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Action research in action: Some practical examples

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Introduction

In recent years references to action research have become more and more common in the ELT literature and there are now a number of useful publications that provide guidance for doing action research (e.g., Nunan, 1988; Wallace, 1998; Burns, 1999; Edge, 2001). But action research can be a puzzling and unfamiliar concept for many teachers, as Jane Hamilton, a teacher I worked with recently, suggested:

My experience of action research is that it is difficult to grasp or explain the concept until one is in the process of doing it. It is in the doing that it starts to make sense and become clear.

In this article, I will try to clarify some of the main concepts and processes in action research. I will also provide some examples of action research by teachers I have worked with in Australia. I hope that by doing so I will inspire colleagues in Thailand to try out some action research themselves and therefore learn more about it.

The concept of action research

As the term suggests, action research focuses simultaneously on action and research. The *action* part of the process

means deliberately putting some kind of strategy or activity in place in the school, department or classroom context. These actions are usually in response to a problem, puzzle or question that the people in that context have thought about for some time. They usually focus on areas of teaching and learning that the participants want to improve in some way.

Here are some examples of action research questions from teachers I have worked with:

I want to introduce more group work in my class. What kinds of groupings work best: male/female; mixed gender; same ability level; mixed ability level; selected by the teacher; selected by students?

What is the most effective way to teach pronunciation: integrated in communicative spoken activities; integrated in communicative listening activities; through specific pronunciation drills and exercises?

We want to increase our students' vocabulary. What kinds of activities can we develop to encourage 1) explicit learning through word lists, dictations,

class tests, or cloze activities; 2) incidental learning through class reading ("story time"); reading several texts on the same topic; collecting unknown English words and phrases out of class; listening to English songs, radio; watching English films, plays; using internet sites for language learners.

Topic areas for action can, of course, cover a wide range of possibilities. Wallace (1998, p.19) suggests that they might fall under the following broad categories:

1. classroom management
2. appropriate materials
3. particular teaching areas (e.g., reading, oral skills)
4. student behaviour, achievement or motivation
5. personal management issues (e.g., time management, relationships with colleagues/higher management)

The focus of the action might be developed by teachers individually or working in groups. Working collaboratively has the advantage of having other people with whom to share ideas, discuss new actions, talk about data collection methods and compare results.

The *research* side of action research means collecting data systematically about the actions we have put in place, looking closely at what the data might be telling us and developing different actions based on the data analysis. The research element of action

research takes us much further than we would normally go in our daily teaching in reflecting on the effect of our actions. There are numerous ways to collect data for action research, such as:

- observational methods, for example:
 - brief notes or recorded comments made by the teacher while the class is in progress
 - audio or video-recordings of classroom interaction
 - observation by a trusted colleague on particular aspects of classroom action
 - transcriptions of classroom interactions between teacher and students or students and students
 - maps or layouts of the classroom that trace the interactions between students and teacher
- non-observational methods
 - questionnaires and surveys
 - interviews and discussions
 - diaries and journals kept by teacher or learners
 - classroom documents, such as materials used, samples of student writing or tests

Time is often one of the greatest problems for people who want to do action research. One way to minimise the time problem is to build on activities we would be using in our workplaces anyway. The table below illustrates how classroom teachers could extend their normal teaching activities:

Regular classroom activities	Action research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching grammar items • Teaching aspects of writing (e.g., structuring the essay) • Using different materials • Teaching vocabulary • Encouraging students to take more responsibility for learning • Extending students' motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audio-record classroom interaction or students' group work responses • Collect students' texts over a period of time and monitor improvements and gaps • Discuss students' reactions to new in comparison with old materials • Give students a survey asking them about their responses to different vocabulary activities • Ask students to write a letter to other students in the class to explain effective ways to learn English • Interview selected students about what does/does not motivate them (alternatively get students to interview each other and record their responses)

I hope that by now some of the essential characteristics of action research, as set out below, are becoming clearer:

1. Action research is small-scale and localised research. It investigates problems that are relevant to the researchers in their own professional contexts. So we can say it is based on specific problems of practice.
2. Action research involves a combination of action and research that means collecting data systematically on our actions, ideas and practices as they actually occur in daily life.
3. Action research is a reflective process of bringing about changes and improvements in our practices. These changes are based on evaluating the evidence from our data.
4. Action research is participatory, as the 'actor' is also the researcher and the

research can be done most effectively through collaboration with others.

