Educational Action Research

Meta-action research with pre-service teachers: a case study

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Meta-action research with pre-service teachers: a case study

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This article analyses a case of action research collaboratively conducted by a university teacher and 50 students in a master's course in teacher training. Its originality resides in the socio-economic, academic, and conceptual nature of the obstacles encountered in the module; in the meta-theoretical orientation of the action research that was chosen to overcome them; and in how triangulation strategies were devised to compensate for the limitations imposed by the academic framing of the course. In spite of the brevity of the research cycle, both the structure of the course and teacher–student interaction improved rapidly and significantly, as did the latter's trust in the teacher. As a result, important advances in learning also ensued, and the pedagogical potential of this research method was thereby confirmed.

Keywords: meta-action research; self-reflection; collaborative action research; teacher education; pre-service teachers

1. Introduction: meta-action research

Meta-action research is a term chosen to refer throughout this article to a course of action devised to strengthen what is generally considered to be the most positive effect of action research (AR): its reflexive dimension – that is, the possibility of expanding and improving the understanding of one's practice through collective dialogue, reflection, and action (Burns 2010). Meta-action research is not a concept, however, but is a term deemed suitable to describe a specific variant of AR that was put forward within a concrete educational setting, and in order to respond to very precise difficulties, the overcoming of which called for further self-awareness on the part of all its participants. This is not to say that no general contribution to the field of educational AR can derive from this term or from the precise situation in which it was constructed. As the reader will come to realize, not only are the obstacles that were therein encountered likely to obstruct many other settings, but the conclusions drawn from this case study insist largely on the convenience of strengthening reflexivity as a key component in *any* educational endeavour, as the present revival of AR has thoroughly shown (Brenan 2013; Kitchen and Stevens 2008; McNiff and Whitehead 2011).

To characterize the present study more fully, two recent articles may be mentioned, since all three testify to the *pedagogical* benefits of actualizing reflexivity in the classroom through AR. The first article is that of Kur, De Porres, and Westrup (2008). It describes a practice conducted not long ago in the University of

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Monterrey (México) in which the teaching of AR to a group of graduate students revealed a phenomenon repeatedly encountered in much of the AR literature (Brenan 2013; Kemmins and McTaggart 1988, 1; Kitchen and Stevens 2008): namely, that a 'high level of personal growth often accompanies AR, and that such growth, as well as learning the "mechanics" of AR, is significantly enhanced when faculty become deeply engaged with students during the entire learning experience' (Kur, De Porres, and Westrup 2008, 327). These features are also borne out by the present case study. The second article worth mentioning (Sowa 2009) shares even more significant similarities with this one: the goal was also to teach AR to pre-service teachers who were pursuing an MEd in the professional area of English-language education. Important differences, however, distinguish the two studies, especially concerning the number of students that took part in each master's course (50 in my case, eight in Sowa's), and also the specific context of English-language education (English as a foreign language, in this case; English as a second language, in Sowa's).

To characterize further the present report of AR, its *participatory* dimension must also be underlined (Levin and Rock 2003; McIntyre et al. 2007; Mitchell, Reilly, and Logue 2009). Against the negative trend emphasized by Van Sluys (2010, 141), my students and I were actually both the subjects and the objects of our research; both researchers and researched subjects. As in Sowa (2009, 1027), AR also formed part of the syllabus of the module, one of the goals of which was to teach AR. As stated in the academic guide, the subject was mainly devoted to, 'familiarizing pre-service teachers with different innovation practices in education, i.e. with its models, areas, and the immediate connection that exists between educational innovation and research' (University of València 2012, 1).

To distinguish the overall purpose and methodology of this case study from those mentioned above, the specific obstacles encountered in the development of the course must be introduced and analysed. The obvious reason why these problems should determine the profile of the present AR is that it pertains to the very nature of this form of inquiry to respond to specific difficulties found in the circumstances of the social action (Kemmins 1988, 45), in this case, a master's module. The originality of this case study resides in the fact that we utilized AR in order to analyse and rectify the specific pedagogical problems that the pre-service teachers and I had stumbled upon. Ironically, this meant that AR was carried out in an academic setting that, among other educational goals, pursued the teaching and learning of AR. This is the circular logic that the term meta-AR attempts to capture – one which I believe also characterized the experience documented in Kitchen and Stevens (2008), although theirs was not devised as a specific response to teaching problems, but rather as a pre-designed teaching strategy. Thus, the Greek prefix 'meta-' conveys the general sense of an inquiry that is directed at the fundamental tenets of the method which inspires the inquiry itself – the theory of AR, in this case. The general research question which guided this experience, and which will drive this article forward, may be formulated in the following way: Can pedagogical benefits be expected to result from applying a meta-theoretical orientation to AR? In fact, this question may be broken down into two:

- Can the difficulties experienced by a group of pre-service teachers in understanding the procedural principles of AR be treated as the object of analysis of a specific AR project, run by the pre-teachers themselves?

- If so, will the pre-teachers eventually come to understand those procedural principles as a pedagogical side-effect of the AR analytical process?

