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Opening the Insider's Eye: Starting Action Research

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This paper discusses the topic of getting started on a process of action research (AR). I hope that the paper encourages a few teachers to begin classroom investigations, because it is important for the TESOL and TEFL profession that we have more teacher-researchers. Only if we establish action research as a more attractive aspect of teaching can we avoid the almost complete separation between research on the one hand and practice on the other (Wallace 1991, p. 10). This gap between theory and practice has understandably caused a negative attitude towards theory among teachers. Essentially this rift has been caused by the predominance of the objective outsider in TESOL research. Action research offers the possibility of TESOL teachers providing an insider's view of the teaching process.

Participant Inquiry

In the nineties there has been an increasing recognition that we need to look more carefully at the web of interlocking ideas, choices and decisions that constitute classroom teaching. The teacher is in an ideal insider position to articulate these complexities and there is so much to uncover: "The more we look, the more we find, and the more we realise how complex the teacher's job is" (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p. 5). However, the interesting question this quotation raises is "Who is doing the looking?" Are we talking about the outsider or the insider doing the looking, finding and detailing?

Uncovering the Invisible

Action research helps our profession to record and detail the complexity which Allwright and Bailey refer to. Teachers can best document significant interventions and modifications in practice but they may not realise or be able to describe this complexity until they have begun a process of reflection or reading or both. A great number of teacher actions are unconscious and routinised. Indeed it would not be possible to do all the things that a teacher does in the classroom if all the actions were conscious. In other words much good practice has become second nature.

Action research is a way to engage with classroom teaching and bring more of it to a conscious level; a way to uncover what has become invisible. Once teachers feel engaged and more conscious of these everyday choices and decisions they are in a better position to frame appropriate research questions. Teachers, in order to formulate and answer their questions, "must grope towards their invisible knowledge and bring it into sight. Only in this way can they see the classroom with an outsider's eye but an insider's knowledge" (Barnes, 1975, p. 13).

If action research has two simple ingredients then, they are:

- Opening teachers' eyes to what has become familiar.
- Developing a sustained focus on one aspect of teaching.

This observation and noticing leads to insights, naming what teachers do and describing and recovering practice so that it is not lost irretrievably (Naidu, Neeraja, Ramani, Shivakumar & Viswanatha, 1992, p. 261).

First steps

Action research offers the chance to develop context-orientated understanding or what Prabhu (1990) calls "a sense of plausibility." In this section I will discuss how to get started in developing this sense of plausibility through a process of AR. The first step is usually identifying an idea. This may start out as a general idea. "My students don't seem very motivated" is fairly general, for example. The movement to a focus, for instance, on increasing the proportion of referential questions to display questions, provides a much narrower idea or focus.

It is understandable that many teachers' first response to any idea of conducting research is negative, perhaps even one of "indifference and downright hostility" (Wallace, 1998, p. 17). There is no answer to this position. AR cannot be enforced and does not work as a top-down directive (Widdowson 1993, p. 267) or as "duties in addition to those which already burden them" (Wright, 1992, p. 203). The motivation must come from the individual teacher or group of teachers.

For teachers who want to make a start there may still be problems of time. However, as far as AR is concerned there is often no need for a radical change in the classroom. Becoming a researcher does not mean that one stops being a teacher. Elliot (1991) stresses the need to see AR in terms of the continual interrelation between practice and research.

It is also worth saying that teachers may like to begin small in terms of their research and may not have to be too ambitious at first. Allwright (1993) suggests that a good place to start may be simply getting students to discuss an issue in class rather than starting with a questionnaire survey in the traditional academic way. Parrot (1993) is certainly a good place to start because the research tasks in his book are small scale and can be done while teaching.

If teachers are motivated to create some time outside the classroom for reflection, reading and research planning, Allwright and Bailey (1991) advise starting with a general issue, thinking about the issue, then deciding what data is needed. This may be good advice and a general issue may be enough to begin the process, but it is not always easy to go further. According to Burns (1999), practitioners new to AR comment that finding a focus and developing a research question is one of the most difficult parts of the research process. Further, as Wallace confirms (1998, p. 27), the next important challenge is to narrow the focus as soon as possible. In other words, it is important to consider how a general issue can be made more manageable. The next section suggests possible techniques for this kind of thinking and decision making.

Narrowing the Focus

I advise (Mann, 1997) the complementary use of focusing circles (Edge 1992) and mind mapping (Buzan & Buzan, 1996) as techniques for this kind of decision making. Subsequent feedback from teachers confirms the usefulness of this combination. My experience of working with teachers on the Aston Master's in TESOL is that teachers have little problem in finding a general issue but that this issue or problem is often too big and, therefore, daunting and demotivating. Achieving a focus, small enough to manage, which does not balloon up and become overwhelming, is where focusing circles and mind-mapping might be useful.

- Focusing circles--This is a technique from Edge (1992, pp. 37-38) through which you can narrow your focus by drawing a small circle at the center (inside) of a larger one. The issue, topic or problem is written in the small circle and the larger one is divided into four segments. In each of these four segments an aspect of the topic is written. One of these four segments then becomes the center of the next circle and so on.

- Mind maps--Most teachers have, at some time, used mind maps or spider webs. Probably the most comprehensive guide to the use of mind mapping is provided by Buzan & Buzan (1996). Here the issue is written at the center of a piece of paper and related factors branch out from the center.

Teachers at Aston reported that there is a different kind of thinking involved in the two techniques. The thinking in focusing circles is selective, *you are involved in deciding, you need to make choices and justify them*.. In mind maps, *the main thinking goes into making connections, one thing leads to another*. Most of these teachers felt that of the two, focusing circles was more productive in finding a focus for AR. There was a feeling that once a decision had been made, that is, a focus found, then mind mapping could be used to trace back the connections and see the small focus within the bigger picture. Significantly, a number of these teachers report that using both during the AR process had helped them.