In my experience of working with teachers, one of the most challenging aspects of doing action research is getting started and working out the focus or question. Working collaboratively with others to decide on a common focus is a good way to get going and to gain a greater understanding about action research processes. Below are some steps for trying out an action research approach:

- Identify other colleagues in your school or centre who are interested in working with you.
- Brainstorm a list of teaching, learning or management issues you are concerned or puzzled about. Identify one issue you would all like to know more about.

- Observe your class closely for a week, focusing on the agreed issue and note your observations.
- Discuss your observations with your colleagues. What are the major points that come out? What specific questions do these points suggest?
- Develop a plan that you will follow to collect some initial data. Decide on: who will be the focus (yourself, the students); what kind of learning activities or teaching strategies you will use (regular or new); what methods you will use to collect data (the same or different methods); what resources you need (other people, materials, audio-recorders).
- Decide on a time frame: for how long you will collect the data; when you will meet to discuss the research; how many meetings you will hold.
- At each meeting, discuss the activities and the data and reflect as objectively as you can on what they are telling you about school or classroom practices.
- Discuss what changes in activities, materials, classroom interactions or physical arrangements could be made to make improvements in your practices.

Action research is meant to be a flexible approach to doing research so it is important to fit these steps to the needs of the group in terms of what kinds of questions, methods and time-frames that suit you best.

Teachers doing action research

Reading other teachers' accounts of action research is very valuable in gaining a better understanding of the procedures and processes. In this section, I will provide some short case studies by Australian

teachers, who work with adult ESL learners in the Adult Migrant English Program. In this program teachers teach students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. They use a broad curriculum framework that requires them to assess their students' learning of speaking, listening, reading and writing at the end of the course against a number of performance criteria. However, they are free to design their own syllabus, lesson plans, activities, and materials according to their analysis of learners' language needs. During the action research projects, the teachers came together frequently in collaborative groups to investigate a topic of common interest (e.g., teaching reading, teaching mixed level groups, developing a learner-centred syllabus). However, the way in which they identified questions relating to the overall topic was left to the individual interests of the teacher.

Although Australian teaching situations may be different from those in Thailand, I believe that the issues the teachers investigated and the way they collected their data can be commonly applied in many English language classrooms. In the case studies that follow, I have tried as much as possible to use the teachers' own voices to describe their research.

Case study 1: What about grammar?

Dora Troupiotis (1995) was concerned that grammar teaching had become marginalised in communicative language teaching approaches. As Dora put it:

This was part of a consequence of a widespread adoption of a process-oriented curriculum model which espoused a needs-based learner-centred

approach to teaching and course design. This curriculum model discouraged the direct teaching of language and favoured a fluid response to emerging learner needs together with a methodology of engagement and task-based learning. The teaching of grammar was also omitted through its omission in course materials and through a lack of attention to the study of grammar in teacher-training programs.

The particular questions that concerned Dora were:

- Should learners have a grammar book?

- What terminology should I use?
- What grammatical items should I select and how and why should I select them?
- How should I incorporate these items into the course and the lesson?
- How much time should I devote to the teaching of grammar?

Dora was teaching an intermediate class of fourteen students for fifteen hours a week over twenty weeks. She decided to record and monitor her decision-making about teaching grammar by using the following grid:

Activity/Task	Language item	Why teach? Why now? What terminology?	Other comments

Where possible I completed the [grid] immediately after the class. When this was not possible, I made brief notes and wrote up a fuller account later. On some occasions where class activities had clearly related to the project, I made extensive notes. At other times there did not seem to be anything

significant to record and I wrote very little.

Towards the end of the course, I also decided to get some feedback from the students about their attitudes to the learning of grammar. I asked them to fill in the simple questionnaire below:

Please answer the following questions:

1. How much class time should be spent on the following? (Use % of class time, e.g., 30%)
 Reading_____ Writing_____ Grammar_____ Speaking_____ Listening_____
2. How do you think grammar should be taught? (Tick the ones you agree with)
 - Students have a grammar book and grammar is a separate part of the lesson.
 - The teacher explains rules and then students do exercises.
 - Students read rules and do exercises at home. Then exercises are corrected in class and rules are explained.
 - Teacher explains when students don't understand a rule or make mistakes.
 - Other ways:_____.
3. Would you like to have a grammar book during the course?
 Yes_____ No_____ Not sure_____
4. Who should decide what grammar should be taught?
 The teacher_____ The students_____ Both the teacher and the students_____

Based on her data collection, Dora was able to reach several conclusions about her research questions.

Should learners have a grammar book?

At the beginning of the course, I had decided that I would not require all students to have a grammar book. I felt that this could lead to a preoccupation with grammar and encourage us to address grammar in a decontextualised way. By the end of the course, however, I had changed my views on this. In the end of course survey, 70 percent of students said they would have liked a grammar text. In retrospect, I believe that a grammar book would have provided students with a resource for extending their

understanding of grammatical features covered in the course and for investigating other aspects of grammar that arose.