2. The context of the action research

According to Kemmis, the significance of a practice such as AR:

> can only be established in context; only under the 'compulsion' to act in a real histori-cal situation can a commitment have force to the practitioner, on the one hand, and def-inite historical consequences for actors and the situation, on the other. (1988, 45)

In Banegas' words, 'participating teachers [in an AR] could improve their own prac-tices and contribute to the larger educational system in which they operate' (2011, 418). The situation in which this AR was implemented may be dissected into three different levels – socio-economic, academic, and conceptual – each of which included particular characteristics that, as the reader will see in later sections, posed specific difficulties to the course's academic goal. Each of them also incorporated, however, a potential degree of emancipation; concealed historical possibilities to be fulfilled by the actors taking part in this AR.

2.1. Academic level

Regarding the academic context of the course, the module was named 'An Introduc-tion to Teaching Innovation and Educational Research'. It developed during the first semester of the 2012/13 academic year and formed part of the curriculum of the master's degree that, for only the last couple of years, all future high school teachers in Spain must obtain after their four-year university degree. This master's programme was and still is offered by the University of Valencia, which is a state institution. Ninety per cent of the students who registered for my course were Eng-lish-language graduates, and the course was taught in English throughout. These stu-dents had no previous acquaintance with educational research or teaching methodology, two areas of knowledge that were not covered during their degree. My subject was intended to compensate partly for this lack, but the truth is that both the number of students in the module (50 students) and the number of lessons ascribed to it (15 lessons) imposed severe restrictions on the contents and the meth-odology that I, as instructor, could apply to the course. The approach originally assigned – and inconveniently so – to the satisfaction of the content goals was mainly theoretical, so the subject lacked a practical dimension: initially, students would have to learn about the advantages of educational research and innovation as they became acquainted with the history of AR by reading actual reports that put forward this mode of inquiry. This theoretical orientation, as we shall see, led to a significant amount of student disaffection. Thus, when I finally decided on the con-venience of applying meta-AR to this module, I did so in the belief that it would at least provide the students with the chance of learning about the methods of AR in a practical way.

2.2. Sociological level

From the post-Lewin generation of action researchers onwards, accounts of this edu-cational form of inquiry have always been explicitly tied to the historical and social

dimensions that form the background of the situation inspected. 'Educational action research is not only practical but emancipatory', suggested Elliott (1988, 81) more than 25 years ago. Likewise, McNiff and Whitehead (2011) listed recently different social purposes of AR, and included among them the ability to encourage the 'individuals to think for themselves and to hold themselves accountable for their educational influence', something that, according to them, 'can act as the grounds for the creation of good societies' (2011, 39). This article will not explore the potential of AR to transform and compensate for the dominant socio-economic injustices in society, nor will it try to identify its specific political impact (Boog 2003; Kinsler 2010; Van Sluys 2010). I am, however, concerned with showing how the development of this AR project interacted with the socio-historical context, with the reality pressing beyond the classroom walls. Since some of the original problems we attempted to solve through AR were tied to Spain's sociological situation, the possibility of improving them implied raising the students' awareness about this situation.

Let me remind the reader that Spain has been undergoing a rampant capitalist crisis since late 2008. Austerity has hit hard on the state budget, which, among other consequences, has led to persistent cuts in public services, and these have drastically minimized job opportunities in education. This is especially true for the generation of pre-service teachers that took part in this master's programme: their ages ranged mostly (70%) from 22 to 25 years and, according to the European Union commissioner for employment, Laszlo Andor, 'the jobless rate for those under 25 [in Spain] climbed from 55.8% in October to 56.5% percent in November 2012' (El País 2013). In my own class, only 20% of the students were employed when the course started, out of whom less than one-half worked for more than 15 hours a week. Furthermore, university fees have doubled in the past five years, making academic progress harder, even as the social benefits of higher education are daily becoming harder to ascertain.

Even more interesting for this research, however, was to trace how this economic scenario brought forth a sociological effect that, in my opinion, impacted on this group of students as a problematic, albeit in the last instance positive and enabling, force. It so happens that the tide of justified indignation that has swept across the country, demanding the maintenance of the welfare state, has stirred an activist and critical stand in the younger generations, as a result of which university students are – among other things – no longer afraid to express their discomfort within and outside university walls. As I write this, students' unions have launched a general education strike that has obtained major support among teachers and students alike (Silió and Aunión 2013). In accordance with this social inertia, students now seem determined to hold the teachers (and the system in general) more and more accountable. Whatever negative consequences this dissenting attitude may occasionally bring – for nobody is free from making unreasonable demands, not even students – my impression is that they will be outweighed by the positive ones. It is normally the case that behind a critical, activist stand on the students' part there lies a potential desire to participate and get more involved; hence the need for every university teacher to know how to transform students' occasional – sometimes unjust – complaints into a responsible and responsive form of participation. A collateral conclusion which stems from this case study is that participatory AR may just be the ideal way to do so, especially befitting a strategy to launch institutional changes in the present times of social turbulence and discontent (Somekh and Zeichner 2009).

