

EMPOWERING LANGUAGE TEACHERS THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH: TWO CASE STUDIES FROM MALAYSIA

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Abstract: Given the easy availability of information due to social media, it is generally recognized that language teachers need to transform themselves from being mere disseminators of information to that of innovators. Literature suggests that to do so, language teachers should make action research an indispensable part of their language teaching armory. This paper aims to encourage language teachers to take charge of their own profession by conducting action research in their respective classrooms. The paper illustrates two case studies which stress on the process which can be duplicated by teachers as well as the outcome which can be used for improvement and for sharing with peers through publication. By engaging in action research, language teachers can move beyond their conventional teaching roles to become researchers cum practitioners who are able to rise to the occasion by overcoming current language issues first hand instead of taking advice from educational researchers.

Keywords: *action research, language teaching, reflection*

INTRODUCTION

Preparation for English language teachers to motivate and teach their students should involve more than just techniques and the various strategies and tips for language learning. Teachers need to develop their own practices after completing their formal training and courses. They must also aspire to improve their own teaching practices in response to changing conditions and experiences (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). To do that, teachers need to ask themselves what can be done to improve their students' learning. In this regard, teachers can resort to a number of strategies such as attending refresher course, seeking guidance from mentors, registering for higher programmes of learning or they can learn to conduct research pertaining to

specific issues identified from their own classrooms. Kurt Lewin (1946), then a professor at MIT, terms such kind of research as action research (Adelman, 1993)

Action research can be seen as an innovative technique that can be integrated into teacher preparation programmes wherever the classroom context lies – countryside, suburbs, cities, huge institutions or small schools, so that future teachers can try out new approaches of teaching that can help them to understand their learners better. Action research is also useful for teachers to investigate teaching/learning issues as some problems in learning may lie with the teachers. Burns (2009, p. 6) notes that “many teachers have been put off research and the teaching theories taught to them in teacher training

courses” because they discover that once they get into their classrooms, the theory does not match reality (Burns, 2009).

Although action research has been around for many years, it is not commonly practiced nor is it frequently administered by the teachers themselves, particularly in the Asian context such as Malaysia. Much literature (see section below) have been written about action research and in particular, the benefits to be gained. Nonetheless, very few school teachers are able to conduct action research for various reasons: they may not know how to do it; they have no time to do it; they are not keen to do it; they may think that this is beyond their level or they are overwhelmed by work.

In the case of Turkey, Atay (2006, p. 1) notes that “neither pre-service nor in-service teachers of English can do much research in Turkey; pre-service teachers generally cannot get permission from schools for research while in-service teachers do not have sufficient time and training to conduct research”. This issue highlights the kind of difficulty school teachers experience.

In 2008, the Malaysian Education Ministry attempted to introduce action research as a means of improving teaching and learning in schools (see *Buku Manual Kajian Tindakan*, 2008). However, implementation has been slow as can be seen by the lack of reports noted in journal articles or books published by school teachers hence, studies and reports are limited. For instance, there was a compilation of reports and findings noted in the “*Koleksi Kajian Tindakan 2011-2012*” (A Collection of Action Research conducted between 2011 until 2012) compiled by secondary school teachers in a suburban school in Kajang, Selangor. However, the book carried no publisher or ISBN number although it comprised a collection of reports written by the respective teachers who had conducted the research in their classrooms. A further review of these reports indicate

that they had not been systematically conducted and analyzed before reporting. Thus, the methodology was questionable, making these studies less scientific. It is possible that the teachers involved were not trained on writing out the methodology section hence, the discrepancy. Nonetheless, scholars (see Teo, Voon, & Voon, 2011) note that school teachers are still finding their way into this activity.

In contrast, the notion of action research is better received at the higher institutions of learning such as colleges (see Abraham, 2015) or universities (see Norasmah & Chia, 2016). Training modules on action research were organized and conducted (between 2012 and 2015) by experts at the Academy of Leadership for Higher Education (AKEPT, Malaysia) as a means of fortifying this interest. The aim was to empower practitioners like lecturers to conduct action research and to publish the research result. This aspect of research was placed under the discipline of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

Norasmah and Chia (2016) note that more teachers are being trained to do action research for the purpose of enhancing their teaching and learning processes. However, Norasmah and Chia (2016) have only cited the National University of Malaysia (UKM) and the Academy of Leadership for Higher Education (AKEPT) as their sources. Both organizations have been providing training in the realm of action research since 2012 and their efforts in doing so have been aligned to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), a discipline that was developed for lecturers in higher institutions of learning. SoTL focusses on classroom research as a means of identifying solutions to rectify problems faced by lecturers within their own classrooms. When such findings are shared, they become a scholarly pursuit.