What terminology should be used?

I used traditional grammatical terminology although I tried to keep the use of linguistic terms to a minimum. When grammatical terms were introduced I always illustrated what I meant by writing an example on the board.

How much time should be devoted to grammar teaching and how should it be taught?

The teaching of grammar occurred as the need emerged rather than as a

specified segment of the program. Generally, the introduction of new grammar was done by looking at its use in the context of a text. The discussion might then take the form of the introduction and explanation of a general rule, or a discussion of the appropriate context. This might be accompanied by grammatical exercises to reinforce the students' understanding of a rule. We would also discuss exceptions to rules and examples of usage of language that students had come across.

My estimate is that the explicit teaching of grammar took up about 10 to 20 percent of class time.

The students' opinions on the amount of time grammar teaching should occur in each lesson varied between 5 and 40 percent. The students also had very different views about how grammar should be taught, suggesting to Dora that she needed to use all the strategies suggested in her survey.

What grammatical items were selected and how were they incorporated into the lesson?

There is a need to be flexible enough to respond to learners' perceived needs as they arise, while at the same time being aware that a purely responsive approach is likely to give rise to disconnected and atomistic treatment. Teachers will need to determine where a particular feature is relevant or of interest to all learners, whether it is best dealt with at the time it occurs or whether it should be followed up with one or more students at a later time. If so, this should be signalled to the students concerned.

Interestingly, when asked who should determine what grammar should be taught, three students suggested the teacher, one student felt the students should and ten felt it should be decided by both the teacher and students.

Dora commented that she found her involvement in the project to be valuable:

Although I wouldn't say that my thinking has changed fundamentally, the project has helped me to clarify certain aspects of my teaching. In reflecting closely on my teaching of grammar and in recording the process of course planning in this regard, I have a better understanding of what I am doing and increased confidence that I can accommodate what is required of me in relation to the curriculum demands.

During the course of the project I also found that I was focusing more on whole texts and this allowed for a more contextualised introduction of grammar features, making grammar more relevant to learners.

Case study 2: What do students think of group work?

Lucy Valeri (1997, pp.37-39) was teaching intermediate learners in a mixed-level, or 'disparate', class. Her students were adults from a broad range of cultural and language backgrounds and with different experiences and goals in learning English. Lucy had been 'a keen advocate of group work for many years':

My usual practice was to establish groups subjectively on the basis of what

I thought would be the best combination for student learning. I had at times allowed students to form groups of their choice but at no stage had I surveyed them to discover how they wanted to be grouped and why. I decided to investigate a little more systematically what kind of groups worked best in my class, both from the learners' points of view and from my own.

In the first two weeks of the course some difficulties had arisen related to differences amongst the students, for example:

- some of the women wanted to work only with other women;
- some students only wanted to be in a group with students of a similar language background;
- some students had not undertaken previous language courses and needed additional help to fill gaps in their knowledge and understanding;
- the students had varied goals and interests and this presented difficulties in selecting content relevant to all.

I decided to focus initially on mixed or same sex preferences for groups, on mixed or same language background preferences, and on groupings by employment or further study goals.

Learners were grouped differently each time group work occurred. On some occasions they stayed in the same group to do two different kinds of tasks. Sometimes students were grouped to maximise the degree of disparateness and at other times they were organised

to be as homogeneous as possible. At other times students themselves selected their group. For the last three weeks of the course all group work was on the basis of self-selection.

Lucy collected data on her students' views by using a number of different methods:

- surveying the students to get their views about group work – some had never worked in groups before;
- developing teacher and student observation sheets so that they could write down their anecdotal impressions immediately after a particular group work activity;
- surveying students on specific tasks where they recorded their role in the group (e.g., group leader, note taker);
- holding class discussions and some individual interviews to clarify points written on the observation sheets;
- distributing a final survey in the last week of class to get students' views on the whole course.

These activities soon became part of her regular teaching and learning processes and she continued to investigate these issues for several weeks. Initially, when she surveyed the students at the beginning of the course she found that:

- 40 percent of the students said they did not like to work in groups; most of the others preferred to choose who they would work with;
- 60 percent of those who liked to work in groups felt they learnt from others and work was done quickly because of different ideas;

- a minority of students wanted to work with others from different countries so they wouldn't speak their own language, and some wanted to be grouped with people whose English was better than theirs. One student felt that the personality of the group members was important.