2.3. *Conceptual level*

The first block in the module was originally conceived as a review of John Elliott's earlier work on AR, a selection of whose articles I gathered in a class dossier. Apart from his insistence that scientific rationality should be applied to education – especially in relation to teacher accountability – the *procedural* ideas of Elliott's project (1991, 49–50) were also underlined during the course. According to him, not only should these principles provide the pedagogical guidance to all research and innovation carried out in the classroom through AR, but they really offered the conditions necessary for any real, long-lasting learning to be possible. In the second block of the course, this educational philosophy was contrasted with one which (still prevalent, to a large degree, in foreign language education) places much emphasis on standardized content goals and, as a matter of fact, on the assessment procedures designed to evaluate them (Cummins, Brown, and Sayers 2007, 55–58). The main question students had to ask themselves in this block was: How does this type of examination short-circuit educational goals? Actually, *standardized testing* is normally implemented with a complete disregard for students' diverse socio-cultural realities and for those pedagogic approaches that do take the latter into account.

Finally, in the third block, the module focused on those English teaching approaches that, like Pauline Gibbons' and Jim Cummins', were able to apply these procedural or socio-constructivist pedagogies to the arena of language education. The pre-service teachers would use the latter approaches as adequate models to derive sound strategies for the specific Spanish educational context, where English is the most widely taught foreign language.

In designing the module, I had attempted to remain consistent with the procedural pedagogy it introduced. As evidence of the pedagogic coherence that existed between the contents and the methodology of the subject, let me end this section by reproducing some fragments from the general presentation of the module – an 11-page document I wrote and handed students on the first day of the course. The section devoted to the Objectives stated that:

> a learning process which does not imply a change in the student does not bring any practical effect whatsoever (at least in the long run), since its products tend to be immediately forgotten once the examination is over.

> By this kind of educational *change*, I understand a process whereby students gain self-awareness of having come to see things differently from how they envisioned them before the commencement of the course. In this module, I also look forward for changes occurring in the way you see the matter that concerns us: educational research, and how the latter can lead to innovation in our teaching practice. The change I am interested in, however, is one which you should be able to explain and justify in your own words, and analyze through open discussion with your peers. While many new things can be learned from this module, I will consider my own teaching worthwhile only to the extent that it facilitates a change of this sort. (Villacañas de Castro 2012, 4)

Likewise, the section that dealt with evaluation and assessment attempted to translate the theoretical underpinnings of Elliott's pedagogy, this time by stating that my assessment, despite including a final examination, would also judge whether or not students had made an active, committed, and beneficial use of all the resources at their disposal (readings, lectures, peer interventions, etc.) to build their own representation of teaching, innovation and research on more solid grounds (Villacañas de

Castro 2012, 9). Finally, the document encouraged the same meta-theoretical orientation (2012, 4) that our AR would finally bring into full swing the moment I started to delegate research tasks to students. It already supported the students' ongoing reflection on the progress of the course and their active involvement, but it would take the whole AR to attain this goal completely.

3. Methodology

3.1. *Getting the action research started*

The course started on 23 October 2012 but, in complete contrast with my desires and expectations, a month (i.e. eight lessons) later, it was already obvious to me that the group was encountering important obstacles which prevented it from attaining the content goals, and that in addition those obstacles were resilient and would not just wither away. At that time, the students were still immersed in the first block of the module, one in which Elliott's project of a 'teacher as researcher' and 'curriculum development' was explained in the context of a procedural pedagogy. If truth be told, the group was finding these ideas extremely foreign to their learning experience and, thus, very hard to understand. A group presentation was originally scheduled for the day the AR started. Five students would present a summary of the key ideas found in three articles by John Elliott, among which was the one text that would guide us along our meta-AR: 'A practical guide to action research' (Elliott 1991, 69–89). Just before the presentation started, however, a couple of students raised their hands to let me know that they wanted to discuss some problems which, in their opinion, obstructed the group's progress. On the spur of the moment, I decided we should first listen to the presentation their peers had prepared and then, during the last part of the session, talk this matter over together. They accepted this offer and the scheduled presentation began.

During the first part of that lesson, the leading group of pre-service teachers performed just like the previous groups had done, and received, in response, the same lack of interest and participation we had already grown familiar with. Passivity prevailed. Halfway through the class, however, it dawned on me that this session might afford the best occasion to actually start developing an AR. Having heard the students express their desire to reflect on the course, it was evident that they were longing to share their experience. In addition, the presentation included a full outline of the different steps an investigation of this sort consisted of. Determined as I was to actualize this thought, during the short break that came halfway through the lesson I suggested to the small group of leading students that, once they had listed and explained each of the activities found in AR, they might proceed to ask the rest of the class whether they found it convenient to put into practice each of these steps (albeit in a simplified form) by turning our module into the object of an AR project. I added that, by proceeding thus, we would be able to investigate the problems that had arisen during the course in a rigorous and systematic way, and hence make constructive use of their doubts, criticisms and complaints. Also, I mentioned that this would bestow a practical introduction to AR in a real problematic context.

