Action Research in Language Teaching[1]

Introduction

Action research generally involves inquiring into one's own practice through a process of self-monitoring that generally includes entering a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting on an issue or problem in order to improve practice. Wallace (1991: 56-7) maintains that action research 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'. As mentioned in Chapter 1, systematic reflection means that language teachers· collect data about their teaching so that they can make more informed decisions about their teaching; however, whereas reflective teaching can result in non-observable behavioural changes in the classroom such as increased levels of awareness of a teacher's assumptions, beliefs and practices, conducting an action research project usually results in some kind of transformation of the research into actual and observable actions. This chapter outlines and discusses how reflective language teaching can be facilitated through conducting action research.

What the research says

Within second language education, action research has usually been associated with the study of classroom actions rather than addressing social problems associated with language teaching. Bailey (2001: 490) maintains that action research for language teachers is 'an approach to collection and interpreting data which involves a clear, repeated cycle of procedures'. Action research is conducted by practising language teachers because they themselves are valuable sources of knowledge regarding their own classroom situations and as a result change can be implemented more credibly because practising teachers will find the results more credible and valid for their needs. However, action research is different from usual research conducted by academics, and while academic research is valuable in its own terms, it often has little practical application for practising teachers. As Sagor (1992: 3-4) has observed: 'The topics, problems, or issues pursued [in academic research] are significant, but not necessarily helpful to teachers on the front line'.

Examples of actual action research abound in the English language teaching literature in recent times and teachers who have carried out action research often report significant changes to their understanding of teaching. Gow, Kember and McKay (I 996) working in Hong Kong, for example, focused on encouraging independent (student) learning at the tertiary level, and reported improved student learning as a result of their action research project. Another interesting study conducted by Curtis (2001), who encouraged 20 Hong Kong teachers to carry out small-scale action research studies which focused on how they could increase and improve the quantity of spoken English used by their learners in their English lessons, also reported positive results from partaking in action research such as increased teacher

[1] Thomas S. C. Farrel (2007) “Action Research” in *Reflective Language Teaching: From Research to Practice*, (pages 94-106) Continuum.

awareness of classroom dynamics, and expectations of their learners. In addition, Curtis (2001: 75) reported that the teachers learned 'a great deal about themselves, their students and their teaching and learning environments through action research'. Stewart (2001: 79) carried out action research to explore how Japanese university students use questions in formal debates and concluded that action research for language teachers is not only a way to solve problems 'but it is found in the very act of entering into the cycle of investigation'. Stewart (2001: 87) maintains that action research 'forces teachers to think about what they are doing in the classroom in a systematic way through a lens focused on one particular area of their practice'. The literature on action research for language teachers suggests the following:

- It involves collecting information about classroom events (in the classroom), through observation or through collecting information in other ways, such as through interviews, questionnaires or recordings of lessons.
- It involves careful and systematic collecting of that information.
- The research involves some kind of follow-up action.
- This action involves some change in practice, and monitoring the effects of such change.
- The results are owned by teachers, rather than the research community.
- The results of the research can be reported at a staff meeting or through a written report.
- It seeks to build up a knowledge base about teaching based on practitioner's knowledge, rather than expand the knowledge base developed by academics and theoreticians outside of the school context.
- To develop research skills useful for classroom inquiry.
- To bring about changes in classroom teaching and learning.
- To develop a deeper understanding of teaching and learning processes.
- To empower teachers by giving them the tools which they can use to further impact changes within the profession in which they work.

Case study: correcting grammar

The following action research project was conducted in Singapore. By comparing and contrasting the teacher's beliefs about grammar correction together with their actual practices, the researchers wanted to see whether there was a discrepancy between beliefs and classroom practices while assessing grammar in student written work (Farrell and Lee, 2003). The two Chinese female teachers who had volunteered to participate in the action research project actually initiated the study. They had been interested in how they were correcting grammar and if they were in fact doing what they thought they were in their classes. So they were eager to participate in this action research project for their own professional development.

Both researchers first read up on the topic of grammar correction. The action research (AR) project utilized data-collection methods such as classroom observations, teacher interviews, student interviews and collection of writing samples of students' work. All the observations were tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed. The recorded responses from the teacher interviews were also transcribed to find out what teachers claimed to do in the area of grammar correction in compositions. The results of the observations indicated that both teachers had a tendency to correct every grammatical error in their students' written work. They also showed an alignment between their perceptions and actual assessing practices in terms of types of grammatical focus. That the two teachers corrected every grammatical error

was a bit of a concern because the literature on grammar correction questions the efficacy of attempting to identify all errors in students' compositions. We mentioned to the teachers that Ur (1996) has suggested selective correction because it may not be possible for students to learn from their errors thoroughly in oral or written work because they will not be able to cope with the sheer quantity of information. However, we also realized at this stage in the action research process that if the teachers are to implement changes in their beliefs about correcting all grammatical errors in their writing, it may take some time. Consequently, we suggested to the teachers that in future they could set aside class time to persuade the students of the effectiveness of selective error correction and the futility of correcting every grammatical error. They said they would introduce this into their writing classes.