Despite the call for school teachers to be involved, (Teo, Voon & Voon, 2011), little has been done. Eventually, most classroom issues are identified and pursued

by academic researchers (see Dzakiria, Mohamed, Hisham, Malek & Said, 2007). Since specialists from schools seldom partake in such a pursuit, the ultimate advice and recommendations on how they can deal with their own classrooms would come from the academic or educational researchers. This is less beneficial for the teachers because as first hand observers of their own classrooms, they are a better judge on how the research can be conducted and what kind of problems they want to solve.

Teachers and Action Research

As mentioned above, there are many issues preventing teachers from being engaged in research (see Atay, 2006; Meerah & Osman, 2013; Norasmah & Chia, 2016). In line with this argument, Borg (2009) adds that this requires raising the awareness among teachers because some teachers may “have inappropriate or unrealistic notions of the kind of inquiry teacher research involves” (p. 377). This is clearly so because action research differs from traditional research methods. Moreover, some people cannot see the benefits of action research when everything revolves around the class alone (see Norasmah & Chia, 2016).

Teachers are trained professionals. They have served time going through specialized trainings to develop their skills, knowledge, and expertise. The goal of the training is to equip them with the right skills, knowledge, and expertise to support the young learners whom they “service” in schools so that these learners can one day, develop adequate skills and competence to serve as contributing adults in their society. Language is just one aspect of the many skills which all learners— young and old— need to acquire at school. The language skills acquired by students can help them to fulfil an academic goal, a personal need, a profession/career or to fulfill an internal desire such as travelling. Just as a mother would want her child to be well equipped

for an uncertain future, language teachers too must be able to impart as much knowledge as they can to their learners with efficacy. This can ensure that the learners acquire the appropriate language skills for a future goal. Effective language teachers can provide the best learning opportunities for their students and action research can serve as a very valuable approach for these teachers to deepen their insights into teaching and to improve their own understanding of themselves as teachers, their classroom environment as well as their students’ desire and intention.

Studies (see Meerah, Johar, & Ahmad, 2001; Carpenter, 2003; Meerah & Osman, 2013; Norasmah & Chia, 2016) suggest that school teachers tend to be restricted in this pursuit by various factors. Besides hindrance from superiors, lack of knowledge and disinterest, they also face issues like class discipline, school results or examinations. Moreover, the idea of school teachers conducting research, collecting data, making an analysis and then producing papers for publication does not calibrate well with the respective school teachers. Such a phenomenon is universal (see Meerah *et al.*, 2001; Carpenter, 2003; Atay, 2006; Borg, 2009; Burns, 2009; Meerah & Osman, 2013; Norasmah & Chia, 2016). Thus, something needs to be done to encourage teachers to do so.

Most literature (see Zeichner, 1983; Ramsden & Moses, 1992; Brew & Boud, 1995; Hattied & Marsh, 1996) mention that action research is more pervasive in the education domain with majority being conducted in higher institutions of learning. In his research, Middlewood (1999) note that 94% of the teacher-respondents mentioned that action research had enabled them to learn new skills such as logical argumentative skills, critical thinking skills, and problem solving skills. From their experience, the teacher-respondents were also able to develop and enhance their own

teaching and learning processes thereby, benefitting both parties at the same time.

The merits of action research (AR) have also been emphasized by Hogarth (2005) who say that: a) AR motivates students' interest in the subject; b) AR improves students' understanding of subject; c) AR encourages critical reflection/analysis among students; d) AR provides teachers with up-to-date information and e) AR involves students as part of the research, making them partners to the learning and teaching process.