Although a bit insecure – even stunned – at first, the class reacted positively to my reasons and agreed to the proposal. This was the first and most important step towards their trusting my desire to help them – my 'sincere emancipatory intention' (Boog 2003, 434), to say it in more technical terms. The remaining time of this

lesson was devoted to organizing a new schedule that should allow us to distribute the different AR activities in a balanced way. We decided to divide the AR into two phases, the first of which would occupy the next three lessons, during which period we would progress through activities one to four in Elliott's outline, as shown below. The fifth activity, consisting of the actual implementation of a series of the action steps, would cover the remaining seven lessons of the course, a time during which we would share data collection responsibilities and monitor the progress in ways that would allow us to evaluate it in the final lesson of the course (17 January). Apart from this AR schedule, key decisions were made during this lesson on 20 November concerning the need to satisfy basic triangulation requirements when data were gathered and analysed. Without these resolutions the AR would not have been possible, or only at the expense of damaging the *validity* factor of the investigation – what Wallace (2008, 43) calls 'the reliability of the students' testimony of the class situation' – and of committing severe *ethical* blunders (Elliott 1991, 75). Basically, it was agreed that the students who delivered that day's presentation would mediate between myself and the rest of the group during the entire AR. This meant that, for each of the activities included in Elliott's (1991, 82–83) outline, these students would act as external observers. First, they would interview their peers – they did so in the breaks between the classes – and note down their ideas and impressions concerning what they believed was going wrong with the course. In front of their companions, the pupils would speak their minds freely, while they kept their identity secret from the teacher. The information thus obtained would provide us with an ideal starting point for the discussions we would then hold inside the classroom, through teacher–student and student–student dialogues. In these conversations, the conflicting views that had surfaced during the interviews would be closely examined and contrasted with the teacher's perspective, in order to meet the terms of triangulation. Finally, it was also decided that the small group of external observers would attempt to negotiate between the diverse perspectives that arose and (if possible) offer a synthesis of the differing points of view, by suggesting transactive formulations that could gain general consent.

All the activities included in this AR followed these three steps: data obtained from the interviews were exposed to open discussion in the classroom for the larger group to reach general agreements. Apart from determining this course of action, in this session we also deemed it necessary to introduce some modifications into Elliott's (1991) model. Since we were acting in the context of a three-month course, our AR would only include one cycle of inquiry, and two steps in Elliott's outline were entirely dispensed of: hypotheses testing and the revised statement of the general idea, which follows the former (Elliott 1991, 73). Our justification for this allowance was that the teacher's and the students' viewpoints were considered from the start, and there was already a total consensus on the accuracy of the general ideas we came up with. We considered it unnecessary to do any further tests before designing the action steps.

The reader will encounter next my account of the progress and outcomes of this meta-AR. I wrote this report once the experience was over and included in it much of the data gathered by the external observers, plus the ideas resulting from the group conversations and the observations which I wrote down in my lesson journal while the AR developed. With the purpose of sharing this experience with a wider audience, I have organized the information around the research question presented in the Introduction of this article; that is, around the pedagogical benefits that

resulted from applying a meta-theoretical orientation to AR. Some attention has also been devoted, however, to evaluating the success of the strategies that we put forward for this investigation to comply with triangulation.

A previous, yet similar, version of the following sections was read to and approved by the students of the course, to whom I now wish to express my gratitude for their sympathetic participation in this experience. In addition to the evidence obtained through the three data streams I have already mentioned – data provided by the external observers, group conversations, and my lesson journal – I have taken into account the final essays the students handed to me on 22 March 2013. I have frequently quoted them, although only after changing the authors' real names. Since the essays were not anonymous and a large part of the grades the students received in the module depended on their content, they cannot be treated as a fully reliable piece of evidence, but rather as indicative of the general changes that were set off by the AR. The fact remains that at least one-third of the students made reference to the meta-AR they had conducted in class, and included key observations on its development. Furthermore, they were not required to reflect about this AR in their essays, so the fact that some of them did may bear witness to a genuine interest raised by this experience. Because of this, I have decided to take them into account and treat them, in terms of Boog, as 'learner reports about the growth of the capacity for self-determination on which the research focussed' (2003, 434).

3.2.   First phase of reconnaissance (27 and 29 November 2012)

'Initially there were many misunderstandings between the teacher and us, since we did not know what he expected from us', wrote Antonio in his essay. 'I really think that the problem lay in the communication between the teacher and the students', insisted Carmen, 'since students did not understand the global idea of the subject'. In line with the previous observations, Anna also mentioned that 'when the subject started we had some problems in understanding the objectives of the course, the way we were going to be evaluated, and how we had to carry out our presentations'. As these testimonies prove, the course did not progress along the path I imagined. Up to the lesson on 20 November 2012, my instructions had been that students should work on the texts by themselves, in groups of four to six, and expect their doubts to be solved in the class discussions that should follow their presentations. During the first two lessons of the course I had provided a general outline of the main trends found in our programme, and considered that this explanation would suffice as a preparation for the contents presented by the reading assignments. And in case it did not, I had assured the students that the course was aimed at fostering discussion instead of regular instruction (Elliott 1991, 16), as stated by the texts themselves; and thus incomplete conceptual understanding on their part should be no impediment for them to explain, through their group presentations, what they had actually understood and to focus on what they had found interesting.

