ACTION RESEARCH FOR

THE IMPROVEMENT OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

There is a common assumption among novice researchers and language teachers that the aim behind Action Research (AR) is to do research for its own sake; as for the fulfillment of a degree requirement or for a talk during a scientific meeting or a conference. AR can, however, have another more rewarding dimension than that of being used for writing dissertations and arranging them in library shelves where very little profit is gained. Thus, AR may also be a simple set of ideas and techniques that can introduce teachers to the power of systematic reflection on their practice. There is no doubt that every teacher holds within him the power to face all the challenges of the teaching profession. The secret of success in the profession of teaching is to continually grow and learn. AR is a way for every teacher to continue to grow and learn by making use of his own experiences. The only theories involved are the ideas that he/she already uses to make sense of his/ her experience. AR literally starts where one is and will take him/her as far as he/she wants to go. Thus, in this paper the researcher tries to shed some light on the theory of AR and its importance for the improvement of language teaching and learning.

Keywords: Action Research, Reflection, Improvement, Language Teaching Practice.

INTRODUCTION:

All along my modest teaching experience and research concerns, I have constantly come across the concept AR that I had often taken for granted as far as what it means, how it is best achieved, what it is used for and how it can be most beneficial for teachers as well as for their learners. In fact, and thanks to a questionnaire that I have lately administered to a number of EFL colleague teachers, I have come to the conclusion that there was more than one teacher who misconceived the concept. In reality, this study is part of a wider one which is about quality education and that is taking place at the faculty of letters and foreign languages in the University of Tlemcen in Algeria, and in which EFL teachers and learners were chosen as sample population. The questionnaire administered to the informants for this wider study embodied forty-three (43) questions among which seven (7) were related to action research. The questionnaire was given to fifty-eight (58) teachers, but only thirty-nine filled and gave it back to the researcher. Indeed, and while analyzing the data I discovered that many teachers had more than a view about what AR is and what it is used for. One striking reality revealed by the questionnaire is that most of those who had done AR, recognize to have done it as part of their Magister dissertation or Doctorate thesis realization, and thus very little benefit is capitalized from the documents as they rest 'peacefully' in university library shelves with no one to care about and reflect upon what they come up with. Nevertheless, fortunately, the questionnaire reveals that there are some teachers who do AR to tackle issues with their learners so as to improve their classroom practices, and these teachers admit to have shared their experiences with colleagues belonging to the same institution, and also with others through article publishing and conference talks. Yet, part of the informants who said they had taken part in wider AR projects, do raise some problems such as the ones related to project financing and the meeting difficulties faced by members of the group working in different universities, and recognized the research to be a failure. So, as a response to these findings, this article will shed some light on the theoretical side of AR and the process that may be followed to better engage educators in doing it for the betterment of their classroom practices and learners' learning.

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

According to the data collected in this study, it appears that AR is something that many language teachers have heard about, but often have a hazy idea of what it actually is, what doing it involves, and what doing it is aimed for. One of the most direct definitions to action research was provided by John Elliot (1991:69) who sees it as '*the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it*'. This simple definition gives us a view about one of the most important reasons for doing action research, which lies in the will to better the quality of teaching and learning as well as the conditions under which teachers and learners react in learning institutions.

Whereas Watts (1985:118) defines AR as '*a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research*'. This is to say that AR mainly refers to a disciplined inquiry performed by the teacher with the goal that the research will bring some information and change in his/her future practices. This kind of research is handled in the context of the teacher's environment- that is, with the students and at the institution where the teacher works- on questions that deal with educational matters at hand.

AR requires one to take an approach that is reflective, critical, and systematic to explore one's own teaching contexts. The term critical here does not mean being negative and derogatory about the way one teaches, but taking a questioning position toward one's teaching in the classroom. This can be done by taking an area that could be done better, exposing it to questioning, and then proposing new ideas and other ways of doing. So, in AR, a teacher plays the role of an 'investigator' or 'explorer' of his personal teaching context, while at the same time being one of the participants in it. This view is also congruent with what Borg (1981: 313) comes out with by stating that '*Action research emphasizes the involvement of teachers in problems in their own classrooms and has as its primary goal the in-service training and development of the teacher rather than the acquisition of general knowledge in the field of education*'. Within all these definitions of AR four basic themes reveal themselves to the reader: Training and empowerment of participants; participation leading to collaboration; knowledge acquisition; and social change.

ACTION RESEARCH CHARACTERISTICS:

AR is not always equivalent to what comes to mind when we hear the word 'research'. AR is not learning about a topic that interests us in books. Nor it is a problem-solving in the sense of trying to find out what is wrong, but

rather a quest for knowledge about how to improve. It, thus, involves people towards improving their skills, techniques, and strategies. AR is not about learning why we do certain things, but rather how we can bring improvements on them. It is about how we can continually better our ways of instruction to impact our learners. This is what makes AR different from other types of research and here is what makes it unique:

1. AR is carried out by people who have a direct relationship with the social situation under research. In the case of a social classroom situation, teachers are the first responsible for what goes on there.

