

Female Teachers' Professional Development through Action Research Practice

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Abstract

This is a study on teachers' professional development through action research practice. The participants of the study were 23 English Language Teachers (ELT) who teach in high schools, preparatory schools and colleges in Debre Markos, in Dessie and around in 2014. The methods of data collection were teacher reflection, and in-depth interview. The ELT teachers felt that the Action Research (AR) involvement helped them develop their profession. Because of their involvement in the inquiry, they changed their perception of research and their role as teachers and researcher. Their interest towards action research develops as they do the research. Their consciousness about EFL teaching rises when they research on their own classroom and environment in relation to English language teaching. The teachers felt that AR brings opportunity especially for female teachers who have other responsibilities at home and in the surrounding. The teachers' perception shows that they are comfortable with doing action research. In-service action research is economical, effective and efficient method of professional development. The teachers read and explore literature to enrich their research. This implies that some push factor should be there to break the silence of teachers who have developed comfort with what they have. Researching pushes teachers to read the academic literature, update themselves, write and contribute to the intellectual world by adding knowledge backed with experience and expertise.

Keywords: action research, professional development

1. Introduction

Educators strongly suggest that research should be regarded as part of the work of teachers. It actually is one of the major tasks of teachers in addition to classroom teaching and updating them through reading academic writings. In a foreign language teaching, classroom activities play the major role in giving opportunity to students to learn the language. Every classroom environment is so unique to itself that what actually works in one classroom may hardly work in another. This makes action research inquiry important in order to exploit each classroom event to benefit students at its best.

Action research is one of the various approaches of educational research methods. It is highly recommended for teachers since it enables them to reflect on their classroom activities (Babcock, 2001). It helps teachers to improve ongoing practice to help students' learning and their own professional development. Students, teachers, administrators, research experts and governing educational bodies' engagement in a continuous process of action improves the environment and makes learning happen to a maximum level. Action research offers the way how this situation happen through participative practical involvement of the concerned bodies (especially teachers and students) by a cyclical engagement of targeted activities. It is a continuous process of investigation involving planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

EFL teachers can make use of it to improve their real classroom situation. They should be equipped with Action Research theoretical and practical knowledge. A continuous improvement of classroom environment is crucial in a foreign language situation like in Ethiopia since the classroom activities should as much as possible be exploited for the learners as it is the sole opportunity available to improve their English, and communicate through the language.

Action Research, though relevant, is lacking in Ethiopian EFL teachers. This is concluded by local researchers by Adoko (2000), Cherie (2003), and Wonda (2006). These researchers conducted study on the awareness, attitude, and extent of implementation of action research in Ethiopian educational centers, and found out that most of them never conducted one. The result of these findings shows that most of the teachers have positive attitude towards it and they are eager to know how to conduct Action Research. The reason why most of them do not conduct Action Research is because of lack of know-how (Ibid). In their recommendation, the researchers indicated that if 'concerned bodies' offer these teachers with appropriate training on Action Research, the great majority of them will take a move.

The aim of this investigation is to assess the perceived effects of action research on those female EFL teachers who practiced it.

2. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to investigate Female EFL teachers' engagement in action research and its effect on their professional development.

Specifically, this study is intended to:

1. explore the effect of the teachers' action research engagement on their professional development
2. reveal female EFL teachers reaction on their action research experience
3. show the extent to which EFL teachers feel that action research involvement contribute to their professional efficiency
4. examine any change of practice and/or perception of the teachers as a result of their involvement in action research

3. Action Research

The term action research was first coined by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1952), as Kemmis 1980 stated in Elliot, 1991). The concept of action research traces back to the works of John Dewey in 1920s and Kurt in 1940s. Stephen Coley and other teachers from College of Columbia University introduced it to education in 1949 (Haley, 2006). As to them, action research is "Teacher-initiated classroom research which seeks to increase the teacher's understanding of classroom teaching and learning and to bring about improvements in classroom practices" (Snell, 1999). Action research can make teachers 'students of teaching' (John Dewey, in Verster, 2005).

Action research (AR here after) emerged as a form of curriculum development in schools in the 1960s in UK (Elliot, 1991). Teachers who conducted action research praised, and so the primary purpose of some researchers to conduct one was appraisal (Ibid).

3.1. Definition of Action Research

Singh, (2007) cited the following definitions of action research. AR is a three-step spiral process of 1) planning which involves reconnaissance; 2) taking action; and 3) fact-finding about the results of the action (Lewin, 1947, in Singh, 2007)). "Action Research is the process by which practitioners attempt to study their problems scientifically in order to guide, correct, and evaluate their decisions and actions" (Corey, 1953, in Singh, 2007). "Action Research is a fancy way of saying let's study what's happening at our school and decide how to make it a better place (Calhoun, 1994, in Singh, 2007).