While the students had listened to me and read the document stating the general aims and methodology followed by the course, together with the set of instructions that (in accordance with them) should characterize their work, they seemed incapable of putting this understanding into practice. Their presentations did not use the prescribed format that I had explained, one which encouraged a participatory, interactive and socio-constructivist approach that was consonant with Elliott's procedural principles and his own rendition of AR. Those students delivering the presentations

barely discussed the contents with the teacher beforehand; during their performance they relied too much on *PowerPoint* presentations and, accordingly, did not interact much with the rest of the group. This occurred despite the fact the texts themselves placed emphasis on the interactive variables implied in teaching and learning; that is, on the importance of this dimension as much as on the research strategies that might serve to evaluate and improve it. Likewise, contrary to what the module intended and made explicit, pre-service teachers did not refer to the experiential and individual dimension that might have accompanied their own reading of the texts; no self-connections (Van Sluys 2010, 147) were made. Rather, they tended to summarize the ideas without even distinguishing which were the most important ones from a theoretical point of view – possibly because they lacked sufficient acquaintance with the topic. Meanwhile, the audience remained equally passive and seemed unwilling to interact, even when the occasion arose. Students found the texts too difficult to follow, and those who were not in charge of the presentations did not tend to keep up with all the reading assignments, which they found too numerous. Most of the time, this led everyone to plain boredom. 'The teacher had high expectations, but his support was inadequate', summarized Beatriz. 'It sometimes made me lose interest in the subject.'

This situation often turned frustrating and even infuriating for them, especially when they felt that the students responsible for the presentation were suffering the negative effects derived from the audience's lack of understanding and participation: insecurity, anxiety, and nervousness. Yet even then, most students found themselves impotent and incapable of making comments or asking questions. Anxious as they were, they did not answer the questions their peers addressed to them, except with reluctance. To make things worse, this general state of affairs gave way to intense anxiety as soon as the idea of evaluation through an examination entered their minds. They suffered for not having understood the content and for not being able to imagine what the examination could possibly be about. Antonio voiced this concern in his essay, when he wrote that, 'too much work was required of them and they were afraid of the exam that the teacher had planned to set at the end of the course'.

What kind of cognitive blockage was preventing the students from attaining the theoretical and methodological concepts that underlay the course, and what might be causing it? The group concluded that various factors accounted for the contradiction diagnosed in their practice as well as for the consequences that derived from it. The main explanation was that they were neither theoretically nor practically acquainted with the tenets of procedural pedagogy, the influence of which arguably characterized this course in at least two ways: not only were its concepts a theoretical goal to be attained, but procedural pedagogy offered the methodological orientation that regulated the students' and the teacher's academic relationship. Students repeatedly made the point during the class discussions that this module was their first encounter with pedagogy and didactics. Thus, it was not hard for us to arrive at the conclusion that, whereas teachers normally depend on a clear and familiar methodological background to sustain their students as they become acquainted with unfamiliar content knowledge, this had not happened in our context, since both variables were new to them. The students explained that during their high school and higher education periods, their experience was for the most part limited to taking notes on what the teacher said. Besides, despite the fact that most of them had carried out presentations previously, these were normally teacher oriented, not student oriented; they were not

designed to generate discussion, but mainly to transmit information in a summarized fashion. This was the only pedagogical and interactional pattern these pre-service teachers knew and continued to implement. We derived the following thesis: when not only the theoretical contents but also the practical methodology of a module are foreign to students' educational experiences, intense disorientation ensues. If this disorientation is not handled properly, it can lead to anxiety, as in this case.

Regarding the theoretical difficulties found, it was agreed that – as Beatriz stated above – I had not offered enough support or mediation for the students to understand the ideas dealt with in the module, even though this scaffolding was clearly needed. This course of action aggravated the students' lack of confidence in me, impinged on other spheres, and ended up deteriorating many affective and cognitive variables. Paradoxically, this occurred despite the fact that I had placed a lot of emphasis on students' expressing any concerns or problems they might have found. Some students felt that my deeds had not matched my initial words.

A number of other causes undoubtedly supplemented these effects; for instance, the fact that most of the texts dealt with the practical, interactive dimension of teaching, but did so in a very theoretical manner, more related to the concepts of AR than to case studies where this form of inquiry had been conveniently applied. Also, the fact that students were not offered the opportunity to put their knowledge into practice during the module (the placement period started later in the year) intensified the lack of a practical dimension. Finally, it was suggested that the final examination as a means of evaluation was inconsistent with the one goal that I had identified as the most important in the module; that is, to encourage a change in the students' thoughts on the relationship between teaching and educational research. Although the examination was not the only way to evaluate student work – actually, the module's programme stated that it only stood for 25% of the grade – its very presence posed a pedagogical inconsistency. Among the negative consequences that derived from this pedagogical incoherence, possibly the most damaging was that it forced me into a variety of contradictions, such as overloading students with reading assignments (two or three per presentation) at the same time as I insisted that the purely theoretical or conceptual dimension of the module was less important than the experiential one; or likewise, interrupting students' presentations under the excuse that I wanted to emphasize the main concepts in the texts, at the expense of breaking thereby whatever interactional dynamics had already been created between the leading students and the larger group.

