

# Action research



## **ACTION RESEARCH, ITS BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION**

Action research in English Language Teaching is relatively a recent development which has been predominant in the literature in late 1980s and early 1990s. This essay explores the definitions, literature, benefits and challenges of action research as a method of teacher research in teacher education and development. It concludes by a critical assessment of the application of this research methodology and its sustainability in ELT.

Most ELT and especially ESL teachers are not exposed to AR, and may not even have an idea of how it works. Some extensive workshops and conferences where teachers are involved in practical demonstration of teaching planning and presentation may result into AR. A case in point is my personal experience in Alfaisal International Academy, Riyadh. The Academy in collaboration with British Council organised a Training Workshop on the Teaching of Composition between the months of September and October, 2007. All participating teachers were given papers with spaces, and were asked to freely express the problems they encounter in the teaching of composition. The teachers were asked to present their views in groups and discuss the problems which include the choice of topic, sentence and paragraph development, logical arrangement of ideas, styles and soon. At the end of the month-long training most of the participating teachers were able to improve upon their composition class.

The composition training was highly contextualized and localized in its attempt to investigate a situation in a specific school. We were able to convert tacit knowledge of student progress in composition writing to explicit

knowledge that could be communicated clearly to other constituents, such as board members and parents. The training confirmed our individual opinions, observations, and intuitions based on investigation of our inputs in the training. If our observations were taken into considerations, it would provide impetus for changes in practice and curriculum, based on information that was systematically collected and synthesized. This information would lead to the expansion of the language capacity of the Arab ESL students through a revised curriculum that involved storytelling, sentence-level production of the language, and the use of content-based discourse-level speaking tasks. The research was participatory and collaborative, involving all of the international community English as second language teachers in Alfaisal International Academy, Riyadh Saudi Arabia.

The problem is that such workshops are once-in-a-blue-moon events, wide apart and hardly sustainable. Moreover, we did not call it AR. However, it has all the features of action research.

## **6. CHALLENGES FACING ACTION RESEARCH AS A PRACTICE**

One of the major challenges of action research is to create awareness about its nature, scope, benefits in language teaching fields. Besides its inclusion as a certificatory requirement course, it should be encouraged through conferences and worldwide professional body where contacts can be maintained. Dissemination of individual and cooperative research findings would ensure the growth expansion of AR.

Despite AR impacts in the language teaching learning field, more interesting challenges and tensions are still prevalent. I share Burns' (2009) concerns

that there are differing understandings, of AR's purpose, scope, and practices in various contexts. We should really consider finding answers to questions concerning the future directions of AR in a number of broad areas, such as:

1. How should we envisage the primary purposes and outcomes of AR? Is it mainly a vehicle for practitioners' personal and professional development, or can it also have a role in the production of knowledge for the field?
2. Is AR simply an accessible version of research for teachers, or does it also denote an emerging paradigm with its own epistemology, methodologies and investigative practices? If so, how should standards of quality be addressed?
3. In what ways can AR open up opportunities for collective forms of knowledge about teaching and learning that are inclusive of academic and teaching communities? What kinds of relationships between teachers, teacher educators and researchers will need to emerge to facilitate collective knowledge production?
4. (How) can AR activity in language teaching also address broader issues of curriculum development, social justice and educational political action, thus contributing to the greater sustainability of effective educational practices?

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This research methodology, despite many contentions, criticism, arguments and counter arguments on the nature, scope and processes, is used in many fields of human endeavour such as social and health services, community

development and education, to address a long history of difficulties in successfully transferring research knowledge into changes in practice. It is a means of combining the generation of knowledge with professional development of practitioners through their participation as co-researchers. It also serves as a barrier breaker between policymakers and practitioners, giving them richer insights into practice and an active role in policy development as well as its implementation respectively. This is clear in a research where teachers are involved in the identification of problem, plan on how to solve the problem in a participatory, collaborative, cooperative way. The various inputs of individual teacher researcher and all participating teacher researchers are the data that would inform the policy of change. Thus when teachers are part of the planning of policy and designing curriculum, its implementation and improvement would be better and easier.

The essay has been able to critically explore action research, teacher research, meaning, arguments and processes as a research 'methodology'. Some suggestions have been proffered to a more rigorous method of research in teacher action research in the language teaching field.

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