As the definition of the scholars' state, AR is a combination of action and research. "It is an investigation in order to act to bring about improvement and understanding" (Singh, 2007). AR is practice oriented (Ross, 1999). AR has action as a central element, not passive observation. It requires practitioners involve in reflective action that leads to improvement of practice (Babcock, 2001).

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) describe AR as inquiry consisting of four main phases: planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Singh, 2007). Elliot's (1991) mostly cited definition says, "... Action research can be defined as 'the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it.'" AR is a kind of inquiry conducted by practitioners (Burns 1999). Language teachers conduct classroom inquiry with the aim of getting a positive change in the teaching-learning process.

Action research is a small-scale study and a disciplined method for intentional learning from experience (Altrichte, et al., 1993). "Action research can be defined as the process of studying a real school or classroom situation to understand and improve the quality of actions or instruction (Hensen 1996, in Johnson, 2002). Action research is: "...a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; in Singh, 2007).

McCarthy and Riner (1998) gave the following description on what action research is and what it is not. As to their list, AR is:

- 1 a process, which improves education by change.
- 2 educators working together to improve their own practices.
- 3 developing reflection about our teaching.
- 4 collaborative, that is, it is educators talking and working with other educators in empowering relationships.
- 5 the establishment of self-critical communities of educators.
- 6 a systematic learning process.
- 7 a process that requires that we "test" our ideas about education.
- 8 open-minded.
- 9 keeping a personal journal about our teaching.
- 10 a political process.
- 11 a critical analysis of our places of work.
- 12 an emphasis on the particular.
- 13 a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.
- 14 working in small groups of educators.

15 a justification of our teaching practices.

But, action research is not:

- 1 the usual thing that teachers do when thinking about teaching. It is more systematic and more collaborative.
- 2 simply problem solving. It involves problem posing, the search for the questions beneath the questions that we typically ask about our educational practices.
- 3 done 'to' other people. Action research is research by particular educators on their 'own' work, and it is done with the help of other practitioners.
- 4 hierarchical, but rather is democratic. It is educators working together in relationships of equal ownership and influence regarding the action research project.
- 5 a way to implement predetermined answers to educational questions. Action research explores, discovers, and works to create contextually specific solutions.

AR is conducted by participants (not by outsiders) who are involved in the object of research (like teachers or teacher educators who are engaged in the act of teaching some of the aspects of which are being researched). It is carried out within the confines of the social situation in which the participants are functioning, i.e. in educational scenario such type of researches are conducted by the teachers within the school in which they are employed. The method in such type of research predominantly relies on self-reflection of the participant (researcher) rather than on rigorous statistical analysis (Ibid).

Action research can also be defined as a way of thinking and systematically assessing what is happening in the classroom or school, implementing action to improve or change the situation or behavior, monitoring and evaluating the effect of the action with a view to continuing improvement (Thomson, 1987, in Nigussie, 1996).

In general, action research is a systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers to gather information, understand how the teaching-learning process operates, how they teach, how well their students learn, developing reflective practice, in order to effect positive change in the teaching-learning environment, the educational practice and improve the quality of the immediate learning environment (Mills in CAL, 2003; Finch, 2004; Elliot, 1991; Snell, 1999; McCarthy and Riner, 1998; Johnson, 2002; Altrichte, et al., 1993; Burns, 1999 etc).

Johnson (2002) describes AR in the following way.

- 1 action research is systematic: it is a planned, methodical observation related to one's teaching
- 2 you do not start with an answer. The assumption of any research is that you don't know what you are going to find. If you know the answer, there is no point for you to study. For example, if you know that method X is the best way to teach reading, it will not be appropriate to conduct a study to describe it. However, to see the effect of method X in a particular classroom, it would be appropriate to conduct a study. The goal is to understand method X fully and its effect on student's reading performance. This is the concern of action research, where the teacher becomes an impartial observer (to the greatest degree possible) and study the effect of method X as it is used in his/her classroom.
- 3 an action research study does not have to be complicated or elaborate to be rigorous or effective
- 4 you must plan your study adequately before you begin to collect data: prior plan and schedule is one of the distinguishing factor of a systematic inquiry and an impressionistic view.
- 5 action research projects vary in length. The length depends on the nature of the inquiry, the question, the research environment, and the data collection methods. For smaller action research projects of classroom teachers, 2 weeks is a minimum length. There are also action research projects done within one or two period's time. Longer studies for master's thesis or an academic journal, the duration ranges form 2 months to a whole school year. The data collection period in both cases should not be too short to avoid the risk of presenting an unrealistic view of that educational setting.
- 6 observations should be regular, but they do not necessarily have to be long. It may range from 1 minute to an hour or more recorded through a quick note or longer and more formal. Consistency and pre planned schedule should be there.
- 7 action research projects exist on a continuum from simple and informal to detailed and very formal
- 8 action research is sometimes grounded in theory. Action research relates itself to the existing theory by the question, results and conclusion of its findings to the existing theory. Teachers may let the reader know how their research is related to what others said. Some action researches include review literature before data collection to give it a framework; others wait until the result of their study, to compare their work with what others said.
- 9 action research is not a quantitative study. In an action research, the researcher is not trying to prove anything. S/he is not comparing anything to choose the best; neither is there experimental or control groups, independent or dependent variables, or hypotheses to be tested. The goal of action research is not one of the above kind but simply to understand what is going on and improve it.