3.3.   *Designing the action steps (29 November 2012)*

Despite the variety of difficulties found, by the end of this first phase of reconnaissance, the students, the external observers and I concluded that there was no need to change the general pedagogical approach which characterized the contents and the methodology of the course, as long as specific methodological variables were tackled – especially those that seemed to obstruct, rather than facilitate, the attainment of the learning goals. Priority was given to the transformation of those features that, as revealed during the phase of reconnaissance, had resulted in the aforementioned vicious circle: students did not trust the teacher; this resulted in a proportional aggravation of the problems of communication between them, which in turn intensified the teacher's growing difficulty in putting an end to these distorted dynamics. Different action steps were put forward in matters such as workload, means of evaluation,

lesson structure, and also in the way the students and I interacted inside and outside the classroom (during office hours). The number of reading assignments was brought down to one per presentation, for example. Out of the three methods of evaluation, the examination was put aside, and more prominence was given to the essay, the evaluation of which ended up representing 56% of the final grade. Likewise, an adequate format for the presentations was also discussed and established, and it was agreed that they should occupy only the first half of the lesson (one hour) and should be based on the changes with which students had experimented concerning the ideas referred to in the text, not so much on the content of the text *per se*. Also, students' interests ought to provide the point of departure for developing the presentations. Part of the remaining lesson time would be devoted to solving, through discussion, the theoretical doubts that either the presentation or the text might have produced in the members in the audience, who during the last part of the lesson would be offered the opportunity to share their views with the rest of the class.

3.4. Monitoring the action steps (implemented throughout seven lessons: from 4 December 2012 to 15 January 2013)

Various monitoring techniques were adopted to guarantee that evidence concerning the implementation of the action steps was looked at from different angles. The three perspectives represented were my own – I became the external observer during the group presentations – the perspective of the students giving the presentations, who acted as teachers whose practice was evaluated by the audience, and finally the standpoint afforded by the rest of the students (audience). At least 20 minutes were allowed at the end of each lesson for the three parts to address the development of the session and the quality of the teaching practised by those in charge of the presentation. Finally, the last session in the course was entirely devoted to discussing its progress, especially the extent to which changes had been successfully implemented, whether the expected consequences had derived from them, and whether further action steps should have been developed.

4. Results

The results of the action steps were addressed through a second phase of reconnaissance that was collaboratively developed, following the usual procedure, during the lesson on 17 January 2013. This phase allowed us to determine that the module had undergone a radical change:

> We told the teacher about the difficulties we were facing and the teacher decided to apply AR to the course. We investigated why his teaching methodology, his proposals, and the presentations that some students had already carried out, had not worked out well. We came up with a number of changes which would allow us to learn and enjoy the contents in the course, and from that moment on classes started to be different and interesting. Our oral presentation was the first one to implement the changes proposed and we sounded confident about the content, the length was perfect, and in general it went pretty well. (Antonio)

Let me give a more detailed account of the transformation to which this student referred. Those in charge of the presentations not only felt secure and got their

message across clearly, as mentioned above, but they succeeded in emphasizing the contrast between their past ideas and their present educational conceptions, resulting from their reading. To the extent that these pre-service teachers made reference to, and tried to justify, their development, their presentations were not so dependent on the *PowerPoint* slideshows, since they did not need to resort to an external source of evidence to speak about this matter. The fear of leaving things out from their presentations was one of the main worries experienced at the beginning of the course, but gradually students understood that including every point was not the main purpose of their teaching, so they valued and selected the information according to their own interests, which tended to match those of the audience. As a result, both the presentations and the student–student discussion that came next flowed at a natural pace. In a relaxed manner, students took up each other's comments, and ideas were dropped or picked up once again by later interventions. Insofar as they allowed themselves to be guided by their own interests and concerns, the speakers showed a confidence that was paralleled by the audience's, whose participation also increased significantly. Not only did the presenting group take the rest of the students more into account (they formulated problems and allowed them time to reflect and speak about them) but the audience was also more willing to participate, possibly due to the more relaxed atmosphere and hence the certainty that the sessions no longer created anxiety in the leading group. Eduardo's essay explicitly reflected the 'improvement experienced in the class dynamics'.

Since student interest and motivation is also an important learning variable, let me highlight that the pre-service teachers found the texts in the second and third blocks of the module more compelling. I cannot emphasize this point enough. These readings dwelled on practical issues such as forms of examination (this topic raised extraordinary interest) and the application of procedural didactics to English as a foreign language (EFL) education. Yet even more important than this practical dimension was that these topics allowed students to discuss and reflect on their own lives and educational trajectory, and do so in a spirit which was very much in line with the reflexive quality that our meta-AR encouraged. Thanks to these readings (and to the discussions they led to), the self-reflective orientation promoted through AR methodology found an ideal kind of reinforcement in the form of topics that allowed this orientation to concretize itself. Coherence between the methodology and the content of the course was thus created. The presentations devoted to analysing opposing pedagogical approaches afforded the best occasion for students to criticize specific aspects of the education they had received in the past, and even to question the real purpose of a system that – especially regarding foreign language (FL) education – had placed so much emphasis on transmission (not discussion) of knowledge, memorization, and standardized tests. The group agreed that this orientation had been strengthened precisely at the expense of the procedural principles developed by Elliott (the same ones that guided this meta-AR) and of the intrinsic gratification that students could find in them. This argument led a pupil to ask herself whether contents were really important enough to focus assessment only on them:

> Contents are very important to continue studying and to attain a degree in the future, which may guarantee a good job. But the way contents are taught is also important because it shows students how to work cooperatively and how to reach knowledge by themselves […] Attitudinal principles are also essential since they teach students how to live in society, how to respect others, or how to behave in different situations. (Paula)