Understanding Action Research

Action research is doing research with the intention of addressing a problem that has been identified by the teacher's sharp eyes and reflection. To reflect means to take some time, usually at the end of the day, to evaluate if something had occurred well and if so, why or why not. Thus, action research can be conducted individually or in groups with people who share similar issues or problems. Denscombe (2009, p. 6) says that, "an action research strategy is to solve a particular problem and to produce guidelines for best practice" while Burns (2009, p. 2) notes that the fundamental premise of action research "is to intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes and, even better, improvements in practice".

As the world transforms to become more high tech and digital, teachers can no longer teach in the way they were taught by their teachers; they can no longer treat their students the way they were treated by their own teachers. The generation gap has widened but this does not mean that all teachers need to succumb to mediocrity or become helpless. Instead, teachers can resort to looking for answers to their own problems or challenges. To do so, they must be equipped with the knowhow.

Burns (2009, p. 2) explains that "action research is related to the idea of reflective practice and the teacher as

researcher". Action research involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to explore one's own teaching contexts. In action research, to be critical does not mean being negative or derogatory about the way you teach. It is about taking a questioning stance about a problem that exists and then asking yourself what can be done to improve it. In action research, the teacher becomes the investigator or explorer of his/her own teaching context which involves his/her learners. The teacher is also one of the participants involved. Action research has been used by teachers to test the effectiveness of the "Shadowing" technique for learning English rhythm especially pronunciation, among Japanese adults (Omar & Umehara, 2010). In their study, Omar and Umehara (2010) observe that their involvement as both facilitator and group member, allowed them to observe the students' responses including their non-verbal behaviors (e.g., facial expressions, gesture, and body movements). This helped them to understand their learners better. They were also able to develop the relevant intervention to assist their learners in becoming better at learning.

Curry, Nembhard, and Bradley (2009) maintain that by conducting action research, reflective practitioners can make their language teaching skills and methods more solid. This is useful not only for getting future teachers to become better equipped in teaching but also for all teachers to continue to grow and develop as reflective practitioners. Many researchers including Curry *et al.* (2009) say that action research follows a certain procedure including: a) selecting an issue, b) refining the research question, c) undertaking data collection, d) analyzing multiple forms of data, e) developing and implementing new instructional strategies and f) making the research findings public.

Action research can also be classified according to purposes: i) to determine what is currently occurring and ii)

to test a hypothesis (Meerah & Osman, 2013). Outcomes from action research tend to be qualitative in nature as data are mostly descriptively analyzed. This is because the research involves all the students in the respective classrooms. Nonetheless, the most important outcome that can be derived from action research is the finding that can enable classroom teachers to learn and improve on their own performance (Meerah & Osman, 2013; Luchini & Rosello, 2007). Action research encourages teachers to “reflect upon their own teaching practices and, as a result, engage in change with the aim of redirecting their instructional objectives to meet their students’ needs” (Luchini & Rosello, 2007, p. 266). This is valuable as it contributes to enhancing the teacher’s development (Luchini & Rosello, 2007). Such improvements can only be seen due to the information that was deduced from the data which had been collected through action research (Burns, 2009). Undoubtedly, data in action research must not be compromised and they must be systematically acquired.

Reflection as practice

Reflection-in-action is “reflection on one’s spontaneous ways of thinking and acting, undertaken in the midst of action to guide further action” (Schön, 1983, p. 22). This reflection signifies what we do as we go around in the classroom, assessing our students’ reactions as well as our own reactions to the moment-by-moment activities and interactions taking place. In contrast, reflection-on-action occurs only after the event. It is a kind of thinking back about what happened (Burns, 2009). The teacher reflects on the decisions made on the students’ responses, teacher’s own responses towards the students, and on how the teacher thinks and feels about the lesson. These reflections are used to assist the teacher in understanding the reaction taken. Without reflections, teachers may begin to think or talk about their teaching in a

technical or automatic way (Schön, 1983). In becoming mechanical, teachers have no reason to understand why they do what they do in the classroom. This includes their teaching routines, teaching approaches, teaching contexts, students, the philosophies/values motivating them to execute certain things in the classroom and others. Without reflection, teachers are unable to look inward thus, there is not much input for improvement (Schön, 1983). With reflection, teachers have a reason to look for improvement.