3.2. Theoretical Backups of Action Research

The primary concern of action research is change (Altrichter et al., 1993). The motive of the change is grounded by the idea of development and innovation being the main elements of professionalism. There is always opportunity of improvement in context of teaching. Action research believes in the inevitability and importance of change and improvements for their educational value not for the purpose of abandoning routine practice. This approach to change is result of a reflexive view of professionalism. Action research can be an agent of change (Johnson, 2002).

Approaches to change: There are two approaches to change called technical and reflexive. A brief discussion about them will clarify their contribution to action research.

- 1. Technical rationality:** This approach assume that there are general solutions to practical problems, these solutions can be developed outside practical situation, and the solution can be translated in to practice by teachers action which is communicated through publications, training, administrative orders etc (Schon, 1983, in Altrichter et al., 1993). This is operationalized in the classical research model of innovation. Theories are developed through research, they produced into curriculum, teaching-learning materials and manuals and disseminated to teachers who are to accept the innovation in the form of prescription and use it in the 'told' way.

This approach results in a highrarchy of credibility. The teacher appears to be more credible than the students, the head of department more credible than the teacher, the principal more credible than the head of department etc (Ibid). This gives low value to practitioners, mere applying of the higher theoretical knowledge predefined by the administrative power above them.

- 2) Reflexive rationality:** The assumption behind this approach of change is complex practical problems demand specific solutions, these solution can only be developed in the context in which the problem arises and where the practitioner is a crucial and determining element and the solution cannot be successfully applied to other situations but can be made accessible to other practitioners as hypothesis to be tested (Ibid).

Behind action research is reflexive rationality. The concept of professionalism and teacher as researcher was developed by this view. This is just what Stenhouse refers as "A capacity for autonomous professional self-development through systematic self-study, through the study of the work of other teachers and through the testing of ideas by classroom research procedures" (Stenhouse 1975, in Altrichter et al., 1993).

The learning culture of the educational center is a determining facto for reflexive rationality to develop. If there exists local initiatives, and the practitioners are empowered to bring about growth process, then imposed change will replace itself by improvement-centered-change (Altrichter et al., 1993). In order to understand the concepts of reflexive rationality, we need to view the description of complex professional action. Donald Schon (1983) formulated the following relationship between professional knowledge and action.

Action Type 1: Tacit Knowing – in –action

Tacit knowing-in-action represents accumulated knowledge under routine circumstance. When professional practice is simple and appears smooth, action is based on 'tacit knowing-in-action.' The characteristic of this type is that thinking and acting are not separate, the profession is frequently unaware of the sources of his practical knowledge, s/he will usually fail to give a straightforward verbal description of his/her practical knowledge. 'Routines' are cited as an important example of this kind of action which could not have resulted without knowledge.

Action Type2: Reflection-in-action

When new and complex situation which cannot be solved by routine actions happens, reflection-in-action is needed. This is described as:

- When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and techniques, but constructs a new theory of the unique case. His inquiry is not limited to a deliberation about means which depends on a prior agreement about ends. He does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to a decision which he must later convert to action. Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is build into his inquiry (Schon, 1983).

It may not be translated in to words or writing. It resembles a 'reflective conversation with the situation' (Ibid). It refers to the competence of self-reflexive act of one's own thinking and the ability to import knowledge for one context to another (Dorney, 1983 in Altrichter et al., 1993).

Action Type 3: Reflection-on-Action

This action type occurs when there is a need to explicitly communicate knowledge and verbally by distancing ourselves for our actions in order to reflect on it (Ibid). This is an important feature of professional action that it:

- 1 Allows improvement of our ability to analyze and recognize knowledge. It facilitates careful analysis and allows us to plan changes

2 It makes knowledge communicable

This type of action is in the main part of professional competency. Professionalism requires the following to be fulfilled:

1. We have to cope constructively with serious problems or complex new situation. By distancing ourselves from our actions, we have better chance of redefining them.
2. We need to take responsibility for the education and induction of motives into the profession and for passing on professional experience to the next generation. Verbal and written record and communication of knowledge gets importance to make this happen.
3. We must be able to communicate our knowledge and our professional action to colleagues and clients, putting forward rational arguments for them and inviting critical discussion.