When our self-reflection finally encompassed Spain's sociological reality, the group expressed feelings of disappointment and regret, since society did not guarantee their incorporation into the labour market at the end of the master's studies. Their lack of expectations contradicted the promise which had been made to them in the past, by their teachers and elders, an assurance they had frequently drawn on (in the absence of an intrinsic motivation) in order to justify all the effort and time spent in educating themselves. Had this journey been gratifying and interesting *per se*, as Elliott wished it to be, possibly these pre-service teachers would have felt less disappointed. Yet it was not, so they looked back at those years as if much of their education had been meaningless. This feeling was partly directed at the master's degree itself, but at least they could voice their disappointment within it and analyse their feelings constructively. In addition to this, the effectiveness of standardized testing was further questioned on account of how it might lead to students becoming disillusioned and quitting their studies:

> If we have to focus our teaching only on providing students the content knowledge that tests require, then we will not have time to focus on procedural and attitudinal principles. […] Is it appropriate to promote standardized tests in a country where many students leave school before they finish compulsory education? Will students feel motivated to work hard and continue studying if they feel that education is only helpful to pass exams, but they don't pass them? (Paula)

Similar comments echoed throughout the discussions motivated by this meta-AR and by the presentations developed during the second part of the course. Through them, these pre-service teachers gained awareness of the sociological, academic, and conceptual dimensions that underlay the difficulties they had experienced in relation to the main ideas presented in the module. As a result, students gradually came to understand that I had designed this subject to provide them with research and innovation paradigms which allowed them to scrutinize, question, and transform the kind of education they had been exposed to during most of their lifetime. 'The ideas discussed in this course have changed the way I view the teaching profession', stated Daniela:

> not because I thought that the main objective of teaching was to help students accumulate information, but because I never thought that viewing teaching as a process of helping our students to be critical thinkers involved changing the role that the teacher had to play in the process.

I soon started to feel trusted as a teacher and conductor of the module on account of this growing understanding. 'When the problems we experienced were fixed thanks to our AR', Beatriz said:

> I changed my feelings and my thoughts about this subject. I realized that I could learn many things from it and from the teacher. […] The teacher's behavior taught me to realize that we have to take students into account and try to put ourselves in the students' shoes. It has made me change my thoughts about the way a teacher has to behave within the class. I started to put this idea into practice in my English academy with my own students. (Beatriz)

The concurrence of the different levels of improvement suggests that the more harmonious class dynamics that emerged, once the group, thanks to AR, started to

overcome the previous difficulties, bore witness to a gradual and parallel expansion of the students' awareness of three different levels of analysis: their own conceptual, academic, and sociological reality; procedural pedagogy; and educational research. In other words, as they became critical examiners of their own reality and experiences, students started to think and act in accordance with procedural principles, and also to become more confident researchers. This explanation of the facts confirmed my initial hypothesis, which suggested that a meta-theoretical, participative approach to this specific form of scientific inquiry would prove to be an adequate pedagogical strategy to counteract, through its multiple layers of analysis, the prevailing, negative inertias that stemmed from many different, but overlapping, levels in the setting of the course: socio-economic, institutional, academic, and conceptual. This endeavour had to be synonymous with a significant expansion of the participants' self-awareness on all these dimensions – all of which were tackled, to some extent, during the second part of the course – and meta-AR was devised as an effective means to do so. One finds a similar logic enacted in communicative situations where meta-linguistic factors – for instance, what two speakers actually understand by a word – must be addressed before any fruitful communication exchange can take place. In any case, by the end of the process students had already internalized the key procedures of educational research, hence the redundancy of teaching them again.

5.   Discussion

In this last section I intend to comment further on the consequences and implications that can be derived from this research and the pedagogical experience that proved my initial hypothesis right. Concerning the economic and institutional variables (the solution of which rested far beyond the scope of effects likely to ensue from this AR), my expectations were that our inquiry could at least prove useful for students to reflect on and discuss them in an organized and systematic way; thus, to help them become aware of how these sociological and academic tendencies determined the difficulties they were experiencing, and were hence impinging on the attitudes they were showing towards them. I believed that the mere chance of objectifying these determinants would offer some degree of emancipation from them. Evidence showed that when this AR ended, the students had become more conscious social individuals concerning two issues: the demands placed by society on education and the social effects that resulted from some problematic educational practices.

As regards the other set of variables tackled by this AR – academic and conceptual – the positive results obtained suggest that this method can be safely recommended in situations in which education teachers consider – as I did then – that they are losing the students' confidence and, hence, also a grip on the academic progress of their course. I hope that this exploration encourages other teachers to explore the pedagogic potential of using AR inside the classroom; not only to teach the principles of this specific form of inquiry but to give students the chance to reflect on the possible causes of their own lack of motivation and understanding, since this might be the best way to solve both problems and help them progress in their learning. In this case study, the meta-AR became a very effective measure to break the vicious circle both the students and I had fallen into. Important as the concrete action steps derived in the last phase of the AR were, I believe just as relevant as these methodological changes was the original decision to conduct a collaborative case of AR within the group, since this choice set the structural, pedagogic shift – with

emotional and conceptual implications – that enabled, later on, the other minor implementations to become effective, already in the background of an ongoing radical change. Clara suggested this possibility in her final essay, by posing the following question: 'Was it the reduction in workload [which resulted from one of the action steps], or was it that the students felt that the teacher actually listened to them that improved the atmosphere?' My opinion is that both factors were relevant and conducive to change. Other essays insisted on the same point:

