p. x).

The objectives of the AR course are to provide in-service teachers of English with necessary theory on AR, to develop in-service teachers' ability to do AR in their own teaching context, and the ability to solve teaching problems through the use of AR. The course is implemented for 50 periods in which the theory is delivered in 40 periods, followed by a 10 period practice. In the theory, teachers are introduced the concepts of action research such as its definition, characteristics, 4 steps (plan, act, observe and reflect), and a detailed guide on how to conduct action research to improve their English language teaching. The rest 10 periods is reserved for teachers to do simulated action research, in which teachers work in groups of four to discuss their simulated action research and present their simulated action research on posters. The whole class under the guidance of the trainer will give comments on each group's action research for the research's improvements later.

The textbook used in the course is designed by Thai Nguyen university as a part of the National Foreign Language 2020 project. Besides, extra materials are designed and compiled by the staff of University of Foreign Language Studies (UFLS), the University of Danang (UD) for the AR course for in-service teachers of English in the centre of Vietnam. Up to June, 2017, approximately 300 teachers of English from primary schools, secondary schools and high schools in Danang city, Quang Ngai province and Quy Nhon province have taken part in the Action Research course implemented by UFLS, UD. Besides, UFLS also organized courses to train trainers for universities and colleges in the centre of Vietnam, who would work as trainers for in-service teachers of English after the course. Around 100 lecturers from universities and colleges in Danang city, Khanh Hoa province, Gialai province, Quang Nam province, Nha

Trang city, Quang Tri province, Quang Binh Province, and Thanh Hoa province have participated in Action Research courses in UFLS.

This evaluation only focuses on evaluating the AR course for in-service teachers of English in the centre of Vietnam which is implemented by UFLS. The evaluation does not account for AR courses for lecturers in the centre of Vietnam as AR courses for lecturers aim at training them to be trainers for AR courses for in-service teachers of English.

2.3 Some applications of CIPP model

CIPP model has been applied in numerous evaluation studies in the world. According to Zhang (cited in Stufflebeam, 2014), CIPP model was used in 200 evaluation studies, journal articles and doctoral dissertations/ thesis in many fields. It is calculated that approximately 134 dissertations have made use of this model. Stufflebeam (2003) listed 41 evaluations using CIPP model such as an evaluation of the Hill Family Foundation's program to improve productivity in higher education, evaluation of the Western Michigan University, College of Education's external doctoral program in Guam, program evaluations for the Michigan Partnership for New Education and so on.

In education, CIPP model is often applied to evaluate curricula, and educational programs. Pang (2014) evaluated the implementation of the Malaysian Smart school Curriculum in a secondary school in Sabah. The evaluation's findings are useful for not only educational decision-makers, administrators but also for practitioners in Malaysia in particular and in the world in general in terms of curriculum development. Another application of CIPP model is the research "Using the Context, Input, Process, and Product Evaluation Model (CIPP) as a Comprehensive Framework to Guide the Planning, Implementation, and Assessment of Service-learning Programs" (Zhang et al., 2011). In this research, a summary of CIPP model and its use in evaluation are discussed and the findings of the research is presented so as to give deep insights into the strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities of the program. Vo (2017) presented a detailed description on CIPP model and how its dimensions are used in evaluation. However, the paper focuses on theory and fails to provide specific examples on how to apply CIPP in evaluating specific educational programs.

2.4 Previous studies on in-service teacher training program in Vietnam

Regarding the previous studies of in-service English teacher training program, a number of research studies can be found. Firstly, Phan (2015) did a research on the impact of the in-service English teacher training program in the highland and centre of Vietnam. The research focused on the influence of the training program on English teachers who took part in the program to see what changes they experienced after finishing the training. Huong and Marie (2016) evaluated the Primary English Teaching Methodology workshops, one component of the English teacher training program in the centre of Vietnam using a case study. Participants of this case study are in-service primary teachers of English in Thua Thien Hue province. Findings reveal that even though the training proved to be effective, improvements in regard to content, method and management are needed. In particular, the content of the series of workshops are fairly repetitive and should be edited to suit the context of teaching in Thua-Thien Hue province.

Pham (2017) conducted an evaluation research on English-for-teaching course which aims at enhancing English teachers' ability to use English in their teaching. Findings of the research reveal that the course is effective to develop English teachers' capacity to give instructions in English during their lessons. In this year, a research study on teacher language proficiency and reforms on English language education was carried out (Le, Nguyen, & Burns, 2017). The whole picture of English language teaching with its weaknesses and how to improve the situation was characterized in the research. The English language proficiency of in-service teachers of English is realized as one factor that needs great improving for better English language teaching in Vietnam.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

The evaluation uses CIPP model as the theoretical framework. The evaluation seeks the answer for such questions as "How are the objectives of the course aligned with the needs of students?", "What are alternative approaches/ strategies of the course", "How is the course implemented in accordance with the outlined syllabus?", "To what extent does the course meet the learning outcomes that are stated in the syllabus of the course?".

