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When Teachers Become Researchers: *The Importance of Action Research*

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When Teachers Become Researchers: *The Importance of Action Research*

Tahmina Mariyam^α & Md. Mohib Ullah^σ

Abstract- Though the decisions are imposed by the policy makers, in a teaching context like Bangladesh; it is the teachers who deal with the actual classroom scenario. In spite of that the voice of the teachers is little heard. Action research can be an effective way to make their voices heard. The purpose of the present paper is to show the importance of action research in secondary school level and at the same time finding out how familiar our teachers are with it. Stating the problems, relating the significance and stating the objectives in the introduction, the study delves into a detailed review of the literature. Following the literature review is the actual study conducted. Through a qualitative, gradually turning into quantitative methodology the study reveals its findings. The study ends with some relative recommendations along with a concluding remark.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In recent time, Action Research (AR) has become a commonly used term in the field of education in general and to be particular in second language teaching. AR explores solution to real classroom problems or strives to develop classroom practices by collaborative activity among the peers with a view to improving the achievement of the learners. Burns (2010:3) outlines, 'It is related to the ideas of 'reflective practice' and 'the teacher as researcher'. AR involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts.' He further states that in AR 'a teacher becomes an 'investigator' or 'explorer' of his or her personal teaching context, while at the same time being one of the participants in it.' Action Research for language teachers is 'an approach to collection and interpreting data which involves a clear, repeated cycle of procedures'. Bailey (2001: 490).

Though teachers play a pivotal role in teaching language in Bangladesh, it is assumed that teachers in Bangladesh are not much organized in doing action research. Consequently, it becomes difficult for the teachers to address the problems or the difficulties that they face time to time while teaching learners in different context.

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a) *Significance of the Research*

Language teachers in Bangladesh teach learners in unusually large classes and multi-dimensional contexts. And with the attendance of mixed-capability learners from different backgrounds in language classrooms, teaching as a profession is becoming more challenging day by day because teachers in these classes of different contexts encounter many unpredictable and unexpected challenges that they require to deal with tactfully. Wallace (1991: 56-7) states that AR 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'. The research can pave the way for better practices of the teachers and can perhaps guide them towards their continuing professional development. Thus, language teaching can be more effective than the previous time and enhance the achievement of the learners.

b) *Statement of the Problems*

It is observed that a top-down process is followed in the field of English Language Teaching in Bangladesh. For example, before introducing a new textbook or designing a new syllabus or curriculum, a pilot study is made and then the Ministry of Education goes for implementation of it. Usually, there remains a huge gap between most of the field level practitioners and policy makers and planners while introducing something new. On top of that, it is a confessed truth that the Ministry cannot train even one third of the total language teachers to teach after the new textbook or syllabus. And there emerges mutual blame-the Ministry claims that the teachers are following the traditional ways of teaching instead of coping themselves up with the new text book or syllabus. On the contrary, the teachers claim that the new textbook or syllabus is not suitable for their contexts. The ultimate result is very dissatisfactory. Besides, many novice teachers are starting their teaching career and teaching at secondary level along with experienced teachers. It is a big challenge for both groups of language teachers to teach new textbook in both urban and rural contexts with limited resources. One of the ways of addressing these problems and making language teaching effective is to promote action research to practitioners, the teachers.

c) *Objective of the Study*

One of the objectives of this research is to find out what the secondary level teachers know about action research. Secondly, it attempts to explore how the teachers who are familiar with action research deal with different problems and difficulties to solve them. Also, it strives to know what the secondary language teachers having no idea about action research do to solve new problems or difficulties. Besides, the researchers aim at exploring how far the practices of both groups of teachers conform to action research. And last but not the least, based on the findings of the research, the researchers plan to present recommendations so that language level teachers at secondary level can progress in terms of profession, make teaching effective and enhance learners efficiency.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Action research bears the implication that “‘research’ is not only something that is done ‘on’ or ‘to’ teachers, but is also an undertaking in which they can themselves be actively involved” (McDonough & McDonough, 1997: 22). While conventionally, research is being linked with contemplation and teaching with action, action research tries to bring these two polarized notion together. In order to understand the term better, few definitions of the term, from its early proponents to its recent advocates have been presented below.

