The Study of Practice through Collaborative Action Research

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Abstract

This paper attempts to encourage English teachers to study their everyday practice of teaching at school through doing collaborative action research. In this way they can find interesting findings and gradually develop theories of teaching in a more democratic, bottom-up fashion rather than the commonly forced top-down instructions. It discusses what it is and how it can be done in a smaller and more modest scale by any English teacher in her busy time without leaving her routine job of teaching her classes in view of developing her professional career. It closes with a few topics that may be done immediately apart from any other topics that many teachers have been interested in, hoping that at one stage a series of sharing workshops can be organized where teachers share their findings and take another cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting of the collaborative action research with other teachers in a wider area across the city or regency, province and eventually the country. Interesting findings can be published in our journal in a form of a research report or article. A few more significant credit points can be awarded for the teachers' faster academic promotion.

Keywords: action research, collaborative work, theory of teaching, academic promotion, daily classroom practice.

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Introduction

So far, research has been the most neglected area of academic activities in many schools and universities, especially in the field of language teaching and learning. Many teachers and lecturers pay more attention to their teaching activities rather than to the research side of the profession. There are many reasons for neglecting this side of the academic work of the profession.

The main reason is that many teachers and lecturers feel that they do not have enough skills and experience with this research. Many of them got bad experience and hard time when they did their thesis writing. They did not enjoy doing it, especially when they had impatient supervisors to get along with during that bad time at the end of their S1 program. Therefore, they just stop doing it as soon as they finish their theses and they never try to do it again.

Another reason is that they cannot afford to spend a little bit of their busy time to conduct research any more. They are supposed to teach above the normal teaching loads for a number of reasons, such as the limited number of teachers in many schools and universities, and the unfortunate low incomes of teachers. Some teachers are even exhausted at the end of the day because they have to teach in other schools as well for the same purpose, i.e. to make the two ends meet.

They also often think that research should be more experimental and quantitative in nature as in the natural sciences, rather than descriptive and qualitative for studies in educational setting and behavioral sciences.

The most important reason is probably that the school system does not provide enough budget to carry out this kind of applied research so only very few teachers are intrinsically interested in this academic venture to satisfy their inquisitive mind.

This paper attempts to encourage English teachers to study their everyday practice of teaching at school through doing collaborative action research. In this way they do not need to leave their classrooms, but they still can find interesting findings from their day-to-day practice, and gradually develop theories of teaching in a more democratic, bottom-up fashion rather than the commonly forced top-down instructions.

The Study of Practice

The study of practice (to borrow Kemmis and Wilkinson’s term, 1998: 24) is the process of analyzing and learning what teachers have been doing in their classes from time to time. Many teachers feel very happy at the end of the day when they are successful in making their students behave well and learn what they are supposed to learn. This joy can make
many teachers stay in their teaching profession for a long time. When they fail to control her classes and cannot make them learn as expected, they feel rather gloomy and try to find out what was wrong with their teaching. Some even cannot sleep well reflecting their failure that day. On the other hand, of course, there are some teachers who do not care at all. They just continue teaching in the same way regardless of the fact that many new ideas have been introduced and implemented around them. By the way, when we want to stay in our teaching profession, after teaching one class, it is always worthwhile to reflect over it for a while to see our success and failure, and then work out a simple plan to improve it at our earliest convenience. It is a real shame if we completely ignore the chance to share interesting experiences.

Action Research
This is the process of carrying out that simple plan and observing and reflecting the students’ learning process and making another plan for further improvements. There goes the next cycle of the action research. Nunan (1992: 229, cited in Saleh, 1997:3) defines action research as “a form of self-reflective inquiry carried out by practitioners, which aims at solving problems, improving practice, or enhancing understanding.”

Allwright (1991: 44, cited in Saleh, 1997: 4) describes seven common steps to do in action research: (1) to identify a problem, a shortcoming, or just an interest; (2) to collect preliminary information; (3) to plan an action; (4) to do the action; (5) to observe the effect of the action; (6) to reflect the result of the observation’ and (7) to revise the plan for further improvements.

Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998:22) simplify those steps in the spiral of self-reflective action research into three: (1) plan, (2) act and observe, and (3) reflect.

In the first step a plan is worked out by identifying a problem to solve or a practice to improve. A good plan starts with some relevant information about the background of the problem. If the problem is too big to solve, we need to narrow it down to make it more manageable within the time, financial and human resources constraints. One advantage of this type of research is that it starts from a real practice in the classroom which every teacher has experienced (Burns, 1999, cited in Markus, 2000: 93-94). After the plan has been relatively well developed, it is then carried out naturally in the normal schedule with more careful techniques of observing the process and result of the treatment. We need to note down as much as possible about everything we observe in this process. After we act this plan for a period of time, we will have collected enough notes which finally become our data for
reflection. In the last stage of reflecting these data, we may come to a conclusion whether our treatment has made some improvement or not. If it has, we need to ask a further question whether more improvement can still be made. If it has not, we need to find what factors might have affected this failure and which single one may need to be treated further. All of these reflecting questions and answers will lead to the next cycle of the spiral, that is, a new plan for another period of time. The research goes on trying to act this plan out.