3.1 Methodology

The evaluation research is based on qualitative method, which seeks for deep information on how effective the AR course is. The instruments used in the research are document review and the interview. Those who were invited to attend the interview are teachers of English in primary schools, secondary schools and high schools in the centre of Vietnam. These teachers took part in the AR course implemented by UFLS.

The evaluation applies CIPP model. Context evaluation which features out the need of the AR course participants (in-service teachers of English) is conducted through document review and interviewing AR course participants. Input evaluation which searches for alternative strategies is carried out by examining whether the strategy used is suitable for the implementation of AR course through the interview and document review. Process evaluation which identifies problems that prevent the course from meeting the needs of enrolled students is done through interviewing the course participants. Product evaluation which provides the evaluator the opportunity to suggest improvements to the course is also conducted through the interview.

3.2 Population and Sample

As stated in the previous part, roughly 300 in-service teachers of English are trained by UFLS's staff in the centre of Vietnam. In the evaluation, 30 teachers took part in the interview. The sample for the interview is selected by random providing that the equal number (10 teachers) is allocated to the three groups of teachers: primary teachers, secondary teachers and high school teachers.

Letters were sent to 40 school teachers who took part in AR course given by UFLS. 34 of them agreed to attend the interview at the time convenient for them or on phone. However, to have equal numbers of teachers at three levels (primary schools, secondary schools and high schools), the number of those actually interviewed was reduced to 30.

3.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The interviews with two main parts were conducted with 30 in-service teachers of English who took part in the AR courses conducted by UFLS. The first part of the interview with three questions is to investigate the background of the teachers, such as their teaching years, students' grade, and their qualifications. The second part consisted of seven questions focusing on teachers' common problem, how they solve the problem before the AR course, how effective they think the course is, if they would actually do AR after the course, their opinions on the textbook and the syllabus of AR courses, and what they would want the course to change for improvements.

The questions for the interview were designed by the evaluator with the help of two other lecturers who are in charge of the AR course. The interview questions were read and edited by these lecturers for validity. Besides, after the first four interviews, the questions were edited for better clarity.

The data from the interview were analyzed based on codes and themes. The process of data analysis was conducted manually with pre-coding, preliminary coding/ jotting, first cycle of coding, second cycle of coding, and selective coding (Saldana, 2009). Specifically, the recordings of the interview were turned into transcripts and then similar phrases or ideas were selected for grouping. The ideas were then considered for main themes before being grouped. The ideas were again considered for classification into groups. The frequency of the ideas was calculated using MS Excel.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Among 30 teachers taking part in the research, 10 are primary teachers of English; 10 are secondary teachers of English and the remaining 10 are high school teachers of English. Nearly all of them have bachelor degree of English.

Table 1: Teachers' background

No.	Years of teaching			Qualifications		
	Less than 5 years of teaching	From 5 years to 10 years of teaching	More than 10 years of teaching	College degree	B.A	M.A
Primary school (10)	20%	30%	50%	10%	90%	0%
Secondary school (10)	10%	50%	40%	0%	100%	0%
High school (10)	10%	40%	50%	0%	100%	0%

It can be drawn from the interviews that teachers of all levels from primary to high schools share problems in English language teaching. Nearly most of those interviewed have problems of crowded class, unmotivated students, students of mixed levels, lack of teaching aid, pressure of testing and assessment and limited time in class. Besides, they also have some other less

common problems, such as lack of support from the headmaster, pressure from parents, or teachers' confidence in teaching and so on.

Ms. A who is an experienced English teacher of English at a primary school in Binh Dinh province complained that she often encountered the problem of overcrowded class. Her class usually has around 40 pupils who are of mixed levels. Besides, she also has problems with her headmaster because in order to increase the interaction among pupils, she often uses groupwork, which causes a lot of noises. Ms. B is a young teacher of English at a high school in the city centre, so she is lucky not to have to face the problem of facility and mixed level students. Yet, she does not have enough time for her lesson in class. Being an inexperienced teacher, she finds it hard to deal with all parts of the lesson in the limited time allowance. Mr. C is a teacher who has been teaching at secondary school for 10 years. He is in charge of grade 8 and 9 classes. His problem is testing and assessment, especially when his pupils have to sit for a very important exam at the end of grade 9, the high school entrance exam.

Table 2: Teachers' common problems

Teachers' problems	Crowded class	Unmotivated students	Mixed level	Lack of teaching aid	Time limited	Pressure of testing and assessment	Others
Primary teachers	100%	90%	90%	50%	100%	50%	20%
Secondary teachers	90%	60%	60%	50%	86%	80%	10%
High school teachers	80%	50%	80%	50%	70%	100%	10%

When asked what teachers often do to solve their teaching problems before they take part in AR course, their common answers are asking for help from their colleagues, searching for solutions in books, articles or internet, and some others like joining forums for teachers of English, or watching English teaching period on Youtube.