3.3. The Purpose of Action Research

Action research is “the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it” (Elliot, 1991). This definition emphasizes one of the most important purposes of action research. The aim of action research as to Elliot is to improve the quality of the teaching-learning process and the conditions where teachers and students work. Action research supports teachers to cope with the challenges of the teaching-learning practice by way of reflection and investigation of innovations (Altrichter, et al., 1993). An action research experience of teachers has shown that the support and opportunities of the research process helps teachers succeed and achieve. Teacher-researchers become successful in managing professional problems. They showed remarkable change in practice but also developing theories for their actions. Action research helps teachers uncover complexities of the teaching processes and improve it for the student’s sake (Ibid). Not only for the teacher-researcher but also other teachers and curriculum designers can benefit for teachers’ research.

Action research also helps teachers to be reflective (MOE HDP Module, 2004). Reflection is “focused thinking before giving a considered response which results in improvement.” (Ibid). It is when they reflect their own practices that they can see areas of strength and improvement. A reflective teacher does not want to accept problems and live with them. Instead, s/he wants to search for solutions and improve it.

Briefly, McCarthy and Riner (1998) stated that the purpose of AR is:

- To enable the participants (teachers/teacher-educators) to understand their practices.
- To enable the teachers/teacher-educators to assess the sphere of activity more objectively.
- To empower the teachers to improve their teaching practices by testing innovative ideas of their own.
- It is practical and directly relevant to an actual situation in the working world of teachers. The subjects are the students in the classroom, the staff, or others who are primarily involved in the school.
- It is flexible and adaptive, allowing changes during the trial period and sacrificing control in favor of responsiveness and on-the-spot experimentation and innovation.

3.4. The Relationship between Action and Reflection

• Action and Reflection

“Action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants (teacher, students and principals, for example) in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social and educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations (and institutions) in which these practices are carried out.”(McNiff, 1988). According to this definition, with the help of action research teachers may mediate theory and practice, find better ways of implementing theory in to practice, identify successful and unsuccessful alternatives, improve and change situations. “The skill of reflective thinking is equally important in implementing action research” (Joseph, et al., 1998). AR practitioners need to develop systematic reflections and habit of their mind.

The teachers will tell and reflect on their professional and development as a result of the action research inquiry they’ll reflect their experience about carrying out an AR in their classrooms. In the literature teacher action research are known as action research, practitioner research, teacher research, practical inquiry, classroom research, action inquiry (Singh, 2007).The researchers reflect up on what is happening with their project, developing p, planning, acting and observing.

AR helps teachers shift from focus on long hours and product to effective hours and process. It helps teachers develop ability of keeping up with new curriculum (Verster, 2005). AR sees teachers and students as the most important players of the process.

The main feature of action research is that it must address the practical problems and needs to bring about a practical outcome (Wallace, 1991). Action research is attractive for reflective teachers for two main reasons:

- I. It can have a specific and immediate outcome which can be directly related to practice in the teacher’s own context.
- II. The ‘findings’ of such research might be primarily specific, i.e. it is not claimed that they are

necessarily of general application, and therefore the methods might be more free-ranging than those of conventional research. (Ibid)

AR is part or/and an extension of reflective practice of teachers. “The ‘reflective cycle’ is a shorthand way of referring to continuing process of reflection n ‘received knowledge’ and ‘experiential knowledge’ in the context of professional action (practice)” (Ibid).

The base of action research is reflective rationality (Altrichter et al., 1993). In this sense the process of action research is analyzed in terms of the relationship between action and reflection.

4. Female EFL teachers and Professional development through Action Research

I. Professional Competencies

The subjects mentioned the following competencies they get as a result of their action research engagement.

1. Critical observation

The teachers confirmed that they have become critical observers of their classrooms and its environment. The knowledge of action research has made them think that things can be improved through investigation.

2. Detect problems or ask questions

As a result of their being observers, they are able to identify their classroom problems. Being able to identify the problem is said to be half the solution. The teachers felt that it is highly significant to be able to dictate the problem that hinders the teaching-learning process. Moreover, among the problems they select, they prioritize.

3. Systematic investigation

Solving problems of teaching may be the routine activity of teachers that they do every day. When they find one method successful in their class, they try out another. They ask their colleagues and try to normalize the situation. Though it incorporates almost all activities in research, these routine activities are not systematic. Since the teachers do this subconsciously, the effect as well as the learning will be less. Routine activities can be made systematic by subjecting them to conscious, deliberate and scheduled recording.

4. Alternative solutions

To be able to state the underlined problem is one thing and coming up with solutions to overcome the problem is another. The target teachers felt that their involvement in action research enable them think of different solutions to improve a given problem.

