

Action Research for English as Second Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT: The global context of English as medium of communication for academic and professional leverage has brought a spurt in English language teaching and learning across the world countries. English language teaching is a methodological process that is built on the premise that language is a complex system which involves rules and skills. Since the process involves both learners and teachers, both of them learn from and through each other. Teacher development and learner development are intertwined. Both interact with each other that any knowledge that the teachers acquire in the classrooms is the outcome of their exploring the beliefs, principles and theories and as subjects of the experiments the students also stand to gain. Interestingly the teacher and students become the participants of various researches carried out in English as Second or Foreign Language classrooms world over. This article wishes to exemplify the process of action researches done in the language classrooms for the benefit of teacher turned researchers. This article further shows a legitimate concern that an experienced faculty can show to a novice teacher who would like to carry out an action research in English as Second or Foreign Language classrooms.

Key Words: action research; methodological; complex system; participants; teacher turned researchers

Date of Submission: 20-11-2017

Date of acceptance: 09-12-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Language teaching awareness is what a teacher requires to make his or her teaching effective in terms of giving learners comprehensible input for a better learner output and motivating the learners for a positive approach towards learning. This in turn makes the learner conscious of his or her own self-efficacy for involvement in language learning. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs in his/her ability to perform a proposed task, as such it may be termed as a predictor of future performances applicable to teachers as well because they get motivated by their teaching outcome. Such classroom observations have resulted in exploratory and developmental approaches towards language teaching and students. This insight makes language teachers to do researches that rely mostly on the observations and experimental findings obtained in the language classrooms.

II. CLASSROOM RESEARCH

The language classrooms allow teachers to do researches of different kinds in different contexts. It is believed that the action researches and classroom researches are synonymous both in their process and outcome. They may be adjudged as the wash back sequence of globalization. These pedagogical exercises with teachers as facilitators and monitors depend more on the teachers' ability to observe and their invincible belief in remedial approaches towards deficient performances of the learners (Chandrasena&Pushkala2015). A classroom research investigates the process of teaching and learning as observed by the teacher; as such the research findings are exemplary for teachers, researchers and theorists. By their nature they impugn the existing practices in teaching and assessing, syllabus design, material development and teacher education in particular. Hence it may be said the classroom researches are teacher centric exploring the scope for understanding the classroom language learning with learners as stake holders. The beneficiaries of the classroom researches are as they were originally designed the trainee teachers and the teachers who want to explore their own teaching. Never the less, these classroom researches rely more on learners' cooperation to make learning interactive. Van Lier (1996) finds interaction is coproduction, because as participants in a conversation produce language for meaningful interaction. In a classroom research the teacher's ability to make the subjects work on a topic through a task which operates on a language with all its micro components creating an atmosphere for the learning to happen is invariably the target of assessment. As Allwright and Bailey (2004) suggest these classroom researches are naturalistic enquiry which just see what happens in the classroom setting, without allowing experimentation with participant groups by labelling them as experimental and controlled groups.

Though all researches cannot be experimental or exploratory, there are such kinds exist in language classrooms. These researches get the name from their approach and process. They help to construct knowledge in a particular field. Researches of exploratory approach are intended to gain awareness of teaching beliefs and practices. As such teachers get focused on improving their teaching. Experimental researches on the other hand involve intervention and a high degree of control over variables. But an action research involves intervention but a low degree of exerted control.