A “reflective teacher” is one who operates reflectively; he/she shows open-mindedness as he/she begins to listen to other points of view, exhibiting responsibility as he/she becomes more alert to the consequences of his/her own actions (Dewey, 1933). A reflective teacher demonstrates wholeheartedness by putting open-mindedness and responsibility at the center of his/her actions, questioning his/her own assumptions which are enhanced by the desire to want to introduce new approaches that avoid putting students at the heart of the problem (Dewey, 1933). In this sense, a reflective teacher moves from a deficit view of the students (i.e., my students are the problem) to a deficit view of the learning situation as a whole (i.e., there are problems in my teaching set-up).

As can be deduced, reflective teaching is empowering. It motivates teachers into becoming actively involved in articulating the nature of their work and in extending the knowledge base of their own teaching. It enables teachers to complement the work of educational researchers, involving themselves in the curriculum development and school change thereby, taking a leading role in their own professional development (Zeichner & Liston, 2013). Nonetheless, three central questions underpin reflective teaching: *What do I do? How do I do it? What does this mean for me and those I work with?* (see Burton, 2009).

General Steps in Action Research

There are certain steps to follow when implementing action research. First, the teacher identifies a problem, which can only be identified through reflection, looking for the cause of the problem. The teacher observes the problem once again and then reflects on how the problem can be best intervened. A plan is then hatched, usually through a series of reflection. The teacher would also have reflected on implementing this plan. Until the plan is implemented, data will first have to be collected and the teacher then analyses the cause of the problem based on the data. The teacher then takes the appropriate course of action and he/she then evaluates the success of the action plan. These procedures—with some modifications—have been endorsed by some experts such as Susman (1983), O'Brien (1998), Winter (1989) and Ferrance (2000).

Step 1: Identifying the problem

As the first step, identifying the problem in a classroom takes the sharp eyes of the teacher who is the person managing the class. However, as Ferrance (2000) says, the teacher must be able to answer the following questions:

- Is the problem at hand one which the teacher has influence over?
- Is the problem something of interest and worth the time and effort?
- Is the problem real and worth researching or is it due to some discomfort or tension experienced by the teacher or is it due to some mismatch of teaching strategies and learner differences?

Step 2: Planning

Upon reflecting on the problem, the teacher can try to look at the problem from various angles and then develop a plan to resolve the problem. This usually involves several cycles of reflection.

Step 3: Implementing

This is actually implementing the plan, for example, taking hold of the class and then carrying out the plan and collecting data. This is followed by studying the data and looking for answers to the problem. The next step is to apply the answers and evaluate the success of the resolution. Most classroom teachers report on the outcome of their research either to their colleagues as a sharing practice or with students so as to be accountable. Nonetheless, teachers may want to go a step higher by sharing their outcomes particularly, if the outcome reflects a global issue, with other colleagues who can use the outcome to rectify their own classroom issues. In higher education, outcomes are shared in conferences or seminars. These are ultimately converted to journal publications thereby, allowing the teachers concerned to take ownership and be known for their research.

The current paper draws on two case studies of action research in Malaysia. The context of this paper focusses on the method and the outcome. The aim is to encourage language teachers in schools to take the lead and conduct action research thus, become researchers cum practitioners who can move beyond their conventional teaching roles to become active disseminators of knowledge. By doing so, language teachers can offer greater learning opportunities and experiences in their class for their learners. Through the outcome shared, these teachers can also be seen as contributors who are capable of rising to the occasion of facing and resolving current language issues by offering their own insights and not just take those offered by educational researchers only.

Case Study 1: Improving Classroom Interactions

In 2015, Kuang was teaching a course called *Critical Reading and Writing* to a group of multiracial, mixed level and mixed gender, year two undergraduates. Within the first two weeks of the course which involved

three hours per week, 15 students were observed to be reluctant to participate in class discussions. This occurred when they were individually asked for some input towards certain issues identified in their reading texts. It was the usual one or two outspoken individuals who volunteered their thoughts while the rest kept silent. Kuang (2016) became discouraged because the course required the students to think and speak their minds and to support their opinions and output with relevant sources or evidence, either from the text or from facts gathered from other sources. In this regard, Kuang (2016) has thus identified the problem. When the problem was been established, Kuang (2016) often reflected on the attitude of the class, writing down her own thoughts on what could have held the students back from interacting. This went on for a few weeks. Subsequently, Kuang (2016) noted that there could be a way to break the barrier. She decided to build a rapport with them. All the students were requested to meet her in her office for an interview and under the guise of getting to know them personally, through a casual setting of tea and biscuits, she began to learn a little more about each student. All these information were documented into a journal for future reference.