5. Decision making

Making choices is one important skill that the participants claim they learnt as a result of their investigation. Action research is about improving a situation that is found unsuitable for the teaching-learning process. All solutions that the teachers come up with can neither be implemented nor be the one that can really improve the existing conditions.

Appropriate choice must be made. When the researcher chooses what s/he thinks is the one that can bring a real change, s/he is making decision. How the investigation is implemented; how the change is evaluated; what data collection instrument should be used; and how the result should be analyzed also need decision making. This is what the target group felt they learnt from the inquiry.

6. Implementation of intervention

Once the researcher chooses the intervention which s/he thinks can bring a change on the situation, implementation remains. The how, when, where and by whom of the implementation is decided by the researcher. The target female EFL teachers learnt this when they do their own action research.

7. Reflection on action

As a result of the action research involvement the subjects reflected on the actions they have intervened to improve practice. They looked back to their impact of their action on their practice. The teachers stated that the whole process made them be reflective.

8. Evaluation

Parallel to the reflection ability is evaluation skill. Every time an intervention is implemented it is evaluated to check the extent of the improvement it exerted on the practice. Did the intervention work or not? If it did, to what extent? The teachers evaluated their actions and it is revealed in their research documents.

9. Professional dialogue, discussion and communication

The inquiry demanded the teachers to engage in professional dialogue; talk about their research with their colleagues; ask advice about their inquiry from experienced researchers, teachers and friends. They said that they have had a lot of talking about their study with their colleagues and learnt a lot. They learnt a lot from discussion with their colleagues that they have already made it a useful habit worth adapting.

10. Reading

The average teaching experience of the target teachers is 28 years. They started teaching right away after college and never exit teaching from the day they are on it. They developed comfort with their situation and want to remain like that throughout their teaching career.

Years have passed without the teachers taking any action of what so ever sort to develop their teaching

status.

The teachers used to think that what they have learnt three decades ago is the best ever and it needs no change at all. Whenever a new curriculum is introduced they tend to reject it all at once without giving it a trial.

Action research, the teachers felt, enable them read, explore and see what has been going on in ELT. To accomplish the inquiry at hand they had to dig out and see how the others elsewhere have handled such things. This made them learn not only from their own investigation but also from the literature they reviewed. The research has been a push factor for them to read.

11. Seminar presentation

The findings of the target teachers' study have been presented. Seminar presentation is one important skill that the teachers developed because of the action research participation. They said that findings of studies such as their own need to be shared with colleagues, administrators and others. Otherwise, to use one of the teachers' words, it will remain 'Yegan mebrat' (light in pot).

12. Empowerment

The teachers who did action research felt that they are part of the decision makers. They feel that they are autonomous who knows what is best for their own classroom practice even more than the administrators. Looking at themselves as a researcher enables them improve their teaching conditions at their best. Action research enables them be resource persons who have something to contribute to administrators, parents and curriculum developers rather than being passive recipient, observer, and accomplisher of others' work. The direct involvement of the teachers in the improvement of their own teaching-learning problems made them feel like they are the center and most important element in the process.

13. Professional self-confidence

The participants said that they developed professional self-confidence as a result of their involvement in action research. Any professional development action increases professional confidence on the part of the participants since it increases their ability. Action research involvement also increases the participants' ability in relation to inquiry there by increasing their professional self-confidence.

14. Professional responsibility

In the past, the only job of the teachers was considered to be teaching. In that case, if problems arise in the teaching learning process, teachers used to feel that it is somebody else's job to improve it. All they think they are supposed to do is reporting it; that is if they care to do so. But now, as a result of their involvement in their own problem solving activity, they are being responsible. Worrying about the problems and trying to solve it is a witness of responsibility.

Taking part in problem solving, investigation and reflection, in turn, develops responsibility. The teachers affirmed that their engagement in action research really made them be responsible for their profession.

15. Report writing

The subjects wrote their action researches themselves. They have their advisers comment on their writings. They also read sample action research articles in order to organize their own. They developed research/report writing skill when they produce theirs which they placed in their libraries of their respective schools.

II. Teacher as Researcher

There is a change in trend these days that research has become part of teachers' job (Mitton-Kukner, 2015). Especially in the situation where the best methods of second language teaching have become mysterious even for scholars, and where scholars themselves agree on the fact that each classroom situation is unique to itself, classroom research seem to be the way out.

The need for action research in ELT has become the order of the day to respond to the multiple needs of the students as well as to the teacher who is entitled to make the teaching effective. Honestly speaking the teachers who participated in the study confessed that they did not understand the role of action research to such an extent. However, they stated that they know its role in improving their professional carrier.

The teachers stated that they used to think that a researcher is a different person who has a higher and special skill who is born to research. They never thought research being part of their job. Now, they are convinced that it should be teachers' work.