From research to practice

When teachers want to conduct an action research project they enter into a cycle of investigation that includes the following steps:

1. *Identify an issue*
2. *Review literature on issue and ask questions to narrow focus of issue*
3. *Choose method of data collection*
4. *Collect, analyse and interpret information*
5. *Develop and implement and monitor action plan*

Identify an issue

According to Bailey (2001: 490) the action research cycle begins when 'the researcher decides to address a problem, investigate an issue, or pose and answer questions in his or her own context'. Selecting an issue is probably the most important and most difficult part of the action research cycle because it involves considering a number of practical considerations that must be kept in mind such as limiting yourself to one issue or problem, usually an issue that you are really interested in and that will have a positive impact on your class or on your teaching. Wallace (1998: 21) suggests that when selecting a topic and purpose for action research the following points should be considered:

1. *Purpose:* Why are you engaging in this action research?
2. *Topic:* What area are you going to investigate?
3. *Focus:* What is the precise question you are going to ask yourself within that area?
4. *Product* What is the likely outcome of the research, as you intend it?
5. *Mode:* How are you going to conduct the research?
6. *Timing.* How long have you got to do the research? Is there a deadline for its completion?
7. *Resources:* What are the resources, both human and material, that you can call upon to help you complete the research?

A large number of interesting general issues are available for language teachers wishing to reflect on their practice through action research including (but not limited to) the following:

- *Teaching the four skills* (issues relating to changes in the way aspects of reading, writing, listening or speaking are taught in your class).
- *Classroom dynamics* (issues related to the kinds of interaction which occur in the language classroom).

- *Learner language* (issues relating to the kind oflanguage that is generated by specific activities your students use when completing classroom discussions and the amount of language they produce during pair or group work).
- *Grouping arrangements* (issues relating to how different grouping arrangements such as pair, group or whole class, promote learner motivation, language use and cooperation).
- *Use of materials* (issues relating to different ways in which materials are used and how these affect the outcomes oflessons).
- *Grammar and vocabulary* (issues relating to the teaching of grammar and vocabulary and the effect of using different teaching and learning strategies) .
- *Assessment policies and techniques* (issues relating to the forms of assessment you currently use in your classes and their outcomes).

Review literature and ask questions

After deciding the focus of the topic of interest for action research, teachers can start reading some background literature on the topic. Although Burns (1999: 192) maintains that 'referring tQ the literature should be a matter of choice' and Wallace cautions that busy teachers may not realistically have time to read, reading about what others have discovered before can give teachers more ideas about how to conduct their own action research projects by following similar research methods or adapting the methods used for their own contexts. For example, in the case study outlined in this chapter the interview questions used to gather information were adapted from a review of the literature on error correction. Five fundamental questions about error correction were chosen in the case study interview:

1. Should learner errors be corrected?
2. If so, when should learner errors be corrected?
3. Which learner errors should be corrected?
4. How should learner errors be corrected?
5. Who should correct learner errors?

Also at this stage teachers can decide whether they want to explore the issue alone or with other teachers who are interested in the same issue. In this regard, Burns (1999) insists that teacher collaboration is a vital aspect of action research because of the sharing involved in every aspect of carrying out the research from the practical to the emotional support.

The teacher next plans and decides on a strategy to collect data now that the problem has been identified and even read up on. Burns (1995) maintains that in action research projects, the data collection methods most commonly used and most appealing to second language teachers draw on qualitative and ethnographic methods and techniques and these usually include some combination of the following: careful and systematic collection of information about classroom events through interviews, observation, field notes, questionnaires, recordings (audio and video) and transcriptions of lessons. Among other methods, Burns (1995: 8) suggests the following approaches to collecting classroom data:

- *Journals/diaries:* regular dated accounts of teaching/learning plans, activities and classroom occurrences, including personal philosophies, feelings, reactions, reflections, explanations.
- *Teaching logs:* more objective notes on teaching events, their objectives, participants, resources used, procedures, processes, outcomes (anticipated and unanticipated).
- *Document collection:* sets of documents relevant to the research context, e.g., course overviews, lesson plans, students' writings, classroom materials/texts, assessment

tasks/texts, student profiles, student records.