> I have learned the importance of collaborating with the students when solving a problem. Asking students to produce solutions can bring great results since, by doing so, the teacher can take into account the different points of view on a problem, and different solutions can be proposed. This way of solving problems is a way of taking into account the needs of all the students and their different ways of learning. (María)

In times such as these, when students and young people in general are forced to make immense sacrifices – economic, among them – as a result of decisions in which they have had no say (the purpose of which remains unclear and the consequences uncertain), teachers should not underrate the pedagogic value of creating academic contexts where students are 'actually listened to' – that is, where their words bring practical effects that resemble their original intentions – and where the decisions they make (as long as they comply with rational principles) have immediate consequences that are clearly perceptible to them. If these conditions are granted, experiences such as the one I have described in this article will continue to, 'speak to PAR's [participatory action research's] potential for pursuing more socially just public education that is capable of repositioning who young people are and can be' (Van Sluys 2010, 140).

   Still on the subject of the conceptual problems pointed out, the results have also shown that the pre-service teachers were able to overcome a number of obstacles, especially *vis-à-vis* two topics: educational research and the principles of Elliott's procedural pedagogy. Notwithstanding the foreign character of these contents, it soon became obvious that the knowledge they were able to attain through this practical experience was meaningful and realistic, possibly more than the familiarity they could have gained of the same subject matter through a purely theoretical approximation, such as the syllabus devised. There is an obvious conceptual justification for this claim, and it has to do with the fact that – as any general account of AR will make clear (Kemmins 1988, 45; Wallace 2008, 15) – AR is problem oriented; that is, triggered by the need to solve concrete obstacles that hinder the teaching practice. For instance, Antonio mentioned, as a conclusion to this experience, that 'AR has a social dimension, because the investigation takes place in a real world situation and aims to solve real problems'. This, precisely, is what the class enquiry allowed students to do; they were able to unfold AR in a real problematic context, the consequences of which were pressuring them, and in the solution of which they therefore had a genuine interest. (Possibly, this accounted for the rapid beneficial results.) The context-embeddedness of this AR also allowed us to sidestep the intrusiveness factor of the investigation. Wallace (2008, 43) described this factor as the extent to which an AR project may 'disrupt […] normal professional action (therefore, intruding on the normal learning processes of one's students, for example)'. In our case, students were able to attain the main learning objectives in the syllabus despite the fact we had to leave out some reading assignments, as demanded by one of the action steps

adopted. As our AR unravelled many of the pedagogical knots in the module, the students' learning and cognitive ability soared and remained stable for the remaining sessions. I am ready to argue, accordingly, that this case of AR may shed more light onto the inherent pedagogical – not only research – advantages of this form of inquiry, in the tracks of Kur, De Porres, and Westrup (2008), and amplify the potential scope of its use.

As a last reflection, I believe that, in view of the negative factors that were affecting the course, implementing this collaborative form of AR was the only coherent thing to do and, furthermore, the only praxis that would enable me to set an example to this group of pre-service teachers that would be valuable for their future profession. As Eduardo explained in his essay: 'our teacher had two options: either to continue with his original design of the course or trust the students to solve these problems. He chose the second one. I think that this was an important moment in the course.' Indeed, if I expected these students to turn their accumulated dislike for the module into a constructive form of participation, I had to exert a parallel move in my own actions, and thus show them that a teacher could, 'turn the problems we face in our professional careers into positive rather than negative experiences' (Wallace 2008, 5). Surely, they will have endless opportunities to face this challenge when they become actual teachers, and I hope the acquaintance gained through this course with meta-AR will help them, especially during their first years (Mitchell, Reilly, and Logue 2009, 348). On this occasion, I tried to meet this challenge by analysing my own mistakes so that all of us could learn. Some of the individual essays the students handed in at the end of the course gave evidence of their learning from this educational experience, as well as an appreciation of a full understanding of my own decision. I find it convenient to present a last quote that summarizes the students' perspective:

> I really like and, at the same time, admire the way the teacher suggested we solve the misunderstanding. I have to admit that my first thoughts were that, as I had experienced during my previous educational experience, the teacher would ignore the situation and would continue with his planning. Nevertheless, he surprised me and asked students about their feelings during the lessons, their thoughts and their suggestions for improving the subject. After that, both teacher and students reached a conclusion and an agreement. So, on the one hand, we achieved a different design for the lessons, without such a workload but with interesting presentations on the texts, and, on the other hand, the relationship between the teacher and us, the students, improved a lot. Apart from that, reflecting on the positive aspects of this situation made us understand in a better and practical way one of the most important concepts in the course: Action Research. We solved the problem and reached an agreement by applying the 'Practical guide to action research', which is another text in a dossier, a bit complicated really, if we take into account the theoretical part; but which, thanks to the classroom situation, was easier to understand once we applied it to a real case. (Carmen)

In addition to this excerpt, allow me to end this case study with a humorous piece of evidence. At the end of the module, some students asked me whether I had actually planned the course to go wrong during the first sessions, up until we initiated the AR; whether I had operated wrongly on purpose, so that we could, later on, solve the situation together. As tempting as it was to respond in the affirmative, I had to confess to the contrary: I had not planned my own mistakes. But at least I could admit to wanting to learn from them.

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