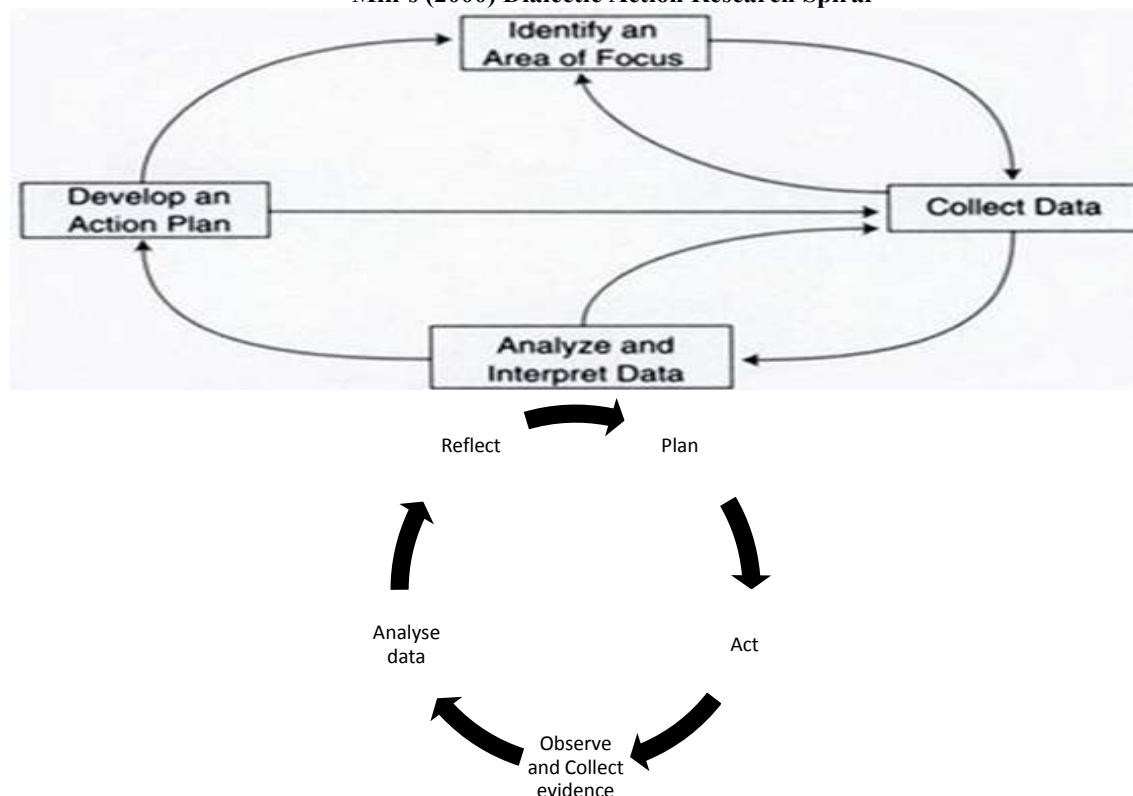
III. ACTION RESEARCH

The first step in a teaching process, is the collection of information about learners in order to diagnose the objective needs of the students (Richterich 1972) and it is more so with the action research. Action research is not exploratory in nature rather it is the process of posing the problem and identifying a solution which will give scope for exploring our teaching beliefs. It is “a cyclical process that follows a series of repeated steps. The cycle includes setting a goal, planning an action, to reach this goal, acting on this plan, observing the action, reflecting on the observation and setting the next goal” (Gebhard 1999).

Action research is systematic inquiry done by teachers (or other individuals in an educational setting) to gather information about, and subsequently improve, the ways their particular educational setting operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn (Mills, 2000). Though it can take many forms, action research is all about an action taken and systematically observing what follows.

Action research includes (1) posing problems and addressing concerns based on what goes on in our classrooms, (2) systematically working through the problems or concerns by creating and initiating a plan of action and (3) reflecting on the degree to which the plan works. As the term stands, it means reflection on the outcomes of one intervention will often lead to the identification of further potential interventions. Mills’ four-step process of research is called ‘Dialectic Action Research Spiral’. Its process falls into four steps.

Mill’s (2000) Dialectic Action Research Spiral



Richard’s (2003) A Cycle of Action Research

Often action research is a community effort, in other words, discussed with other teachers who offer their support and experience as Crookes (1993) demonstrates; action research can take us beyond the confines of teacher’s classroom (Gebhard and Operandy 1999). Action research can neither be said to be always exploratory because it finds a problem and tries to solve it. After identifying the problem, probably through a pilot study which is done with a set of questions (questionnaire) to illumine the teacher on the previous history

of her subjects (which has a negative impact on the learners' attitude and learning) and the present status of affairs, the teacher decides on a plan that could probably bring a change in her students.

At every stage of the process teacher reflects on the degree to which the plan works, may be with her own observation and the feedback from her wards. While doing so, depending on the action research focus, the teacher can observe the facial expressions and behaviours of her wards and elicit answers with her inquiry related questions. As Gebhard says the idea could be to consider ways to describe and analyse students' behaviours that can be used to better understand the classroom set up with the students and the different variables interacting among them which the action research intends to record as data.