Carr and Kemmis opine that, “action research is simply a form of self-reflective inquiry” (1986: 162). Robinson’s definition seems to explain it further when he says, “any action undertaken by teachers to collect data and evaluate their own teaching can be termed as action research” (1991). Describing it more systematically, Ferrance asserts, “action research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research” (2000: 1).

Sagor’s view seems to shed some more light on it when he proclaims, “action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for action research is to assist the “actor” in improving and/or refining his or her actions” (2000). In the same line Burns (2010) declares “action research is related to the ideas of ‘reflective practice’ and ‘the teacher as researcher’” (2010: 2). Extending it further, she says, in action research, a teacher becomes an investigator or explorer of his her personal teaching context, while at the same time being one of the participants in it” (Burns, 2010: 2).

Describing it more clearly Mills (2003) quoted in Donato asserts, “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” (Donato, 2003: 1).

Giving high value to its methodology, Burns concludes that action research is a “part of ‘a quiet methodological revolution’ towards qualitative research approaches” which encourages “participative, ‘naturalistic’ enquiry with its exploratory-interpretive underpinnings (2004: 57).

a) *Roots and Origins of Action Research*

The roots of action research can be traced back to Aristotle. The Aristotelian concept of ‘phronesis’, roughly translated to English as ‘practical wisdom’, along with its relationship to other ethical and intellectual virtues can be seen as the starting point of action research (for a detailed discussion see Eikeland, 2006).

Regarding the modern tradition of action research, some relate it to Kurt Lewin whereas others to John Dewey. Somekh, forming a balance, credits both of them by asserting, “the tradition of action research is rooted both in Lewin’s social psychology, which conceived of action as emerging from a process of group exploration of social interactions rather than solely from rational deduction, and in John Dewey’s theory of ‘learning by doing’” (Somekh, 2006: 23). “Theories of action in action research also draw heavily on the European philosophers, Habermas, Gadamer and Arendt” (ibid). Similar discussion can be found in Tomal (2003: 22).

Stephen Corey might be credited for being among the first ones to use action research in the field of education. “He believed that the scientific method in education would bring about change because educators would be involved in both the research and the application of information” (Ferrance, 2000: 13).

After being regarded as ‘unscientific’ and the ‘work of amateurs’ (Ferrance, 2000: 14), action research in education saw a decline in the 1950s. But through the work of Lawren Stenhouse, it again made a comeback in the 1970s. Gaining popularity, work in action research gradually got carried forward by Donald Schon in the 1980s and Carr and Kemis in the 1990s. Most recently, the positive implications of action research is being carried by the work of the leading experts like Ann Burns (2010), Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2010), and Pappas and Tucker-Raymond (2011) (see Huang, 2012 for a detailed discussion).

b) *Benefits of Action Research*

There is a concern that “research is not adopted by those that could benefit from it most” and that “often, research never makes it beyond journal articles and into practice” (Landers, 2012 quoted in Huang, 2012: 13). Action research seems to be able to change the scenario entirely. Because, “when teachers

are able to engage in research and make justified pedagogical decisions informed by sound research evidence, this will have a beneficial effect on both teaching and learning” (Davies 1999 quoted in Borg, 2006: 22).

Burns (2005) presents the benefits of educational action research as identified by Kemmis & McTaggart. The benefits are that teachers develop skills in:

- thinking systematically about what happens in the school or classroom
- implementing action where improvements are thought to be possible
- monitoring and evaluating the effects of the action with a view to continuing the improvement
- monitoring complex situations critically and practically
- implementing a flexible approach to school or classroom
- making improvements through action and reflection
- researching the real, complex and often confusing circumstances and constraints of the modern school
- recognizing and translating evolving ideas into action. (Burns, 2005: 68)

Similar identification is done by McDonough and McDonough (1997) as they present the advantages of action research set out by Baesley and Riordan:

- It begins with and builds on the knowledge that teachers have already accumulated.
- It focuses on the immediate concerns of classroom life.
- It matches the subtle organic process of classroom life.
- It builds on the ‘natural’ processes of evaluation and research which teachers carry out daily.
- It bridges the gap between understanding action by merging the role of researcher practitioner.
- It sharpens teachers’ critical awareness through observation, recording and analysis of classroom events.
- It helps teachers better articulate teaching and learning processes to their colleagues and interested community members.
- It bridges the gap between theory and practice. (McDonough and McDonough, 1997: 25)