- *Observation:* closely watching and noting classroom events, happenings or interactions, either as a participant in the classroom (participant observer) or as an observer of another teacher's classroom (non-participant observation). Observation can be combined with field notes, recordings and logs or journals.
- *Field notes:* descriptions and accounts of observed events, including non-verbal information, physical settings, group structures, interactions between participants. Notes can be time-based (e.g., every 5 minutes) or unstructured according to the researchers purpose.
- *Recording:* audio or video recordings, providing objective records of what occurred, which can be re-examined. Photographs or slides can be included.
- *Transcription:* written representations of verbal recordings, using conventions for identifying speakers and indicating pauses, hesitation, overlaps and any necessary non-verbal information.

Of course, there are advantages and disadvantages to each of these forms of data collection and it is most important that the information collected is reliable in that the procedures that are used measure accurately what they claim to measure. One way to ensure this is to collect information from several different sources about the issue under investigation. For example, in the case study outlined in this chapter, the researchers decided to triangulate their data collection by using classroom observations that were recorded and transcribed, teacher interviews that were recorded and transcribed, a number of student interviews that were also recorded and transcribed and a collection of writing samples of students' work, and lesson plans (document collection in the above list) as well as the researcher's written-up log of not only classroom observations but all interactions during the action research project in order to get the best understanding of the issue under investigation. In the case study, the last stage in data collection involved collecting two pieces of graded compositions from each student that included the students' corrections. One of the compositions completed before the action research project started, and the other composition the most recently assigned when the action research began. The rationale for collecting a composition completed before the research began was to check whether there were any discrepancies between teachers' usual habits and their practices during the period of research. While collecting the writing samples after the action research began served as evidence for the teachers' actual correction practices. In addition, the student interviews were used to supplement data collected from the writing samples so that more detailed information could be elicited.

Collect, analyse and interpret information

Once the data has been collected, the teacher then analyses and reflects on it and makes a data-driven decision to take some action. Wallace (1998: 21) maintains that teachers can also think about changing or refocusing their original research question at this stage: 'As you proceed with your research, do you suppose that you will have to rethink your original question?' As a general guide the goals at this stage of action research are:

- To identify patterns in the data.
- To compare findings from different sources of data.
- To build an interpretation from the information collected.

The main purpose of this stage is to make meaning of data gathered in order to determine the value of the intervention and involves sorting through the data to discover important themes

relating to the issue under investigation. For example, in the case study reported in this chapter responses from the teachers' interviews were transcribed and analysed to find out what the teachers claimed to do in the area of grammar correction in compositions and their underlying rationale for their perceived actions. The teachers' claimed practices were then verified through an analysis of their correction techniques as observed in the collected writing samples (the analysis of the writing samples only focused on grammatical errors that the two teachers had spotted). Recorded tapes and field notes from classroom observations were also used to confirm (or deny) the teachers' claimed practices in giving grammatical feedback. If data from the analysis of teachers' correction techniques in the writing samples and the classroom observations supported the responses made in the teacher interviews, this was regarded as an alignment between beliefs and practice. On the other hand, if data from the analysis of teachers' correction techniques in the writing samples and the classroom observations contradicted the responses in the teacher interviews, this was considered as a discrepancy between beliefs and practice.

Develop, implement and monitor action plan

The final steps in the cycle of action research is reflection in terms of deciding on some type of action, monitoring the effects of that action and, if necessary, problem redefinition. Teachers ask themselves at this stage what it all means for them and the result of this reflection usually involves some change in teaching practice which is monitored. Eventually, the whole cycle can begin again as the teacher redefines the problem in light of the findings of the first cycle. For example, in the case study reported in this chapter, the findings revealed that both teachers corrected every grammatical error they could find in their students' compositions. They also showed an alignment between their beliefs and actual marking practices in terms of types of grammatical focus possibly because of their common dislike for selective marking. Although most students said they believed that they could benefit from grammatical feedback in their compositions, only 50 per cent of them wanted their teachers to correct every grammatical error in their writing. We relayed these findings to the teachers and also that research indicates that correction of every grammatical error does not positively contribute to students' improvement of grammatical accuracy in their composition and that more selective grammar correction on students' written compositions might be more beneficial for students for their language development. The teachers told the researchers that they would implement the suggested changes including using more selective correction of grammar in their students' writing and also explain to the students why they were going to make these changes by citing not only the findings of the action research but also the findings of the literature reviews.