The research methodology can include a pilot study and a diagnostic test as preliminary data instruments in an action research. A pilot study would shed light on the past and what is not evident for an in depth analysis but which have an impact on the present. According to Chandrasena and Pushkala (2015) a customised diagnostic test is 'a preponderant connective between a pilot study and an action research' because it can identify present language proficiency level of the students in terms of what they have learnt in the past and what they stand to learn in future (Ur, 1991).

The research methodology should include interviews, questionnaires and journal correspondence to find the students' views and opinions. It must also draft an approach, a methodology and a technique each of which is consistent with the other. The coordination among the trio should be perfect to attain the outcome of the research. The researcher should also be prepared for any eventuality in the course of action research because things could unfold in unexpected ways. Action research can be planned on anything relevant to the interest of the teacher or the students and hence it complements the normal professional activity of classroom teachers.

To sum up, action research not only brings a solution for the existing problem in the classroom or out of it, it definitely helps a teacher to find his or her own way among all those methods, theories and texts and hence it is part of professional development which provides a means for the teachers to be reflective and be aware of their teaching efficacy. For example, a teacher may find a certain class students lagging behind in oral communication and to improve their oral skills she may develop materials and create activities at different levels and then to observe how the students respond to them. This example informs us action research is based on problems and that it propagates what is appropriate for teaching and relevant for students' learning.

Classroom research and action research are the names assigned to the language researches on a broader spectrum. Yet, both of them may be either qualitative or quantitative or mixed in their methodology. Quantitative research is descriptive. Numerical data are gathered through tests, surveys, observations and interviews. The qualitative remarks are assessed by their frequency and recorded as percentile. The different variables are not manipulated but are measured as they occur. Categorising learners as subgroups, the groups may be compared on some measure. The values are subjected to correlation studies: two or more variables of a group may be correlated. Never the less, a quantitative research does not attempt to identify cause of differences or relationships, if they exist.

On the other hand, qualitative research is historical. Historical in the sense description of past events, problems, issues and facts as part of its construct, data gathered from written or oral descriptions of past events, procedures etc., -describes what happened previously in an attempt to reconstruct the past and to identify its effect on the present situation. Given to the knowledge of the researcher, he can make an in-depth analytical description of educational systems, processes, and phenomena within a specific context based on detailed observations and interviews. The research may be exploratory of a situation involving a number of students (group of students, a section of students in a college or university or school) or event so that the research becomes a case study. Further, since the action research is open-ended and done to benefit the teacher and the students, realigning the teacher's focus happen regularly.

IV. DATA COLLECTION IN AN ACTION RESEARCH

An action research can engage itself to collect data which by and large is determined by the nature of the problem the researcher has focused on. The data can be qualitative, quantitative or mixed method using the previous two. In action research, triangulation is achieved by collecting different types of data, using different data sources, collecting data at different times. An example of data collection techniques employed for the purpose of the study and research questions are enumerated with the following example. If a researcher is doing research using role plays – role plays are treated as interventions, the data collection technique may be as following: Pre-test (before the intervention) and Post- test (after the intervention) which are Quantitative Data. Questionnaires I (before the intervention) and Questionnaires II (after the intervention), Observation, Interviews and Discussions which are Qualitative Data.

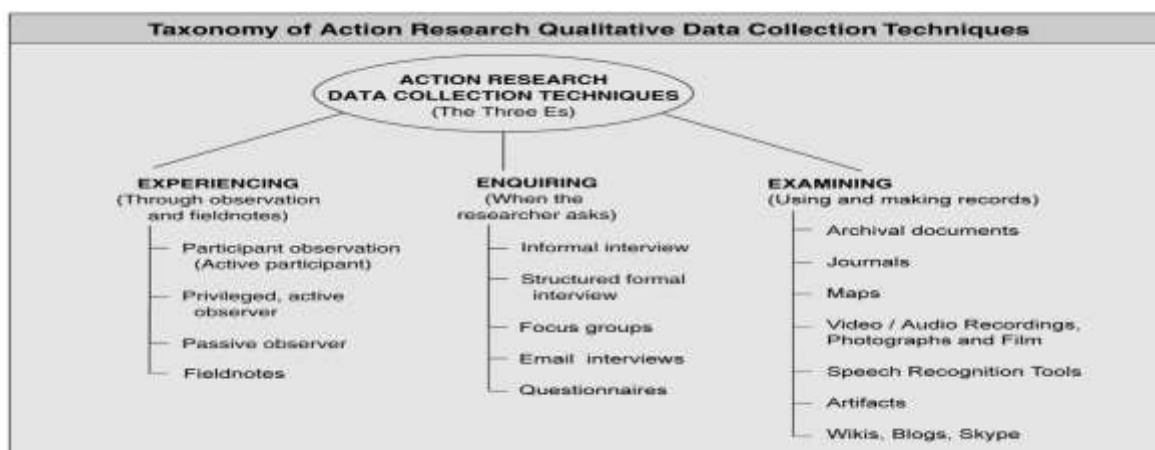
V. QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