For example

Ms. A: I often access the website of British council to have more information for my teaching. On the website, I can find a lot of interesting activities for teaching young learners. Sometimes, there are guides for primary teachers to use textbooks effectively designed especially for Vietnamese teachers of English at primary schools.

Ms. B: I tried to get help from other teachers of my schools. Sometimes, I attended their classes to observe their way of teaching. It is very useful for me to improve my teaching skill.

Mr. C: Actually, to solve my problems I search for books about taking part in the high school entrance exams, join the forum for high school teachers of English to see how they deal with the problem, and give my students more homework to do at home....

Table 3: Teachers' ways to solve their problem before the AR course

Ways to solve problems in teaching	Asking for help from colleagues	Searching for solutions in methodology materials (books, articles, etc.)	Others
Primary teachers	90%	30%	10%
Secondary teachers	80%	50%	20%
High school teachers	60%	50%	20%

Regarding the first research question "How are the objectives of the course aligned with the needs of students?", the course objectives really satisfy the needs of solving problems arising in teachers' English language teaching. As shown from the interview, 74% of all teachers think they would do AR to solve their own problems as they believe AR is a good way for solving their classroom problems. What is more, 90% of all teachers agree that the course is informative, and well-delivered for them to understand the concepts of AR and develop the ability to do AR.

The interview also reveals that 90% teachers prefer the course to be lengthened because 10 periods for practice is limited for them to practice doing simulated AR. 100% teachers interviewed think that the course is implemented based on the outlined syllabus delivered to them before the course. In the interview, one female teacher (so-called Ms.D.) thought she mastered the concepts of AR and believed she could herself do AR when she returned to her school, yet, she complained about the practice period. She and her classmates had to stay up late at night to prepare for the simulated AR even though the result was not satisfactory due to time constraint.

The document review shows that a detailed training plan for the AR course was designed by the group of trainers from UFLS. The trainer keeps his/her delivery of the course fixed to the training plan so the implementation of the course is similar in all classes. The syllabus of the course is delivered to all trainees at the beginning of the course. 100% of those interviewed answered that the course delivered to them was strictly based on the syllabus.

In terms of the final research question, the teachers suggest several improvements should be made to the course. First of all, the textbook's language is complicated and difficult to understand (74% of teachers interviewed). Secondly, the time reserved for practice should be lengthened so that teachers have opportunities to work together to do AR with the help from trainer. Among the four teachers (Ms. A, Ms. B, Mr. C and Ms.D) whose interview responses are highlighted in this paper, only Ms. B did not find it difficult to read the textbook in English. Ms.B is a young English language teacher. The other three had to struggle with concepts, definitions and terminology terms in the textbook. They admitted that their trainer occasionally had to spend much time explaining these terms in Vietnamese.

5.0 CONCLUSION

It can be seen from the findings that the course is effective to develop in-service teachers' ability to do AR for their professional development. 74 % of those interviewed feel confident to do AR themselves after the course. Besides, 90% think that the course is informative enough for them to develop understanding on AR.

However, the course still needs improvements to better the training. First of all, 74% complained about the textbook. In their opinion, the language used in the textbook is difficult to understand. The information provided by the textbook is complicated and is not arranged in logical order. Therefore, teachers have to spend much time reading to understand basic concepts of AR. It is suggested by 50% in-service teacher of English in the interview that there should be more examples on AR, especially the ones that deal with the actual teaching problems among teachers of English in Vietnam. More materials on how to collect data and data analysis should be added to the textbook. The first part of the textbook which provides knowledge of AR, such as definitions and steps of AR should be simplified in terms of language. There should also be discussion questions at the end of each part. Furthermore, it is difficult for school teachers to find out further reading materials even though a list of books and journals are provided in the textbook. It would be better if school teachers are given access to the resources. In other words, the material of the course should be rearranged and rewritten to better suit the training on AR for school teachers.

Another suggestion to the course is that teachers should be given chances to practice more with the help of trainers as approximately 90% of teachers think that the time reserved for practice is limited. It would be better if the course is followed by a two month period practice when teachers do the AR at their school under the guidance of trainers. After that, reports on the implementation and results of AR would be shared among teachers so that they can get more experiences and knowledge on AR. There should be a network like forum to connect those who are interested in doing research studies in general and AR in particular to develop their teaching career. Another alternative strategy is that the face-to-face AR course is accompanied by an online course on UFLS's e-learning website. The online AR course will provide teachers with chances to have online discussions of AR issues like choosing a research topic or analyzing data, to receive spontaneous help from the trainer when they carry AR projects at their school, and to share ideas, experiences and research studies together. All further reading materials can also be uploaded here so that every participant of the course can access such materials.

Overall, the AR course is effective to develop the in-service English teachers' ability to do AR though improvements regarding the textbook and time allocation to the practice session should be made so that the course' implementation is better. It is hoped that the evaluation is useful for the UFLS to better its training program for in-service teachers of English.

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