

Research Notes

**ACTION RESEARCH REVISITED IN THIS GLOBAL AGE:
FOR TAIWAN LANGUAGE EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

In this 21st century, knowledge has exploded in volume and is disseminated through the Internet so fast that many concepts have been radically changed. In the academic world, new theories and concepts in various disciplines or fields have also been proposed to respond to the reality of the ever-changing world. This phenomenon is termed as “paradigm shift” by Thomas S. Kuhn (1970). Under such conditions, this paper would like to revisit action research to review what it is and how it can be practiced by teachers in classrooms, especially language teachers in the context of the 21st-century and in the particular context of Taiwan. The paper reviews the definition, origins, and research processes of action research. Then, it addresses how action research can be conducted by language teachers. The aim is to reemphasize the multiple roles of teachers as researchers as well as life-long learners. In sum, this paper pinpoints that knowledge creation should be produced through not only a top-down process but also a bottom-up process to create experience-based knowledge with a sense of ownership among the practitioners—the teaching professionals.

Key Words: action research, language teaching, language learning, research, methods, EFL learning

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, knowledge is transferred fast and everywhere through the internet and many concepts have also been radically changed. Similarly in the academic world, new theories and concepts in various disciplines have been proposed or advocated to respond to the ever-changing world. This phenomenon was described as a “paradigm shift” by Thomas Kohn (1970) in *The Structures of Scientific Revolutions*. Under such conditions, this paper revisits action research, an old tradition

in professional practice, to review the nature of action research and how it can be practiced by teachers in real classrooms, especially language teachers, in the context of the 21st-century and within the specific context of Taiwan.

For this purpose, the paper proposes that in this de-centralized or post-modern era, the creation of knowledge should be produced not only through top-down processes but also through bottom-up processes to create experience-based knowledge with a sense of authorship among the practitioners. At the same time, it contends that language teaching action research needs to be contextualized in Taiwan in terms of the 21st century with the dual goals of localization and globalization to get students oriented to thinking globally and acting locally.

This section discusses action research in terms of its definition and origin and also the processes of conducting action research.

Definition

What is action research? Put simply, action research means “the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some aspect of professional practice” (Wallace, 1998, p. 1). According to Arhar et al. (2001), action research implies an orientation towards research, a form of professional practice, a research process, and for teachers, a reflective way of teaching to develop their own instructional voice and presence and eventually create a kind of knowledge for effective teaching and successful learning for students.

Teachers who ask questions of their practice such as, “How can I improve my practice?” and who try out some of their ideas in response to that question, who systematically observe and collect evidence related to their actions, and then analyze and talk with others about it—these teachers are engaging in reflective practice. They are using professional eyes to observe their own practice. They are interacting with unique students in a particular and unpredictable situation. They are facing the challenges with action and analysis. And they are sharing the results with others—perhaps their colleagues, students’ parents, the larger community of the school, and the discipline. What makes action research a form of scholarship is the tenaciously inquisitive, purposeful, systematic, critical, self-critical, and collaborative ways one explores and changes one’s practice.

Wallace (1996, p. 10) describes action research as a continuous process of professional development, which is a rational and intrinsic part

of a good professional's life. The motivation for this development is often an interest in, or perhaps even an anxiety about, some aspect of our professional performance. Very rarely do teachers find solutions or resemblances in the pedagogical implications of empirical controlled research and thus are urged to face their own particular real-life problems with critical thinking and actions to conduct their own research in the practicing sites and come out with their own solution to achieve effective teaching. In this way, teacher researcher can eventually develop a professional and unique expertise to deal with a special issue in a specific context.

Origins

John Dewey (1916) contributed to the development of teacher research and action research by criticizing the traditional separation of knowledge and action in the field. He advocated learning by doing and applied the scientific method of problem solving to education, which formed the so-called progressive education movement. He believed that teachers needed to test their ideas in action and study the consequences and impact of their action and improve their practice.

Kurt Lewin (1946) coined the term action research to mean research conducted by scholar-practitioners to improve their social situations and stated that participants must become objective in examining their own biases (Arhar et al., 2001). He constructed an elaborate theory and made action research a 'respectable' form of inquiry for social scientists (McKernan, 1996). Lewin (1946) believed that science should have a function to serve the society and he stated, "Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice." He saw action research as a way of describing professional development in social situations with problems.

In addition, John Elliott (1984) further explained the origins of action research by referring to Aristotle. He stated that Aristotle, in his "Ethics" outlined a form of Practical Philosophy or Moral Science, involving systematic reflection by social practitioners as the best means of realizing practical values in action, which Aristotle called "Practical Deliberation." In this sense, it can be applied to different professionals in the society.

Today's action research, sometimes referring to educational action research or teacher research, developed from earlier forms of inquiry and action research in the social and psychological professions. In 1975, Lawrence Stenhouse published *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*. The theme of the book was the "teacher as researcher"

and he contended that teaching should be based on research carried out by teachers rather than by specialists and that teaching would be improved by teachers studying the effects of their actions. The central idea of his book is that teachers as researchers and the professional development of teachers are closely related to real teaching and critical thinking processes. He requires practicing teachers to reflect critically and systematically about their practices and a teacher has to be “a central agent in the research process and thus has to empower himself as a professional” (McNiff, 1995, p. 20).