.... I never thought I would ever do research before trying it out. I and my friends thought about it and tried it five years ago. We had no idea but started it with the hope that we will have some idea. I remember how reluctant we were. We were about to give up even after starting it. We thought that we were unable for that. We used to think that some people are born to do that and others, like we, can never have a clue.... In the end; however, we managed to do it. And we learnt that we were really able to do research. I personally said 'waw! I can do research'. I willingly accepted it as part of my job afterwards. I keep doing it.... (Teacher A)

They changed their perception of themselves from implementer of what they were given to problem solver and key facilitator of the teaching-learning endeavour who have much to contribute and without whom the process is a mere impossibility.

III. Action Implementation

In relation to the practice of the teachers' action research, the participants found it to be useful experience. They learnt how to implement a possible intervention to improve the existing situation.

IV. Change

Many scholars regard action research as change agent. The target teachers of this study also felt the same thing. They cited the following changes in their professional carrier.

1. Teaching strategies and Methods

Some teachers change their methods of teaching. It gives them alternative ways to try out. For example, one of the subjects reported her case in the following way:

My students had difficulty reading in front of the class. Especially ten of them couldn't even utter a word. I planned to do an action research on it. I thought of interventions and asked my friends if they have one. They suggested some. Among the alternatives I came up with, I chose one. It is making them read outside of the classroom alone without audience. I had them do this twice. Next, me being the only audience they read twice. Their progress was improving. The third time, I and three students attended the listening program. The students were improving. Their fear becomes lesser and lesser. As they progress, I added the number of students attending the listening. I did this for five rounds. The students totally improved and managed to read in front of the class successfully. Only one of the students couldn't succeed. I found this method 90% working. Therefore, next time I face such a challenge, I'm going to use it. By so doing, I adopt a new method of teaching such as this one. (Teacher H).

2. Improving practice

The action research experience has helped the teachers improve their practice. It suggests to them a way of doing things better and differently. One of the participants' experiences tells how it improves teachers practice.

With the introduction of continuous assessment and active learning, we have come to use group work as one method of teaching. I didn't find it useful when I practiced it as I heard many suggest it. The problems were that students discuss other things than the topic; that they use Amharic as a medium of communication; that they have one person do the assignment for the group; that they spend much time in one issue and do not complete all the activities etc. I sensed that I have an issue in the practice of group work. Many suggest it as good method and I also know that it is important for many reasons to have students discuss in group in EFL. How can I make 'group work' effective in my classroom? I decided to investigate it systematically and planned intervention. I instructed the students that I would give a test after the group work on the issue they discussed. The scenario amazingly changed. The students discussed fully in a way they never did. I gave the test as I promised. I could have left the test since I got what I wanted but I feared that next time I use such thing they would consider it a fake. I wouldn't want to ruin the sustainability like that. Instead, I keep attaching such activities like quizzes, personal reports, oral questions to individual members, sudden selection of presenters and so on after each group work. This changes everything. The intervention improves the way I practice group work. It improves it totally. (Teacher C).

3. Reflective practice

A reflective teacher is one who looks back at what s/he has taught. The target teachers felt that they have become reflective as a result of their involvement in their own action and reflection. They practiced looking back to their work and viewing what worked, what didn't work, which needs improvement, and so on to do it better next time. Being reflective, as the subjects mentioned, is a new phenomenon for them. They taught more than half of their lives each and in all their teaching experience, they tend to forget what happened after teaching it. They did not have a habit of looking back for redoing it better.

The teachers felt that because of their involvement in the inquiry, they have become reflective practitioner. They developed looking back to their work after completing it for improvement. After all, they engage in action research practice to understand and /or improve their practice. They find themselves in a position where they cannot do this without reflecting back to their practice. To this end, they have become reflective teachers and now they are enjoying it.

4. Innovative thinking

The teachers spend most of their teaching by using the text book only. They confined themselves to exploiting the textbook exhaustively. When they do this, they adapt themselves to the textbook. The teachers are intelligent that they know everything in the text book and can practice it in classroom as it is. When the method suggested by the textbook is incompatible with the existing situation in the classroom, problem arises. To solve such problems the teacher needs to be creative. To respond to the demands of the existing situation and manage it, noble and original ideas are mandatory since neither the problem nor the solution is there in the textbook.

Teachers need to have both know-how to 'use analytic, creative, and practical abilities to reach an intended goal as well as generate new ideas or combine the existing ideas in a noble way' (Johnson, 2002). This refers to both

intelligence and creativity of teachers (Lyons, 2016).

When teachers engage themselves in action research inquiry, they think of new ways of handling difficulties at hand. The process makes them creative since they think of ways of facing the new challenges (Mitton-Kukner, 2015). This changes the teachers' status from merely adapting the material to creating noble and original ideas that have a significant value in time of trouble. Effective EFL teachers need to be innovative thinkers to help the students learn the language.