Similar claims have been made by Belleli (1993), Crookes & Chandler (2001), Freeman (1998) Nunan, (1993), van Lier (1994). In short the benefit lies in the fact that teachers become “more autonomous,

responsible and answerable through action research” (Day, 1987 quoted in Sadeghi, 2012: 73).

c) *Action Research throughout the World*

Action research seems to have flourished well in the BANA countries (see Perrett, 2003). But the condition of action research in the rest of the world is still to be properly researched. Burns quotes Borg’s comment in this issue that “action research has taken root only in places where teachers are well supported and teach in instructional contexts” (Burns, 2005: 69). Despite the limitations action research seems to have gained popularity outside BANA countries as well.

Action research separately conducted by Gow, Kember and McKay (1996) and Curtis (2001) in Hong Kong promotes positive result (Ferrell, 2007: 94). In China, “most trainees are willing to try action research ... trainee teacher-researchers find themselves more aware of the teaching and learning processes, more capable of improving their own practice, and more confident in their future professional development” (Thorne and Qiang, 1996: 261).

The best way to learn about the global condition of action research is perhaps through Rainey’s (2000) research. Because, though done in a relatively small scale, it is one of the few international researches to be found on action research. Her findings after surveying 10 countries with 240 questionnaires and follow up interviews, bring about both, hope and despair. Despair, due to the fact that, “three-quarters of the teacher surveyed had not heard of action research” (Rainey, 2000: 79). Hope, because “the responses to action research among those who have (heard of action research) are in general very positive” (ibid).

d) *Action Research in Bangladesh*

To think of a well supported teaching context in Bangladesh seems to be a far cry still (see Hamid and Baldauf, 2008). Thus not many reports of action research are to be found. Even after all the limitations cases of action research evolve no matter how less frequent.

The establishment of Bangladesh Reading Association’s (BRA) Journal for Classroom Teaching can be seen as a milestone in classroom based research aka action research.

In the April 2013 issue of the quarterly journal, an individual teacher’s action research has been presented as a case study. After identifying a problem following the Kemmis model of action research the researcher comes to a solution and concludes that “a teacher can solve classroom problem using action research” (Salahuddin and Khatun, 2013: 19).

A small scale survey conducted by Harun and Amin (2013), shows that majority of the teachers are not familiar with the term action research. But almost 90% of them basically reflect on their classes without knowing the implication of it. Hopefully, after learning about

action research and reflective teaching “all the interviewed teachers opined that both reflective teaching and action research would be really helpful for promoting teachers’ professionalism and make classroom practice effective and enjoyable” (Harun and Amin, 2013: 74).

Khan (2008), keeping in mind the initial difficulty, showed “collaborative, institutional and participatory approaches to action research” as important for professional development of teachers in Bangladesh.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to conduct the research a mixed-method has been followed, as “this approach helps construct a more complete picture of human behavior and experience” (Morse, 2003).

The study was conducted using two data instruments. It includes: a survey questionnaire and in-depth unstructured interview.

a) Survey Questionnaire

Creswell (2008) suggests survey design for measuring attitudes, beliefs and opinions in educational research, as it is the best popular form of collecting information from a large population. Thus a survey questionnaire with 13 statements and a number of options was designed in order to elicit data.

The response of the teachers has been summed up in the table below

Statements	Response 1	Response 2	Response 3	
1. Diary Keeping	Always 72%	Sometimes 2.27%	Never 0%	
2. Reading self-study books	Yes 54.54%	No 45.45%		
3. Observes one's own classroom	Keenly 81.81%	Doesn't consider as important 4.54%	Others 13.63%	
4. Allows colleagues to observe classroom	Always 36.36%	Sometimes 45.45%	Never 22.27%	
5. Observes colleagues' classrooms	Always 13.63%	Sometimes 45.45%	Never 22.72%	
6. Discussing classroom situations with colleagues	Always 45.45%	Sometimes 54.54%	Never 0%	
7. Implementing new techniques in classroom	Very enthusiastic 59.09%	Institution's syllabus is sufficient 36.36%	No response 4.54%	
8. Familiarity with the term action research	Yes 13.63%	No 81.81%		
9. View regarding research	Should be Carried out by experts 13.63%	A good number of educational degrees needed 13.63%	Even teachers can be researchers 63.63%	No Comment 9.09%
10. The desire of expressing opinion as a	Always 31.82%	Sometimes 63.63%	Never	Not Sure 4.54%