Following this activity, Kuang (2016) then began applying some improvements on the class. She developed more empathy for the students whose classes were back to back. Realizing their hectic schedule, Kuang (2016) provided little foods to energize them in between classes. During class discussions, she also shared personal stories which were linked to the reading topics and students also got to share theirs. This helped to forge the rapport. As the weeks increased, the relationship became better than before and soon both parties were less distant and more friendly with each other. By week four, Kuang (2016) began applying the reflection exercise on the students during the last five minutes of class. Three questions were

posed and the students were asked to answer anonymously on a paper which will be collected. The questions include: a) what went well in class today?, b) what did not go well in class today? and c) what would you like to see more of in the next class? This activity developed the students' confidence to articulate their opinions privately. It also reduced their insecurity.

With that in process, Kuang (2016) proceeded to conducting a more formal form of action research. She told the class, 'I am going to observe you over the next few weeks to see if things can be improved for the course'. She also gave them theories as to why student voices are important for the teacher. They were also promised that what was gathered from the action research would be analyzed and the analysis would be shared with them. However, the classroom research, in particular, responding to some of the interview questions had to be done on the condition that all things written down would be anonymous but honest. In week 10, data were collected when Kuang (2016) posed ten questions. The students were required to answer them with regards to classroom atmosphere, assignments, marks, and teacher attributes. Analysis indicates that students found their learning environment boring and rigid. They wanted a better learning environment with air conditioning, bigger chairs and tables and space to move around. They also preferred teachers who were warm and knowledgeable. Most of all, the students wanted to be "partners" in the learning process where they were given opportunities to negotiate their learning in terms of the number of assignments, submission deadlines, weightage of marks, activities and teaching materials. Based on the outcome of this action research, Kuang (2016) was able to empathize with her students, adjusting her teaching techniques and the class assignments and weightage of marks. The good relationship developed lowered their anxiety and increased their

confidence thereby, enhancing class management. The outcome was shared with peers in a conference and eventually published in a foreign journal (see Kuang, 2016).

Case Study 2: Assisting Postgraduate Students in Their Academic Writing

As lecturers teaching postgraduate courses, we noted that majority of our postgraduate students were not proficient writers. We drew our evidence of the students' weak performance in writing from written works such as research proposals, written projects and seminar papers. It seems obvious that they would require a lot of support to hone their academic writing skills. They were not just weak in grammar structure but also unable to produce a coherent text that is clear, specific, and concise, albeit with lesser quotations. Many were also ignorant in the organisation of texts. From our long term observations, it was deduced that their weak writing skills were the result of their diversity, their basic educational system and the influence of their first language (L1). We wanted to help these students to improve their skills so we had to first investigate what their specific writing problems include.

Theories denote that interference from L1 is quite predominant in L2/L3's writing tasks. The lack of exposure to reading materials may also be another factor. Unsure if other faculties were facing similar problems, we then offered two workshops on postgraduate supervision for the academic staff of the university. From the input gathered during the workshops, we were informed that all the lecturers faced similar issues with student writing issues. With this verification, we reflected again. We had a duty to do something for the university and the postgraduate students. Hence, we offered to conduct writing workshops for the postgraduate students by conveying our intentions to the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS) in our university.

We used the workshop to collect data by conducting smaller sessions of activities where the postgraduates learn how to review a portion of an article. Based on a few questions provided, they had to identify the answers from the article. It is these written texts which were collected for analysis. Using our experience as language teachers and examiners of theses, we then attempted to analyze the data through major themes. Findings indicate that majority of our postgraduates were not competent in basic reading skills (cannot scan or predict) and they had issues in advanced writing techniques (cannot paraphrase, summarize or synthesize).