5. Teachers' beliefs about their practice and perception of their roles

A great deal of change has been observed on the teachers' beliefs about their practice and perception of their roles. They witness the value by their own direct involvement. They are willing to make it part of their job not only because it is prescribed but also because they saw the benefit themselves. The experience adds them one more role i.e. researcher. To use their own words, 'kebalebetu Yaweke ...' (no one knows better about a thing more than its owner).

Unless they want to ignore it as they used to in the past, they claimed, there are many obstacles in teaching. Since they have accepted solving the classroom problem as their own responsibility, they have identified 'researching' being their role.

1. TEFL and action research

This section focuses on the potential contributions of action research for teachers of English as a Foreign Language. The English teachers participated in the study identified the following benefit they get out of the investigation process.

a. Provides with alternative method of teaching

The teachers are made to articulate the personal methodologies. The alternatives that they came up with the action research involvement help them see other methods and strategies to do the teaching.

They used to think that what they have gone through both in teaching and learning was the best way ever. Their reading to enrich the investigation as well as the action research engagement brought them with different techniques of teaching. This in turn allow them see that their method of teaching turns out to be outdated, inferior and incompatible. They also confessed that they learned that there is no one way of teaching that works for all classrooms.

They need updating all the time. Action research, they think, is appropriate for this. They learned that they need to exploit all ways that experts come up with and also that they need to see and investigate, plan and implement intervention to come up with an adequate method of teaching English as a foreign language.

b. Every classroom situation is different

The teachers claim that throughout their teaching career, they found out that every problem is different. What was challenging in one class went well and smooth in another. Let alone curriculum developers, classroom teachers sometimes fail to predict it. Every classroom is unpredictable and dynamic. To meet the demands of each situation and handle the teaching, systematic approach is of great importance. Action research offers teachers with this quality.

c. The target situation students are very poor in English

English was given as one subject in Amhara Reginal State since the medium of instruction in schools was Amharic until 1998 E.C. in fact, this year, in 1999, the medium of instruction have become English again. However, since partly because they have learnt in Amharic until now, the students' English language status is very low.

There are many problems in teaching English in such a situation. English teachers are to face with the problems every now and then unless they do something about it. A lot of investigation is needed to make the teaching possible and alleviate the problems.

2. Female EFL teachers' professional development and action research

This section is concerned with the role of action research for the professional development of female EFL teachers. The target participants reported that action research can have the following impact in relation to female EFL teachers' professional efficiency.

A. A way of penetrating 'comfortable zone'

There is this sense of comfortability with what they have on the side of female teachers. They have made themselves compatible with the existing situation that they are familiar with. They wanted to live with this 'comfort zone' until the end of their career. Some of the reasons why these teachers wanted to continue this way was that:

- i. they have other responsibilities at home that needs lots of their time. In our culture, female are expected to undergo every activities at home even if she has other responsibilities outside of it. Unlike females, males have only one responsibility i.e. source of economy for the family. These female teachers have difficulty of attending other in-service trainings, reading and searching for further education.
- ii. there is gender influence among the teachers. Female teachers tend to spend much time on talking about other affairs than professional matters. This is a result of cultural orientation that these female teachers adopt

from their mothers and female relatives and neighbors' role.

iii. there is no competition among female teachers. Male teachers are always on competition as the participants suggest. Unless some kind of 'quota' thing come along, female teachers do not come to stage by themselves.

Many of them are relatively in the same stage, they seem to be comfortable with that.

With these and other minor reasons that the teachers listed, they wanted to remain as they are. Action research presented them with what they can do to develop their profession by themselves. It doesn't ask the teachers to leave school to attend sessions nor does it ask them to spend much time. They can do it as they have planned. They can plan it according to their schedule. They can have the 'talking thing' with their colleagues making their project topic a theme. This is suggested by the subjects as killing two birds by one stone. The action research engagement created competition among female teachers which was lacking.

B. Raise consciousness

Action research engagement urges the participants to read, explore and ask others' work on the area they are investigating. To enrich what they're doing at hand, they dig out other' accomplishments. The effort increases professional knowledge as well as research skill. This raises their consciousness, on what they are doing and how to go about it.

C. Maximize opportunities

When the teachers do the action research to alleviate their classroom problems, they also get other opportunities. There is promotion as well as incentives awaiting for the teachers who endeavor such things. Moreover, research is a very crucial skill to pursue further education. Many consider research challenging. It is a way of encouragement especially the female teachers' accomplishment.

D. Motivation

When we climb up the ladder, female teachers are less in number in higher institutions. One of the reasons could be research skills. When female teachers are equipped with this, it will add confidence and motivation for them to educate themselves. Besides, they stated that it is a way of break from mere teaching. AR engagement motivates teachers (Rietdijk, et al, 2013).

