

Action Research in Teacher Education: Cases From ELT Teacher Trainees

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative action research is a powerful form teacher development. In the recent years, it is becoming a common and a popular tool in English Language Teacher Education by taking its place as an important component in pre-service teacher education. Since it is still relatively uncommon for teachers to conduct action research studies in their own teaching, we aim at familiarizing our English Language Teaching (ELT) teacher trainees with the major characteristics and procedures of action research by also giving them opportunities to conduct their first collaborative action research studies. The present study discusses ELT trainees' first implementations of collaborative action research studies in the teacher training programme. Four collaborative action research cases conducted by ELT teacher trainees focusing on their own solutions and conclusions to their unique problems related to classroom silence, motivation, and vocabulary learning are discussed. The results indicate the positive role of action research as an important component of teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

Action research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically using the techniques of research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Nunan, 1992; Burns, 1999). Nunan (1992) points out the three major characteristics of action of action research: It is carried out by practitioners- the teachers, it is collaborative, and it is aimed at changing things. In practice, teachers conduct action research studies when they want to solve an educational problem they have in their own classrooms in order to improve their practices.

Collaborative action research is also known to be a powerful form teacher development. However, it is still relatively uncommon for teachers to conduct action research studies in their own teaching (Borg, 2010). Thus, in the recent years, it is becoming a common and a popular tool in teacher education by taking its place as an important component in pre-service teacher education in order to familiarize teacher trainees with the major characteristics and procedures of action research and by also giving them opportunities to conduct their first collaborative action research studies from the very beginning of their teaching experience (Atay, 2008, Shanks, & Miller & Rosendale , 2012).

The purpose of the present study is to explore ELT teacher trainees' attitudes towards action research studies. We also aim at gathering more information on teacher trainees' overall evaluation of their own action research experience, the effects of this experience on their teaching and their concerns towards being a 'Teacher as Researcher'.

THE STUDY

The participants of the study are 9 ELT teacher trainees from Uludağ University, Turkey. All the trainees are 3rd grade- 5th semester- students. All of the participants are in charge of planning and teaching English to their assigned classrooms. They are taking their regular courses including ELT Methodology II (2-theory, 2-practice). ELT Methodology II course primarily emphasizes the application of classroom-based research, teacher-directed research and action research: characteristics, procedures, data collection techniques by giving particular importance to action research.

In the initial stages of the term the teacher trainees are well informed about the definition of the action research, its major characteristics and procedures. After reviewing the components of the research, the data collection techniques, four different action research studies selected for further examining are dealt with the course instructor during the practice sessions. Then, the teacher trainees are asked to form pairs or groups of threes to

conduct their own collaborative research studies relying on classroom problems they have in their actual teaching. Following the action research procedures suggested by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) as shown below, the teacher trainees are asked to perform their action research samples.

- Stage 1: Researchers identify, evaluate, and formulate a problem that is viewed as critical to their everyday teaching.
- Stage 2: Researchers consult with other interested parties – teachers, other researchers, and administrators – in order to focus the problem more and perhaps suggest the cause of the problem.
- Stage 3: Researchers review research literature to find out what can be learned from comparable studies.
- Stage 4: Based on their reading, researchers may modify or redefine the initial statement of the problem, which may take the form of a set of objectives or a testable hypothesis.
- Stage 5: Researchers specify the research design including the participants, choice of materials, and procedures.
- Stage 6: Researchers clarify how the project will be evaluated with an understanding that this evaluation will be continuous.
- Stage 7: Researchers implement the project undertaking the data collection process.
- Stage 8: Researchers analyze the data, draw inferences, and evaluate the project.

During the remaining ten weeks, the action research groups have step by step followed the procedures listed and provided weekly reports to their instructors about their research. The course instructor-and also the author of the present study- is responsible to provide feedback to each group in each practice session. Thus, the challenges action groups faced with are immediately solved and suggestions are provided.

Besides the four collaborative action research cases conducted by ELT teacher trainees focusing on their own solutions and conclusions to their unique problems in the classroom setting, the data collection techniques employed in the present study include semi-structured interviews with the trainees, course instructor's field-notes and observation.