2. AR starts from practical questions that arise from the daily educational work (and not from those which might be 'in fashion' in some learned disciplines). Its aim is to improve both the practical situation and the knowledge about the participants.

3. AR is characterized by a continuing effort to closely interlink, relate action and reflection, to reflect upon one's doings in order to improve one's actions, and to reflect on action in order to develop one's knowledge (Altrichter, H, et al. 2000: 5-6).

TYPES OF ACTION RESEARCH:

Each AR kind is related to the participants involved in it. A plan of research may involve a single teacher studying an issue in his/her classroom, a group of teachers working on a shared problem, or a team of teachers and others concerned about a school-or district-wide issue.

Research handled by individual teachers usually focus on single classroom issues. Teachers may be looking for solutions to problems of classroom management, instructional strategies, use of audio-visual aids, or students learning. The problem is one that the teacher believes is tied to his/her learners and can only be searched within that individual restricted context. The research may then be such that the teacher collects data or may involve looking at student participation. One of the negative sides of individual research is that it may not be shared with others only if the teacher chooses to present findings at a faculty meeting, present it at a conference, or publish it somewhere.

Collaborative action research, however, may include at least two teachers or a large number of teachers who may work on a classroom or school issue. This issue may be about one classroom or a problem shared by many classrooms. Individuals outside the school, such as a university or community partners may support the teachers in their action research. School-wide research, on the other hand, deals with issues common to all. An example could be treating the problem of parents' lack of involvement in their children's activities, and attempting to find ways through which the school may reach and involve more parents in a more meaningful way.

A district wide research may choose to examine an issue common to a number of schools. It is far more complex than the previously cited ones and requires more human and material resources, but its effect is more rewarding as it benefits a wider range of individuals than a classroom or a single school. (Eileen, 2000:3-5)

PHASES OF ACTION RESEARCH:

AR is a cyclical process that goes through five interrelated steps. It begins with the finding of a starting point for development within one's practice and having the will to invest energy in pursuing it. Then, through conversation, interviews, and other tools of evidence collection, and through analysis of the information gained, the situation gets clearer enough. Following this clarification, action strategies are put into practice and after a planned time of application an evaluation phase is launched so as to spot what has changed and what has remained steady.

One should bear in mind that new action research strategies are not supposed to solve a problem immediately. Therefore, their effects and side-effects need to be monitored in order to learn from experience and further improve the action strategies. Thus, the research process enters a new stage of clarification of the situation which will lead to the development and putting into practice further action strategies.

Teachers-researchers finish their project by making their professional knowledge accessible to their colleagues belonging to the same institution and also to others, for example, by oral presentations during seminars, conferences or by written productions. By these means their findings and beliefs are opened up for additional reflection and critical discussions and thus an invitation to continuing the process of research for more improvement (Altrichter, et al. 2000).

Figure1. Action Research Cycle (Ferrance, 2000).

➢ **Identification of a problem Area**: Teachers usually possess infinity of questions both about their teaching and their learners' learning that they wish to investigate and have answers about. However, not all these questions are fit for an action research, this is why it is important to limit the question to one that is meaningful and doable in the confine of their daily work. The questions should usually be shaped along the following lines as proposed by Burns (1999, 55).

❖ Teachers have to avoid questions that they can do little about. For instance, dealing with a question that has to do with a whole syllabus changing within a school or a district, will not take the researcher far. Researchers had better limit their concerns to their very close surrounding so as to be able to carry on their research, develop their teaching strategies and improve their learners' learning.

❖ Teachers have to tailor their questions so as to fit within the available time they have. Trying to track students' progress across a year, for example, might take them beyond the bounds of the time and resources they have available.

❖ Teachers have to focus on one issue rather than attempting to handle multiple aspects at once. For example, trying to investigate how to teach grammar more effectively, how to promote critical thinking in learning grammar, how to choose grammar exercises, and how to implement grammar into a range of speaking and listening activities is likely to lead to 'AR burn-out' and gives mixed and unclear outcomes.

❖ Teachers have to choose areas of direct relevance and interest to them, their immediate teaching context, be it at school, college or university.

These are a few guidelines about how to shape a good and doable question that will limit false starts and frustrations, and other ones are available in the literature related to this area of study.

➢ **Gather Data**: One very sensible phase in the process of action research and in deciding what action needs to be taken is data collection. Multiple sources of data are used so as to better comprehend the scope of events in the classroom, school or department section. There are many tools of data collection and teachers should select the data that are most appropriate for the problem being searched, and use at least three sources of data for the basis of actions. Among others, the following tools can be of a great utility for data collection: journals, videotapes, surveys, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, portfolios, diaries, audio tapes…etc. In spite of the fact that these previously mentioned tools are very useful, one privileged action research tool for teachers is the diary. As stated in (Altrichter, et al.2000:11) '*The research diary is one of the most important research methods and is very commonly used by teachers doing research'.* The characteristics below make of it an appropriate instrument for AR.