By the end of the course when the students had worked in groups for several weeks, she found a substantial change in the students' views:

- the majority of students had changed their minds about working in all female or all male groups;
- nearly all students wanted to work with students from other countries;
- all students except two made references to the importance of tolerance, politeness and 'personality' as qualities needed for group work to be successful;
- several students expressed their desire to select their group after knowledge of the task;
- all students preferred group work except two who preferred to work alone.

The learners were themselves astounded at how their perceptions of group work had changed over the course. They felt that they had taken charge of their own learning and had become more independent both in thinking and in classroom management. My co-teacher also commented on this change. As the learners had grouped themselves in the last three weeks of the course, I was forced to reconsider

whether my past practice of grouping learners according to my own criteria was in their best interests. The preference for mixed groups clearly gave students more scope for language use and they gained in confidence.

Like Dora, Lucy commented on how valuable she had found the action research process:

As an experienced teacher I recognised there was still room for improvement and it felt good. At no time can we feel that we "know it all" and just sit back. The collaborative action research project gave me the opportunity to work very closely with the learners and with fellow teachers who were very supportive. It also provided me with an opportunity to work with colleagues from very different teaching situations and to experience their problems and triumphs too.

Case study 3: What do students think about vocabulary learning?

Elena Baron (2001, pp.46-47) taught a group of high intermediate learners with professional backgrounds. She wanted to find out more about: i) what her students thought about vocabulary learning; ii) the most efficient way to present new vocabulary. To do the research she surveyed her students at the beginning of the course and again at the end.

In the intervening weeks, new vocabulary was presented to the students using seven different methods:

- pictures
- definitions
- word groups

- a) synonyms, e.g., ecstatic – cheerful, glad, joyous, elated
- b) antonyms, e.g., ecstatic – depressed, sad, unhappy
- c) collocates, e.g., exam – pass, fail, sit
- d) hyponyms, e.g., family – mother, father, sister, brother
- minimal context (phrase or sentence) for the word
- maximum context (where one has to read the whole paragraph for context)
- focusing attention on the structure of the new word, looking at prefixes and suffixes, e.g., dis = not – disagree, disregard, disadvantage
- combinations of the above

In each survey, the students were asked what they thought were the most efficient ways of presenting new vocabulary in class.

Outcomes of the initial survey at the beginning of the ten-week course indicated that:

- 75 percent of students preferred teachers to introduce new vocabulary through pictures (where possible) and definitions or synonyms
- 14 percent of students were strongly in favour of contextual ways of presenting new vocabulary
- 11 percent of students thought they would benefit most from a combination of all the vocabulary presentation models

Outcomes of the survey conducted at the end, after the students had been exposed to all seven methods of

presenting new vocabulary were as follows:

- 57 percent of students considered contextual presentation of new vocabulary to be the most efficient
- 36 percent of students preferred a combination of all the presentation methods
- 7 percent of students said they would like teachers to introduce new vocabulary through definitions

All of the students said they liked new vocabulary to be introduced in a story especially when the story was relevant to their experience and background. This relevance helped them understand and retain new vocabulary better. The students were surprised at how their perceptions of different ways of presenting new vocabulary had changed after they became more aware of the issues. They said that they were now more in control of their vocabulary learning and felt that they had become much more confident in language learning in general.

Elena felt that participating in action research had been ‘very rewarding’ because:

My involvement in this research has made me more aware of student perceptions of my teaching strategies and has shown, once again, that adult learners, especially those with higher levels of English prefer to be aware of teaching strategies. This conscious approach improves their confidence in language learning and their learning potential.

Conclusion

Action research has a great deal of appeal for many teachers in terms of the development of their professional practice. First, by collecting and analysing data systematically we can achieve a sound base from which to make informed decisions about further professional action. When this is done collaboratively with other colleagues in the school or department, action research provides a strong impetus for renewal of 'taken-for-granted' school practices. Second, collaboration breaks down the isolation that most teachers experience in their daily work. The pattern of one teacher in one classroom is a common one the world over. Action research enables colleagues to get together, learn from each other and share many of the common problems that face every teacher. Finally, action research strengthens the research base of our practice and encourages

us to reflect on why we do the things we do as teachers. It introduces us to research processes and methods that are directly relevant to our daily work and can give us a greater appreciation of how and whether recommendations from published research can be realistically applied in our classrooms. I will leave the last word on the benefits of action research to Linda Ross, who worked with me on a collaborative project a few years ago:

Collaborative action research is a powerful form of staff development because it is practice to theory rather than theory to practice. Teachers are encouraged to reach their own solutions and conclusions and this is far more attractive and has more impact than being presented with ideals that cannot be attained.

Author

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