FINDINGS

In this part of the paper, brief information about the each four action research case is summarised by giving details about the real classroom problems teacher trainees detect during their teaching and then decide as the focus of their action research studies.

- **CASE I:**
The first research group consists of two collaborative teacher trainees. The trainees are teaching 38 7th graders- two groups. From the first lessons of their teaching, they notice a problem: "Silence". Students are keeping quiet throughout the lessons and they are unwilling to participate. So, the trainees identify their problem as 'Classroom Silence' and following the action research procedures they collect data via questionnaires, interviews and observation. They try identifying the reasons of silence and solving the problem by trying different strategies in the classroom. Finally, relying on the data, they list out some effective strategies that may help them in their unique setting.
- **CASE II:**
The second research group consists of 3 collaborative teacher trainees. The trainees are teaching 36 A2 level- three groups- adult learners attending a private language school. Although they have been taking EFL courses for over 10 years, they still have difficulties in English. Relying on their observation and consultation, the trainees identify 'limited vocabulary repertoire' as the main reason of their failure. Getting help from the related literature and asking students' preferences, the trainees decide on different actions like vocabulary learning with e-materials, vocabulary learning with vocabulary reports etc. After applying different techniques in the classroom, they get students' opinions by arranging interviews. They also evaluate students' progress by referring quiz results. Finally, they figure out some effective vocabulary teaching activities that are supposed to be valid in their own setting.

- CASE III

The third group is comprised of two collaborative teacher trainees. They are teaching 16 A2 level university students. The greatest challenge they have with their young adult students is their students' being 'unmotivated' in the Foreign language lessons. Considering their age and needs, the research group, tries integrating technology to their EFL classes. They basically focus on vocabulary learning as they believe this is the most important limitation in their language classes. They prepare different word lists, videos, vocabulary games, tests to take their attention and discuss with the students how effective they are in their setting.

- CASE IV

The fourth group, similarly, consists of two collaborative teacher trainees. They are teaching 15 5th graders attending a public school. The trainees are quite dissatisfied with the students' limited interest on learning English. Reviewing the literature on young learners, they decide to take their attention by considering the recommendations of 'peripheral learning'. They, then, decorate the classroom setting by posters, flashcards and colourful materials. They conduct follow up interviews with young children to support the observation data and identify some tips that would work well with their young learners.

CONCLUSIONS

Just before the term is over, the teacher trainees have completed their action research studies. Then, it is time to explore trainees' attitudes towards action research. After the analysis of the qualitative data gathered through different sources, some emerging key themes are categorised. First of all, the ELT teacher trainees emphasise the power of action research to enable them engage more closely with their classroom teaching. That is, the trainees indicate that the process help them both to understand their own practices and improve them. With regard to personal and professional growth, the trainees indicate the positive role of action research in terms of developing confidence, building self-efficacy in teaching, encouraging change and reflection, increasing self-awareness and personal insights, developing critical thinking. The teacher trainees also indicate that action research provides them the opportunity to develop teacher-student relations by encouraging mutual 'sharing'. Secondly, collaboration with other teacher trainees is also declared as one of the important contributions of action research. The teacher trainees all agree that action research encourages sharing and cooperation among them. Collaboration also facilitates the process by challenging them to think many issues. Thirdly, the trainees are quite satisfied with their action research and they are encouraged to write up and publish their own work. This is considered to be an important step in achieving the concept 'Reflective Practitioner' and 'Teacher as Researcher' perspective. As Stenhouse (1975: 143) indicate

- The uniqueness of each classroom setting implies that any proposal-even at school level-needs to be tested and verified and adapted by each teacher in his own classroom. The ideal is that the curricular specifications should feed a teacher's personal research and development programmes through which he is increasing his own understanding of his own work and hence bettering his teaching... It is not enough that teachers' work should be studied; they need to study it themselves.

As we strongly believe the potential of action research as an important tool in teacher education, we would highly recommend teacher education programs to integrate action research practices to their curriculum. It is also particularly important to increase planning/ teaching opportunities for 3rd grade EFL teacher trainees', where they can perform real action research samples as practitioners in their own classrooms. Providing in-service training for more experienced ELT teachers in order to make them familiar with action research may also take an important part in teacher development. Last but not least, we also need to encourage and support action research studies in school-settings in Turkey.

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