The overall best and simplest way to decide if an issue you are considering qualifies as action research is to ask three questions about the proposed study and if the answer to all three is 'yes', then it fits under an action research umbrella, but if the answer to any is 'no', then action research may not be an appropriate approach:

1. *Is the focus on your teaching action?*
2. *Are you in a position to be able to change your future actions (teaching and otherwise) based on the results of your action research project?*
3. *Is improvement possible?*

Thus action research as it is outlined in this chapter can be not only enjoyable but also rewarding for teachers and it is viewed as a cycle of activities rather than a one-step response to a problem. It is a natural extension of a teacher's classroom activities because it can be conducted by teachers in their own classrooms. As Burns (1999: 183) maintains, action

research can help to 'build a community of practitioners aligned towards teacher research and a professional climate that is open to public scrutiny and constructive critique'.

Reflection

- What is your understanding of action research and have you ever conducted an action research project? Explain.
- Why do you think academic research generally has little impact on practising teachers? Do you think there is a gap between academic research findings and practice in the classroom? Why or why not?
- In what ways can conducting action research empower a second language teacher?
- In what ways can conducting action research develop a collaborative relationship with other teachers?
- Do you think the results of the action research project should be reported, e.g. at a staff meeting or through a written report to a journal? Explain.
- Wallace (1998) discusses how an interest in a topic such as *group work,* must be thought through to find a more specific focus for classroom investigation. Can you add any more to the list developed by Wallace?
    - how to set up groups
    - how to form groups
    - how to resolve personality clashes within groups
    - how to deal with the use of the mother tongue during group work
    - how to select materials for group work
    - how to assess the effectiveness of group work

Conclusion

Action research serves the needs of the reflective professional well because it combines the mastery of the professional knowledge a teacher has built up over the years with the wisdom of everyday practice. Although there is no one universally accepted set of processes that constitute conducting action research, it is generally agreed that it focuses on researching an issue of interest to the teacher and usually takes place inside the classroom to determine what is currently occurring. Action research involves the teacher systematically collecting information about this issue and then acting on the information to make improvements to the issue. In order to help teachers collect information related to their action research project, they can use such reflective tools such as teaching journals, classroom observations, narrative analysis and group discussions among other methods that are all covered in this book. Through a process, then, that includes planning, observing, analysing, acting and reviewing, language teachers can learn a great deal about the nature of classroom teaching and learning as well as acquire useful classroom investigation skills.

Chapter scenario

Joan is a native-English-speaking teacher from the USA and has just arrived in Korea to teach English in a university language institute. Before this she was teaching English for academic purposes (EAP) courses in a university institute in the USA. Her students came from various different cultures and were more than likely going to attend (or were attending) college. She has an MA in TESOL from an American university. When she arrived in Korea she started teaching oral proficiency courses (called conversation classes) in a language institute attached to a university. This was the first time she had taught students from the same cultural

background (Korean). She was given various classes from beginning level to advanced level. Joan was the type of teacher who continuously asked her students if they were following the lesson and if they could understand her. She continued this practice in her classes in Korea. So she was surprised one day when the director of the institute (a Korean professor) called her into his office after her first month of teaching to tell her that all her beginning students complained about her teaching methods and her speed of speaking in the class. They also complained that she was constantly drinking coffee during her classes. She was shocked because the students had never complained to her directly and they had always told her that she was a great teacher when she asked if they understood the lesson. Joan had always had her coffee cup with her in her classes in the USA and the students would come to her if they had any problems. Joan decided that she would conduct an action research project on this topic of culture difference and she started by reading more books on Korean culture. She noted the vast and subtle differences between the cultures of the USA and Korea in general terms and in terms of teaching in a university institute. Next Joan decided that she would have to adapt several new strategies to check if the students were following her lessons, and if she was acting in a culturally appropriate manner in her classes. She decided to carry out the following strategies and activities:

- Not to take a yes answer as evidence that the students were following her lessons.
- To build in quizzes into every lesson to check if the students really understood what she was teaching.
- To try to build up relationships with the students after class time.
- To find out how Korean teachers conduct their classes (by observing their classes).
- To hold several classes on topics related to cultures: Korea and the USA.
- To talk to more experienced native-English-speaking teachers in the institute and try to set up some peer coaching type collaborations.
- To team-teach some classes with native-English-speaking teachers and Korean teachers.
- To keep a teaching journal and note instances where there could have been a cross-cultural mix-up.
- To self-monitor her classes more carefully by recording some of her classes.

Joan enacted most of these activates over a two-month period and built up a wealth of information and knowledge about teaching EFL classes in Korea. After about three months, Joan became more comfortable teaching in this new culture and her students began to see what a concerned teacher she really was. Joan could have become a bitter EFL teacher and blame her students, the institute and the new country for her initial problems. Instead, being the professional that she is, she examined her situation and carried out her own action research analysis of the problem and, as a result, developed her understanding of different teaching circumstances.