In the same year of 1975, *School Teacher*, a sociological study by a U.S. sociologist, Dan C. Lortie (1975), brought another major contribution to the field, discussing the issues of who we are as teachers, why we decide to become teachers, and how we develop as professionals. Since then, a flurry of activities has followed, and a fast-growing group of practitioner researchers or teacher researchers in the US and elsewhere practices a form of scholarship called action research.

Processes of Action Research

This section discusses the general process in conducting action research. Action research is a cyclic, repetitive reflective process. Following Lewin’s model, the process goes through planning, acting, observing, and reflecting stages. And the process is recursive with a revised plan again and again (McNiff, 1995).

According to Arhar et al. (2001), teachers develop as action researchers through the process of several stages of self-identity as a professional and researcher as follows:

1. Exploring Researcher Selves and the Profession: It is a journey of discovering the self through self-communication, interviewing others, examining personal artifacts, identifying critical incidents and developing a philosophy of teaching. This is a developmental journey of improving self as a teacher. The three domains to be developed are: (1) Cognitive and conceptual complexity, (2) Moral, ethical, and social responsibility, and (3) Psychological and emotional maturity.
2. Developing an Inquiring Mind: By asking “What is my research interest?” “Why am I interested?” “What is my question?” “What do I already know?” “What do others know?” “What do I expect to find?” teachers generate a topic and explore questions to guide their studies. An inquiring mind is developed from curiosity to embodying research

- topic and questions.
3. **Designing and Planning an Action Research Study:** Based on research topics, professionals address their questions by carefully planning a road map. The researcher chooses appropriate methods to collect data and evaluate the alternatives to design the study thoughtfully to reach a goal. The use of a logical process of thinking based on who, what, when, where, how, and why questions helps the researcher plan and design the study and document data. The triangulation of data comes from observation (what do I see?), interviewing (what do students tell me?), and documents and artifacts (what does student work tell me?).
 4. **Analyzing and Interpreting Data:** This step includes the analysis of collected data by employing our creative and analytic powers, examining evidence from many perspectives, and interpreting and making sense of it. Finally, the interpretations guide the transformation of our teaching and the classroom community.
 5. **Writing and Sharing the Research Story:** The final step is to write up the research story to share it with peers or colleagues, and to publish the research report to contribute to the development of the academic community.

Following these processes, teachers can develop *as teaching professionals* by continually growing as researchers. Then they could be expected to create experience-based knowledge to publish and share among the professional community to contribute to the field and eventually reforms in education.

Distinction and Limitations of Action Research

Based on the points discussed above, it is clear that there is a distinct difference between general academic research and action research in terms of nature. As understood, the purpose of academic research is to investigate and then discover new knowledge to describe the world or the society in an objective way; however, for action research, there is a more subjective intention in conducting it, i.e., action researchers usually intend to make some changes or reforms to the current situations or practices, especially it usually aims to solve practical problems in the field of professional practice. In this sense, we might say that this critical orientation of subjective intention and the practical nature in action research distinguishes it slightly from general academic research, which is an objective orientation.

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Surely there is no perfect research approach. After presenting the origins, definition, the process and distinction of action research, there is a need to discuss its limitations. As a common rule in this world, strengths become weaknesses when seen from a different perspective, i.e., the distinctions we appreciate are actually shortcomings seen from other angles. Since action research has its subjective intention to change or improve practices, it tends to deal with micro units of professional practices in a small scale. In other words, aiming at practical solutions, especially for classroom teachers, makes the teachers who conduct action research focus on practical issues of small populations. The scale of action research is mostly as small as a classroom-based study focusing more on micro units rather than macro units. Owing to its characteristics of small samples, it is relatively difficult to generalize its findings to larger populations. In other words, it might not be appropriate to apply the findings to the rest of the whole population.

DISCUSSION

As discussed above, action research, especially educational action research, is a personalized reflective journey of self-engaged processes to inquire into an answer to a specific situation and creating effectiveness in teaching and learning. As teachers, we all face a pressing need frequently to deal with immediate problems in real life. With the conceptualization of various aspects of action research as discussed above, we can try to realize with action to respond to what we have encountered in our classroom teaching. We need to use the classroom as our research setting to conduct research and enhance our professional development. To reach this goal, there is a need to further understand our special educational context in Taiwan. The following thus offers an overview of the educational environment in Taiwan.

Special Context in Taiwan

For decades educational reforms in Taiwan have tried to make changes in the educational system to help students get rid of heavy burden of too many quizzes and exams at school so that they can enjoy learning in a stimulating and holistic environment. However, it seems that the exam-driven educational system has not been altered at all. The whole society still sees academic performance as the highest value for students.