• Questionnaire

The first step in a teaching process, is the collection of information about learners in order to diagnose the objective needs of the students and it is more so with the action research. As a preliminary a pilot study may be done using a customized questionnaire to investigate the problem the researcher has identified and the participants' contribution to it in terms of personal factors, academic details and the participant's perception in their own view. The best way to capture the 'black-box' (Grenfell and Harris 1999) of the students' mind could be to design a questionnaire to elicit the information immediately after the performance that is under constant observation and also with appropriate wordings to describe the perception of the participant (Chamot 2004). So when Questionnaire I can do a pilot survey, Questionnaire II can be used to find every participant's genuine self-perception regarding the intervention.

Depending upon the researcher's perception and the project, the data may give scope to find the influence of socio environmental and socio-political factors on the participants. A descriptive survey method may be adopted to scrutinize the responses and explain them (i.e) the questions should be so framed to elicit descriptive answer on a five point Likert Scale.

Likert scales are a common ratings format for surveys. They were developed in 1932 as the five point bipolar response ranging from a group of categories, least to most asking people to indicate how much they agree or disagree, approve or disapprove, believe to be true or false. There is no other way to build this scale than the way it has been described. Hence, an action research can rely on a Likert scale arrangement of descriptive options like A, B, C, D, and E. Accordingly the answer under A= strongly agree; B= agree; C= neither agree nor disagree; D= Disagree; E= strongly disagree". Data obtained before and after the intervention through Questionnaires I and II should be subjected to descriptive statistics and inferential analysis qualitatively and quantitatively. They provide simple summaries about the sample and about the observations that have been made. They provide simple frequency summary. They are quantitative and form the basis of the initial description of the data as part of a more extensive statistical analysis.



Mill's Action Research: A Guide for Action Researcher (2014): Pearson Education

• Observation

The classroom observation should guide researchers to understand the importance of the same in researches. The two main purposes are to evaluate teaching and to collect data for research purposes. In a research, observational data can explain why expected outcomes occurred or did not occur and assist in changing the program to improve implementation. An additional use of observational data is to measure the nature and extent of program implementation. In measuring implementation, researchers intend to show not only what programmatic aspects worked best for which types of students, but also the feasibility of successfully implementing the program in different contexts. Observational data can also show change over time within the context of the procedure of the implemented tasks. Observations usually end up in reflection and reflections initiate minor or major changes in an action research.

The purpose of classroom observation in a research context is to evaluate the effectiveness of a technique used and to find whether any improvisation is required in the implementation of the same. The observations are to be jotted down during or immediately after the activities, which are closely observed. An advantage of this method is that the researcher could collect student specific information and detailed information related to specific observations. These observations are quite useful to identify the students' behaviour in varied contexts. These observations can help the samples in self-evaluation of their performance

by comparing the same with similar performances of their peers. The other notable benefit of the observations is to supplement and stand witness to the applicable qualitative or quantitative data collected during the action research.

- **Interview**

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews in the form of oral discussion/questioning or probing sessions are held after the completion of every planned action during the research process. The students' perceptions are to be jotted down. The interviews or interactional sessions are situation specific as the need arise and hence cannot be termed as structured interviews but semi-structured and at occasions, non-structured. As such it remains a forum for the students to opine on the procedures. These face to face exchanges stand witness to the success or failure of the action taken.

- **Using and Making Records**

Archival documents like attendance and retention rates, discipline referrals, standardized test scores, Journals, Maps, video and audio recordings, photos, film and other artifacts are useful as a proof for the process and are authentic records to analyse the feedback given through them. However, the researchers and teachers as employees of an organization need to get prior permission from the management and students for using these recording gadgets.