Further Advice on Choosing a Focus

Getting the focus right for the first piece of action research is very important because these early experiences shape teachers' attitude and commitment to further action research. As Wallace (1998, p. 21) advises, try to avoid topics or questions which are essentially unanswerable. Burns (1999, p. 55) offers similar advice: (a) avoid questions you can do little about, (b) limit the scope and duration of your research, (c) try to focus on one issue at a time, and (d) choose areas of research which are of direct relevance and interest to yourself and to your school circumstances.

If teachers start with a problem which they want to solve, they should not be too ambitious. In other words, choose a problem which has a realistic chance of being solved. For many teachers it may be more useful to make their AR focus on a puzzle (Alwright, 1993, p. 132). Changing something in what is done is not necessarily the same as concentrating on a problem. Allwright and Bailey (1991) see concentrating on a puzzle as a productive way of integrating research and pedagogy. I suggest that your first piece of AR focus on a puzzle or a small change in classroom practice, rather than the biggest problem with the most difficult class.

Questions and Statements

- Wallace (1998, p. 21) provides some basic questions which are worth asking early on in the AR process. The following are certainly useful questions to ask but teachers should not be put off if they cannot answer them. They are only useful if they help you move on. If they do put you off, ignore them. Teachers may only be ready to provide answers nearer the end of the AR process.

- Purpose--Why are you engaging in this action research?

- Topic--What area are you going to investigate?

- Focus--What is the precise question you are going to ask yourself within that area?

- Product--What is the likely outcome of the research, as you intend it?

- Mode--How are you going to conduct the research?

- Timing--How long have you got to do the research? Is there a deadline for its completion?

- Resources--What are the resources, both human and material, that you can call upon to help you complete the research?

- Fine tuning--As you proceed with your research, do you suppose you will have to rethink your original question?

In fact, it may be more profitable to start by making a series of statements as Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p. 18) suggest. For example,

- I would like to improve the...

- Some people are unhappy about ... What can I do to change the situation?

- I have an idea I would like to try out in my class.

Talking Out Your Ideas

Once teachers have narrowed their focus, answered the questions above or made some rudimentary statements, or both, about what they intend to do, it is ideal if they can talk over ideas with a colleague or another interested teacher. Teachers working on AR projects often report the value of having the space to articulate their ideas. One Aston master's participant expresses this role of talking:

Don't you think that any successful piece of work is seldom done alone? Sachiko made some good comments at Nagoya that made me rethink my approach... then discussions on the IBC discussion group really helped me develop. That's why these email discussion groups are important. Because talking about it helps you think and rethink. (IBC - International Business Communication email group)

There are interesting comments here on the way ideas develop through opportunities for talk. It is significant that this master's participant also sees both face-to-face (in Nagoya) and email discussion as talking about it. email discussion is seen as one of a number of valuable tools or forums for the development of a research focus, pinning down an idea. Indeed, there are strong grounds (Cowie 1997, Russell & Cohen, 1997) for supposing that email has clear advantages for the development of teachers' reflective dialogue or "dialogic understanding" (Bakhtin 1973, p. 944). Certainly an email relationship with another teacher interested in AR can be a viable alternative to face-to-face support.

It is worth making the point that AR is often an individual undertaking but can be supported by other teachers. Burns's (1999) account of AR is very much a collaborative one and if it possible to conduct AR as a group, this may provide a more supportive environment. It is clearly beneficial to be supported, and collaborative group work may be desirable for many. However, autonomous action researchers supported by other like-minded teachers may have some advantages over groups within schools or teaching centers. Working in groups can be a mixed blessing and Russell and Cohen (1997) attest to the benefits of working with someone from outside the teaching context who acts as a sounding board. One final reservation about the kind of collaborative work that Burns describes is that it can lead to a tendency to offer suggestions and advice rather than act as an honest understander. In this sense collaboration may short-circuit the kind of cooperative understanding

that Edge (1992) outlines--advice and suggestions may get in the way of the development of an individual's AR ideas. Clearly, however, some support is desirable, and you should look for collaborative or cooperative opportunities, if possible.

Problems with Action Research

In terms of beginning AR, forewarned is forearmed, and Nunan (1993), while being very positive about the possible benefits of AR, takes account of the principle problems that teachers face when conducting this kind of research. These include lack of time, expertise and support. He also mentions the fear of being revealed as an incompetent teacher (and this may be an important reason why collaboration with a teacher outside your teaching context is desirable). At a later stage there is also the fear of producing a public account of the research, which then becomes available for a wider (unknown) audience. Nunan provides some possible solutions: (a) having individuals with training in research methods available to provide assistance, (b) requesting release time from face-to-face teaching, and (c) setting up of collaborative focus teams. Burns (1999, p. 45-52) also has an excellent section on constraints and how to work with them. If you are pressed, my advice would be not to think about any problems until they hit you. Start positive: There may not be any problems!

Conclusion

Despite the possible problems listed above, most teachers find action research stimulating and rewarding. However, there is no theoretical or practical substitute for getting started. Begin with a few small scale observations (to train the insider's eye). You will then be in a position to choose a focus, narrow that focus and devise a series of steps or stages in order to investigate your focus.

With increasing use of internet we live in exciting times; the possibilities for connecting our insider views with the views of others are increasing. For those who are not fortunate to work in contexts where they have colleagues that support their aspirations and development, the prospect of joining other committed teacher-researchers is a positive and eye-opening one. The internet and action research are an exciting combination in combating the isolation of teachers (Wallace, 1998). AR--you ready?

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