Based on this finding, we realized that the university requirement for students to have a certain English language qualification when they made their application to our university did not match the postgraduate programmes offered. Clearly, their skills were too low to enable them to read academic texts and to write academic papers and theses. From that understanding, we then used our data to propose to the university that a kind of support system be provided to these postgraduate students so as enable them to develop their reading and writing skills simultaneously. Likewise, we also presented our data to our peers. The paper was selected for publication in a local journal (see Kuang & David, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Meerah *et al.* (2001) had noted that despite the fact that a teacher's main function is to teach, it is imperative for the teacher to read journals and to conduct research on a regular basis, as a form of professional development. They also examined how far Malaysian teachers, especially those who have undergone in-service courses and workshops on action research, were able to venture into action research. They note that many were aware of the importance; many found satisfaction

with their results when they had the opportunity to report and share their findings but overall, they were still hindered by some bureaucratic constraints placed by principals and colleagues alike. Such situations need to change (Johnson, 2012; Brown, 2002) because the future direction of staff development programmes, teacher preparation curricula as well as school improvement initiatives are in the palms of these teachers. As they learn to adopt action research into their classrooms, their ability to become more critical of happenings around them will be impacted by the critical inquiry they apply in action research. In addition, a rigorous examination of their own classroom practices and school programmes will also elevate the quality of their own teaching and class management. Johnson (2012) asserts that action research is a teacher empowerment tool that allows teachers to examine their own practices based on classroom inquiries. Using what they found, teachers can reform their teaching techniques. Outcomes derived from the result of action research can also be used by language teachers to look inward into their own practices thereby, resolving classroom issues and enhancing personal qualities and development (Guskey, 2000). Hollingsworth and Sockett (1994) had observed that action research had also enabled teachers to professionalise teaching and to rethink about the schools' environment. Oja and Pine (1989) also maintain that teachers who engage in action research tend to become more critical and reflective about their own practices. Thus, it becomes imperative for language teachers to become more acquainted with the process of action research.

Language teachers are the conduit for learners to acquire knowledge, communicate, and interact with others as well as gain social standing. They serve as role models for their learners. With the right attitude towards teaching and learning, language teachers should be trained to

understand why there is a need to conduct personal and individual classroom research as the answers they uncover can serve as solutions to overcome any issue they face within the classroom context. As has been noted, once the results are shared and the teachers' confidence escalate, their attitude becomes more positively aligned with doing research. They may conduct more research; they may become more reflective in their attitude and they may also develop good practices of professionalism. Thus, it is necessary that language teachers, irrespective of their teaching contexts, location and teaching era, strive to learn and understand more about action research and how this can be implemented in their classrooms. By subscribing to action research, language teachers will set the pace in being the first to take the initiative to combat what is rarely done and to take the lead in becoming practitioners cum researchers. Based on this call, it is again asserted that language teachers must take the lead in doing research within their classrooms.

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Monkey

A guy walks into a bar with his pet monkey. He orders a drink and while he's drinking, the monkey jumps all around the place. The monkey grabs some olives off the bar and eats them. Then grabs some sliced limes and eats them. Then jumps onto the pool table, grabs one of the billiard balls, sticks it in his mouth, and to everyone's amazement, somehow swallows it whole. The bartender screams at the guy "Did you see what your monkey just did?". The guy says "No, what?" "He just ate the cue ball off my pool table-whole!". "Yeah, that doesn't surprise me," replied the guy. "He eats everything in sight, the little bastard. Sorry. I'll pay for the cue ball and stuff." He finishes his drink, pays his bill, pays for the stuff the monkey ate, then leaves. Two weeks later he's in the bar again, and has his monkey with him. He orders a drink and the monkey starts running around the bar again. While the man is finishing his drink, the monkey finds a maraschino cherry on the bar. He grabs it, sticks it up his butt, pulls it out, and eats it. The bartender is disgusted. "Did you see what your monkey did now?" he asks. "No, what?" replies the guy. "Well, he stuck a maraschino cherry up his butt, pulled it out, and ate it!" said the bartender. "Yeah, that doesn't surprise me," replied the guy. " He still eats everything in sight, but ever since he swallowed that cue ball, he measures everything first..."

(Source: <http://www.study-express.ru/humour/funny-stories.shtml>, picture: www.google.co.id)