Quantitative Data Collection Techniques

Teacher-made tests, Standardized tests, School/college/University generated report cards, Questionnaires, etc., are used to collect the required data. Here also the 'Triangulation' technique is used with the multiple sources of data – and hence get the name "multi-instrument" approach. The pre-tests and post-tests are part of quantitative assessment. The inferential analysis is carried out by subjecting the pre-test and post-test scores to paired 't' test to verify if there is any marked difference in the learners' behaviour/ proficiency after the intervention introduced in the research.

Validity and Reliability

Validity is the degree to which data collection methods measure what they are supposed to measure and reliability is the degree to which a test consistently measures whatever it measures. The tests are evaluated and expressed numerically, usually as coefficient. The remark of high coefficient (near 1.00) indicates high reliability. Never the less no test is perfectly reliable. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection share the same notion of validity and reliability as they are consistently and repeatedly used before and after any kind of intervention.

Statistical Techniques

Suitable descriptive and inferential statistical techniques are used in the interpretation of the data to draw a more meaningful picture of results from the collected data. In any research, the following statistical measures can be used: Descriptive analysis: Frequency, Percentage Inferential analysis: Pearson's Chi-square Test and Paired t-test

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Once the data is collected an analysis has to be done to fulfil the following objectives:

- To think in terms of significant tables that the data permit.
- To examine carefully the statement of the problem and earlier analysis and to study the gathered data.
- To get away from the data and to think about the problem meaningfully.
- To analyse the data by making various statistical calculation.

Conducting interim analysis of the data collected in terms of their relevance and utility is necessary. Avoiding premature action of discarding the data will hamper the process of action research. Data analysis and interpretation technique is determined by the type of data collected. The quantitative data is interpreted by descriptive statistics which naturally leads to descriptive analysis. Descriptive statistics involves central tendency, mean (average), median (middle), mode (most frequent), variability and standard deviation (spread).

VI. QUALITATIVE DATA INTERPRETATION

Descriptive analysis is used to interpret the Questionnaire I and Questionnaire II. The qualitative data can be quantified as frequency and percentage. The data obtained by Questionnaire II can further be subjected to correlation analysis through Pearson's chi-square test to find the relation between two or among different variables. The data obtained by interview during probing/discussion sessions should also be analysed

descriptively. While interpreting the data, the researcher should extend the analysis, raise questions, note implications that might be drawn, connect findings with personal experience, seek advice of “critical” friends, take time to build relationships, contextualize findings in literature, turn to theory, link to broader issues, provide rationale, sense of meaning. The researcher should display findings, matrixes, charts, concept maps, graphs, figures, audio-visual media for further discussion with critical colleagues, because action research is usually understood as a collaborative work. The researcher must make an in depth study about what is missing; care must be taken to avoid making unwarranted assertions because we cannot predict the future issues popping up in the programme.

VII. WRITING UP ACTION RESEARCH

Then the researcher should organise the records and write the entire program as a thesis using the universal format. References are usually given in Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association because it is most widely accepted by colleges, universities and journals for publication of articles. The first chapter must deliberate on the Outline of Action Research, gives a Report, Area-of-focus statement; second chapter must give the related literature; third chapter the methodology followed in the action research, by way it touches definition of variables, research questions, description of intervention or innovation, data collection techniques used and data considerations; fourth chapter must elaborate on data analysis and interpretation; fifth chapter must summarise the findings and carry on the discussion, finding inferences and relevance with existing theories and with the opinions already established and should propagate how different is the present research; sixth chapter should bring the discussion to a close with suggestions and recommendations for future research.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The researcher may have a sigh of relief at the end of the program thinking she has slogged to find the outcome which may or may not prove her opinion and perceptions. However the researcher needs to realise taking action is a regular part of teaching; it is based on formative feedbacks from students. Certain decisions taken by the researcher are often intuitive and informal. All these deliberations apart, the researcher might be bowed down by the challenges from unexpected quarters, lack of resources, resistance to change (from colleagues and students), reluctance to interfere with others’ professional practices and reluctance to admit difficult truths staring at times from within the institution itself. But at the end when the research is approved the researcher will be on cloud nine.

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IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

M. Chandrasena Rajeswaran "Action Research For English Teaching." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 22 no. 12, 2017, pp. 31-36.