At school, students are still evaluated based on their test scores and teachers have limited freedom in deciding what they want to teach or even how they teach. As a result, schools from elementary to senior high schools seem to pay too much attention to the students with good academic performance. It is quite a value-twisted system and within it teachers seem powerless with limited freedom.

However, responding to new challenges of 21st century such as globalization and keen international competition, all teachers need to be empowered to get their students ready for the competitive world. Teachers need to be aware of an agent role to negotiate with the system and re-position themselves as teaching professionals in relation to the new era and new world. This is why I revisit action research, an old approach, and propose that teachers in Taiwan need to have a concept revolution to adapt ourselves to the new circumstances as researchers and knowledge creators, too, to contextualize what we have learned from books and negotiate between the reality and the imported teaching methodology and play an active role in the process of educating the next generation.

What We Can Do

Moreover, tools of high technologies, nowadays, are overwhelming in our daily life. Thus, in order to communicate with the youth and the world, educators also need to be familiar with the tools of modern technology and, at the same time, to develop our communicative competence to communicate with the younger generation and stimulate their motivation to learn. By re-positioning ourselves as teaching professionals in relation to the new digital information age and new global village, we will be able to lead the navigation of learning and exploring process of our students.

In response to this new information-rich era, western scholars such as Marlene Scardamalia (2009) and Carl Bereiter (2009) advocate knowledge creation following design principles through knowledge forums using an interactive internet platform for groups of learners to ask questions in the initiating stage to inquire on a chosen issue or topic, then communicate and brainstorm with one another through the forum and eventually come up with their unique solutions to practical problems. They also contend that following design principles, teachers can be liberated from daily routines to be able to guide students to locate a balance between regular routine activities and knowledge creativity by making the best of modern digital technology.

It is a new century, there are new challenges; however, there are also

the advantages of new technology of internet and interactive web systems. Thus, various new forms of learning can be tried to balance our old-fashioned exam-exhausting process of studying. If the concepts of teachers could be radically changed so that they take advantage of the new technology and make the best of the internet system, then learning could be expected to be a very enjoyable process with a lot of peer partners and collaborators in the process of locating references, discovering facts, and creating knowledge through the self as well as peer group knowledge exploration in the internet world and also in the real world.

We do need to have a concept revolution among teachers as well as among teacher educators to cope with the harsh educational environment in Taiwan and create more enjoyable and stimulating learning situations for students to make them learn through holistic perspectives and be able to explore in the world of knowledge and the real world by themselves and thus obtain more experience-based knowledge, which will be engrained in their minds everlastingly for their whole life. In this way, students will be oriented to a more holistic approach to learn and grow and gradually turn to be self-regulated, self-directed, and independent learners and eventually become lifelong self-educators, which is the eternal objective of education.

Thus, in practice of language teaching, one possibility for language teachers to start the practice of action research is to focus on an area such as classroom management, classroom interaction, or oral proficiency building, etc., and start asking some questions about it. It is a process of inquire always beginning from the asking of questions. As Wallace (1996, p. 10) indicated: "Inquiry in its most basic sense simply means the act or process of seeking the answer to a question." We might take notes in our teaching journals to examine and monitor ourselves and identify blind points, then later narrow to a focus, and exchange opinions with colleagues or ask them to observe the similar phenomenon. After the focus is set, we then try to form research questions and design a questionnaire or structure interview questions. Such process marks the beginning of the recursive process of action research.

To sum up, knowing what questions to ask and how to ask them is by no means as straightforward as it might appear. And this is where we should begin as teacher researchers and then direct ourselves into a reflective, critical and recurring cycle of researching to experiment with our teaching practices and eventually gain insight from the recurring patterns of a successful teaching style.

CONCLUSION

This paper intends to revisit action research in terms of its definition, origin, procedures of conducting it, and its applications in such a specific context of Taiwan. The purpose is to get EFL teachers in Taiwan oriented with the concept of being a teacher as well as researcher and thus teachers are able to improve their teaching practice and create happy learning environment for our exam-exhausted students so that they may become self-directed and lifelong learners.

With the ability to think independently to ponder over what to teach and how to teach, teachers can make the right decisions in teaching and employ authentic materials to inspire our students to not only learn languages but also unique social issues in the context. Then, students can develop not only language proficiency but also the ability to think independently. While learning language in class, students can also nurture and cultivate their ability to think critically and reflective nature with a very good sense of self-awareness. This kind of practice would foster the development of a whole person and empower students to think globally and act locally.

And all these goals should be initiated with a concept revolution among teachers, i.e., teachers believe first that no matter how harsh our educational environment is, we teachers can try our best to do something and begin self-monitoring and self-reflecting practices as inquisitive teachers. As Anne Burns (2005) recommends, we teachers need to become holistic teachers with a comprehensive and broad vision by discovering our practices through action research. While taking action to transform ourselves from within, teachers can also collaborate with other colleagues to construct more experience-based knowledge. Through this bottom-up process with one after another awakened teacher, we might be able to make radical changes in education and create a new face for Taiwan.

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