b) Unstructured Interview

Unstructured interview was used as another primary research tool. It is because “such interviews are more in touch with the social world, being able to tap into everyday reality” (McDonough and McDonough, 1997: 184)

c) Participants and Setting

The research was conducted in seven different schools based in Chittagong and Dhaka. Twenty three primary and secondary level school teachers participated in answering the survey questionnaire. Principals of four schools out of seven as the representatives of school authorities were interviewed.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

a) Questionnaire Analysis

25 questionnaires were distributed among 25 teachers of 7 different schools based in Dhaka and Chittagong. 23 of them were filled and returned. The teaching experience of the teachers ranged from a year to 13 years.

Systematic order was followed in placing the statements in the questionnaire. They were not put randomly. The statements consisted of a number of options and also occasionally, spaces for writing.

teacher to the world				
11. Involvement in decision making	Always 31.82%	Sometimes 54.54%	Never	Not Sure 4.54%
12. Describing one's classroom situation best	Always 40.91%	Sometimes 40.91%	Never	Not Sure 18.18%
13. Opinion regarding teacher-researcher	Heard for the first time 9.09%	A teacher should be teacher only 0%	Sound interesting, would like to become one. But don't know how 72.72%	Others 18.18%

Figure 1 : Response of Teacher Questionnaire

From the table we can see that a good number of teachers record their classroom experiences in the form of diary keeping. It is also visible that more than half of the teachers read self-study books for their development. A good number of teachers keenly observe their classroom activities. They often allow their colleagues to observe their classrooms, and frequently observe their colleagues' classrooms. They discuss their classroom situations with their colleagues pretty often. More than half of the teachers are found to be very enthusiastic in trying new techniques inside the classroom. Even after all these, unfortunately an overwhelming number of teachers are found to be unfamiliar with the term 'action research'. Hopefully a good number of them think that teachers can simultaneously play the role of a researcher and research as an activity should not be confined to experts only. More than half of them are found eager to express their opinions as teachers, to the world and would like to involve themselves in decision making besides the policy makers. They think that they are the ones who are able to describe their own classroom situation best. To them the term 'teacher-researcher' "sounds interesting". The only obstacle on the way for them to become teacher-researcher is their lack of knowledge and exposure.

b) Interview Analysis

School Principals, as the representatives of the school authorities, from four out of seven schools were interviewed. A short summary of all the four interviews have been presented below.

P1 has been running the school for almost a decade now. Through the interview the researcher got an implication that he finds the extended roles of teachers as absolutely unnecessary. From him teachers should only focus on textbooks. He does not believe that teachers might have anything to say. The entire notion of classroom research is nothing but 'meaningless' to him.

P2 claimed to have a good collection of teacher resources on campus. What she meant by "resources" is not clear to the researcher. She showed much interest regarding teacher activities. She claimed her teachers to be very "involved" in classroom activities. On further

questioning it became clear that she holds a very narrow view of teachers' classroom activities. For her the teachers are not qualified enough to carry out classroom research. Despite her enthusiasm her outlook towards teacher-research seemed to act as a hindrance towards the institutions involvement in activities like action research.

P3 seemed to hold rigid views regarding teachers' involvement in research, policy making, curriculum development etc. Not unlike that of P1, P3 thinks teachers are supposed to 'teach' only. "That's the reason they are paid for", he commented. Increasing their roles and activities will call for a raise in their salary he confided. He is not willing to 'spoil' the teachers by instilling the idea of 'research' into their heads.

P4 seemed pretty enthusiastic regarding the interview. She demonstrated a zeal regarding teacher education and their continuing professional development. The idea of teacher-researcher amazes her greatly. She said, English is something she really wants to focus on. And for that purpose she has even hired an ELT expert, who works as a coordinator and provides teachers with a safe ground regarding new approaches and methodologies.

V. FINDINGS

- Though the teachers are not formally acquainted with the term action research, they perform a lot of activities similar to action research.
- Most of the teachers want to share their experiences as teachers with the world.
- They are not familiar with the self-study books which can help them become better teachers. Some of them referred to grammar books, novels, text books as self-study books. Some of them found internet much more helpful than books.
- A large number of teachers claimed that they keenly observe their classrooms but they seemed to have little knowledge regarding the actual observation procedure.
- A good number of teachers said that they let their colleagues observe their own classrooms and vice versa. Even in this case they seemed to have little

idea regarding the procedure. One of the teachers said, "I overhear" (that is how she observes her colleague's class); while another commented "I usually ask them to come and sit at the back, but they never did".