Collaborative Action Research
Another interesting feature of this kind of research lies in its collaborative nature of the investigation. It can be done by a group of teachers teaching in a variety of different schools in a relatively wide area or region over a period of time. It usually starts from an individual creative and keen teacher in one school. She starts with her own interest of solving a particular problem that she has to face in her classes of English. Based on her personal experiences in trying a few techniques over a period of time (a few weeks, months, years), finally she found the best way to solve it. She wrote a simple paper about it and presented it in a local seminar or workshop. Some other teachers were interested in trying it out in their respective schools. At the end of carrying the first cycle of this action research, they agreed to share their own findings in another local seminar or workshop. As their findings were more challenging, more and more teachers were interested in it and they also wanted to try it in their schools. In this way, it spread over a wide area throughout the city or regency, the province and eventually over the whole country as it became a national issue and - to cut a long story short — it might end up with a tentative teaching or learning hypothesis or theory on that particular issue. Burns (1999, cited in Markus, 2000) states that when done more systematically and collaboratively over a wide area, this type of research can also provide good quality of research findings.

Advantages of collaborative action research
There are a few advantages of this kind of research. For one thing, it starts with a real practice in a normal classroom. It is not too ambitious to learn something from this small interest of a curious teacher who wants to study a bit more systematically about her own teaching techniques. She tries it out again and again. If it does not work, she reflects it over for possible changes. Through a simple analysis, she tries a more logical technique again and again until eventually she finds one technique which is working very well with her classes. Another advantage is that she does not need to leave her classes because she can work naturally with her own students as
scheduled. She and her students will not miss their classes at all. They can also follow the normal learning items in the designated syllabus as suggested in the national curriculum.

Another advantage is that she has known her subjects relatively very well and their natural and closed relationship can be expected to produce more reliable and valid data for further analysis.

A more important advantage is that it does not definitely need a big budget which is always the case with many other types of research. In some cases, it probably does not need any extra budget since it carries out the normal teaching and learning items using the already allocated school budget. A good school needs to allocate some funds to do research as important part of its whole program, and this money can be awarded to those teachers who are fully committed to their teaching profession.

The most important advantage for many teachers is that it can provide a lot of opportunities for them to develop their academic and social professional careers. They will be able to write more interesting papers to share with other teachers in seminars and workshops, and then probably publish them in journals, which will eventually promote them faster to their higher professional academic ranks.

A few topics worth trying
Apart from a few topics that you have been interested in, and/or other topics that may come up from our group discussion in this workshop, I would like to suggest a few general ones that may attract teachers’ interests in trying them out in their classes.

The first one is the use of the target language, i.e. English, as a medium of instruction in our English classes, especially when the school-based management has been fully adopted in our schools where more autonomy has been given, especially in the final examination policy. We may start using simple English right from the beginning stage of our English program, be it the primary school, junior high, or senior high school. Simple English is used for the whole class period covering (1) the language for social interactive communication exchanging greetings, small talks, and leave takings, etc., (2) the language for classroom management in controlling the students’ behavior and teaching procedures and (3) the language for transferring information of the teaching contents, or only one or two of those three areas of language use in class. It depends on a few factors such as the teachers’ oral proficiency, students’ motivation and mastery and school environment. We will see what problems we will face and what benefits we can get from it.
Another topic is the use of pair work or small group work in our English classes from time to time where more practice can be provided for each of our students. Our English classes tend to be very big consisting of over 40 students in one class. It seems impossible to teach a foreign language in such crowded classes. Theoretically, pair work or group work is a good class arrangement to promote language learning, but does it really work effectively in our English classes? Some teachers might have tried it, but we have never heard or read about it. Can we still improve it to be more efficient and effective and how? Very often we give up our effort as soon as we face the problems without trying to analyze them for possible solutions.

Several topics for collaborative action research can be tapped from the advancement of information technology in television and internet that many schools can provide for their students.

Why do not we bring some interesting programs from CNN to our classroom and see their effects on our students’ listening comprehension. There are also many activities using internet facilities that can be tried out in our classes.

Conclusion
An action research starts with a very small, practical and specific topic to be carried out individually in a teacher’s class. After it is tried out for a few times, it can be analyzed or reflected to see its effects and problems. It is then to be shared gradually with other teachers for further try-outs in a wider area over the city or regency, province and finally over the country until more conclusive statements or hypotheses can be made. Who knows eventually a theory of language teaching and learning can be derived from our classroom practice through a series of seminars and workshops like this where we can share our real day-to-day practice?
References