❖ It is less complex than other research tools and is simpler to organize.

❖ It can contain data collected by other research methods such as taking down observations made during an unstructured classroom observation.

❖ It allows the researcher to observe and reflect on ongoing and previous experiences. (Holly, 1989: xi)

➢ **Data Interpretation**: Depending upon the question under study, teachers may wish to use classroom data, individual data, or subgroup data to analyze and identify major themes. There are some kinds of data that are quantifiable and might be analyzed without recurring to statistical software or techniques. The other type of qualitative data such as opinions, attitudes, or checklists, may be organized and analyzed in table form (Ferrance, 2000:12). Very important for teachers starting to do AR is that they must not be haunted by the idea of having to analyze data. In spite of being true, for teachers newly embarked in AR, that this part of the process can be very challenging, it is made much more manageable if one analyzes as he/she goes along. In fact, reflecting on the data in combination with doing the action is essential in AR (Burns, 1999:104).These ideas go in the same line of thought with Burnaford, G., Fischer, J., & Hobson, D. (2001p. 67) when they say, *"...ongoing reflection is satisfying and makes the research worthwhile; looking at a mountain of information at the end of a month of collecting data can be a hopeless process".*

➢ **Act on Evidence**: At this level, the teacher-researcher should use the information from the data collection and review of current literature to design a plan of action that will allow him make a change and to study that change. One should bear in mind that only one variable has to be altered, otherwise, it will be hard to determine which action is responsible for the outcome. While the new technique is being introduced, one should continue to document and collect data on performance. When teachers develop their practical strategies in AR, this does not only mean that it is putting the research results into practice, but it actually is itself part of the research process. So, during action strategies planning, the outcomes of analysis are formulated as an introductory practical theory. Thus, as teachers develop action strategies in practice, the outcomes of analysis are tested and the preliminary practical theory is also indirectly tested thanks to those action strategies which are planned in a careful way, and aspects of the theory put forward can be evaluated; hence, teachers can look out for ways to improve it, modify it or totally revise it.

Therefore, for teachers-researchers, it is not only a matter of developing theories about a situation, but is also a desire to change the situation, as a result of their new knowledge, to improve the working and learning conditions for themselves and their students. To make it worth investing time and energy in research, a teacher must go beyond generating knowledge and theories to making improvements in classroom practice.

➢ **Evaluate Results**: Reaching this level, the teacher –researcher assesses the effects of the intervention to check whether improvement has taken place. In case it has, the teacher should see if the data clearly provide the supporting evidence, otherwise, he has to look out for the suitable changes to the actions so as to elicit better results. In fact, the signs that show that an action strategy is successful is when it results in an improvement of the situation, without causing unintended negative side- effects which may affect the main positive effects. In addition to this, the improvement should not be 'a short term' phenomenon vanishing only after a short period of time. On the other hand, if the action is not successful, according to (Altricher, et al.2000),one should consider the following points:

  ❖ A problem in the way the action strategy was put into practice: the teacher may not have been sufficiently comfortable with the action strategy and may have carried it out in a diffident manner or in a different way from what had been planned.

  ❖ A problem in the conceptualization of the action strategy: for example, too little time might have been allowed for the action strategy to make an impact, or the teacher might have misjudged how much preparation the learners would need before the new approach was implemented.

  ❖ A problem in the analysis of the situation: teacher's own prejudices may have seemed more convincing than the data, so that he never engaged in a '*reflective conversation with the situation*'; or he may have failed to take alternative interpretations into account, or jumped to premature conclusions.

  ❖ A problem in the collection of data: important sources of data might have been overlooked.

  ❖ A problem in the problem definition: perhaps the problem investigated was not the 'real' problem, or alternatively the problem might have changed in the meantime.

➢ **Next steps**: Eventually, there comes a time when teachers –researchers reach a point where they have to bring the process to an end, draw out their conclusions and interpretations, and make statements about their research as a whole. This point involves thinking about the entire 'story' of the research and deciding where it will lead them next. An important point in this phase is letting other teachers know about what one came out with through this research as this will echo feedback that may lead to other insightful questions for a further elaboration of the research. Thus, these questions will be the starting point for a novel AR problem identification that will go through the same process of investigation described in the figure above.

CONCLUSION:

This article provides information about AR, what it means, what its four different kinds are, its characteristics, and the process through which it can be handled so as to give the desired results. This is to mention that AR contributes both in developing teachers and their classroom practices. When they consider the value of their work as they progress through the different phases and the time devoted to reflection and used to discuss strategies and methods, they realize better that the benefits go far beyond student achievement. Practitioners construct skills in analyzing their own teaching methods and start to adopt the techniques of AR in their professional life with more easiness and much satisfaction. To sum it up, one very ultimate way for success in the teaching profession is to continually grow and learn and AR is a way to pursue that growth and knowledge by making use of one's own daily experiences.

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