- Most of the teachers are interested in implementing new techniques in their classrooms but quoting the words of one of them "rarely the authority supports".
- Most of them believe that, "even teachers can be researchers".
- They said that the authority seldom asks for their opinion regarding issues like syllabus and curriculum design.
- To most of them, the term teacher-researcher "sounds interesting. I would like to become one, but don't know how."

Interview with the authority revealed that:

- While some of them are interested in involving the teachers, some of them hold very rigid view.
- Internet, text-books, guide-books are the resources they provide the teachers with. "Guide-books are prohibited but essential", said one of them.
- For some, giving class, setting question-paper etc. are the only things teachers should remain busy with.
- While one school claimed to have a separate library for teachers with sufficient resources. On visit, it became clear that it does not contain any book meant for teacher improvement or research involvement.
- One of the schools seemed to stand with some ray of hope, with insufficient but proper knowledge regarding action research.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Teachers can be made familiar with the term Action Research and its procedures, so that they may tell their stories in their own words. In this regard teacher-educators should come forward.
- The authorities of the respective schools should give-up their rigid viewpoints.
- Schools can create a section in their libraries for teacher resources.
- This is an age of technological advancement. Therefore, the teachers should be facilitated in a way that enables them to connect with other teachers from home and abroad.
- Different journals should come forward in order to publish the articles written by school teachers, sharing their experiences. As Freeman asserts, "when pursued in a disciplined manner, teaching itself becomes a form of research" (Freeman, 1996: 112).

VII. CONCLUSION

Surprisingly, most of the school based researches are done by outsiders. Hence we miss out the inside stories. It is like hearing the story from some pseudo storytellers, who are not even part of the story! Freeman comments "you have to know the story in order to tell the story" (1996: 89). From the present paper, it is clear that the storytellers need some guidelines in order to develop their elocution. With the support of the school authorities and the help of teacher educators, we can hope that, soon we will hear the stories from the actual storytellers. And the actual firsthand stories will pave a new way towards effective English language teaching in Bangladesh.

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APPENDIX I

Questionnaire for Teachers

Please respond to the following questions. Your identity will be kept anonymous. Your response will be highly regarded.

Age:

Teaching Experience (in years):

Educational Qualification:

1. Do you keep a diary in order to keep track of your teaching and students' progress?

- a. Always b. sometimes c. never

2. Do you read any self-study book in order to improve your teaching?

- a. Yes b. No

If yes, mention the name of the book that helped you the most:

3. How do you observe your own classroom?

- a. Don't find anything to observe b. Keenly c. Don't consider my observation important d. Others, please specify

If your answer is 'b', where do you record your observation?

4. Do you allow your colleagues to observe you classroom?

- a. Always b. sometimes c. never

5. Do you observe your colleagues' classrooms?

- a. Always b. sometimes c. never

6. How often do you discuss your classroom situations with your colleagues?

- a. Always b. sometimes c. never

7. How are you at implementing new techniques in your classroom?

- a. Very enthusiastic b. don't consider that as important c. my institution's syllabus is sufficient

8. Are you familiar with the term, Action Research?

- a. Yes b. No

If Yes, please define the term in your own words :

9. What is your view regarding research?

- a. It is very scientific and should be carried out by experts only
b. You need to have a lot of educational degrees in order to carry a research
c. It is something carried out by externals only

d. Even teachers can be researchers

How?

Please

specify:

.....
.....
.....

10. Do you want to express your opinions as a teacher to the world?

- a. Always b. sometimes c. never d. not sure

11. Does your school authority ask for your opinion while taking any decision (syllabus design, curriculum implementation etc.)?

- a. Always b. sometimes c. never

12. Do you think you can describe you classroom situation best, other than anyone else?

- a. Always b. sometimes c. never d. not sure

13. What is your opinion regarding teacher-researcher?

- a. Heard the term for the first time
- b. A teacher should be a teacher only; not a researcher at the same time
- c. Sounds interesting. I would like to become one, but don't know how
- d. Others; please specify