3. Individual versus collaborative AR

AR encourages collaboration (Rietdijk, et al, 2013). The female EFL teachers conducted AR both individually and in collaboration. They found both useful. Working in collaboration with others, they think that they get alternative means of accomplishing the objective; they see different means of recapping the problem; they have the work done in short period of time. However, there is disagreement on minor issues. Everyone knows better only on what their section is and some members do not participate totally.

The subjects preferred the individual work to the group work though the latter has its own benefits as mentioned earlier. They felt they learnt a lot from the individual work than the team. In their own inquiry, they know every single accomplishments since they have to do it all by themselves. The dedication and commitment exerted in the individual work is more intense that the participants learnt a lot form it.

4. Interest

The target group confessed that they had interest in action research even before trying one. Their interest has increased more and more when they take part in it. They are interested in the inquiry to the extent of making it part of their work even when there is no promotion or incentive attached to it.

5. Benefits

Amhara Regional State Educational Bureau has arranged promotion and incentives for those who conduct action research. This is to initiate them to explore classroom and school environment problems to facilitate the teaching-learning process.

Tacher B, I and H are beneficiaries of this arrangement. Teacher B and I got two stage promotions with a salary increment of 100 birr. Their status in their professional career has also risen from 'teacher' to 'associate leader'. This is supposed to be great change in their career. If it wasn't for their action research endeavor, they should have waited longer service year to earn this status. Similarly, teacher H got benefit. Her benefit is, however, different from teacher B and I.

She got the benefit from BESO (A foreign NGO working in the education sector). BESO has CPD (continuous professional development) programs for teachers. She contributed her action research and won the competition. As a reward she got 300 birr for her effort. Both the incentive and the promotion appear to encourage the teachers to work further.

There are also some who tried for promotion and /or incentive but failed to get one. Teacher A and D are good example for this. They conducted action research for promotion/incentive purpose. However, they didn't get one for some reason. Though they didn't obtain the promotion/incentive, they claim they are equipped with the appropriate knowledge of action research which is to remain with them. They continue doing it even after being excluded from the promotion.

6. Systematic investigation

To talk about classroom problems is part of routine activities of teachers. They also discuss about interventions

and its results. Making these routine activities procedural and conscious changes it from ordinary to systematic activity. Research is a systematic investigation. The participants identified the following systematic investigation they learnt as a result of their involvement in the AR inquiry.

- 1. Planning:** Their activities in the inquiry witnesses that they plan the investigation before hand. They identified the what, how and why of the problem before everything else.
- 2. Hypothesizing and making predictions:** They hypothesize before implementing the actions which are meant to improve the difficulty. Hypothesizing is scientific and systematic activity.
- 3. Collecting and measuring data:** Identifying data collection instruments, deciding on the sample, formulating research questions and collecting, organizing and measuring it is a systematic activity.

Discussion

In the past few years action research has become increasingly popular in Ethiopian education system. With the shift of focus from planned decision to informed action, classroom and the teacher have got great attention. Empowerment of teachers has become significant to make use of them to feed real and contextual information to improve teaching.

Action research has been suggested as an effective method of in-service professional development strategy. It has been proved elsewhere as an important system of professional renewal. In our educational system too, the inquiry have been promoted to be adapted. Some teachers are making use of it. What does it change with regard to teachers' profession? What benefits do they get from the involvement? These are the intention of this particular work.

As Halsall (1998) stated, care must be taken in arguing a particular action has generated a particular outcome. When an action research engagement is said to result in equipping the teachers with certain professional competencies such as discussed above, it is in relative terms. This is because we have no proof that these outcomes resulted by some other factors than 'the action research activity itself'. The only evidence would be the claims made by the subjects who strongly suggest that they indeed benefited the mentioned professional growth as a result of their involvement in action research that they never get otherwise in their rich teaching experience in the past.

Green in Halsall (1998) reviewed four emerging definition of professionalism called flexible, practical, extended and complex professionalism. Of these the former two can be resulted as a result of small scale action research such as the focus of this study.

"Flexible professionalism' arises through teacher dialogue on the improvement of teaching and learning in local professional communities (teams, departments, schools)" (Green, in Halsall, 1998). The findings of this research indicated that the subjects developed professional dialogue and the resulting knowledge to improve their teaching.

"Practical professionalism' arises from teachers reflecting on their own experience and that of others" (Ibid). The participants in this study also reflected on their own experience and explored others' works. This is evident that they developed practical professionalism as a result of their endeavor in research.

Extended professionalism refers to a wider change that is related to government reforms. Complex professionalism believes on the complexity of the work. These two are broader and intense that it is beyond the scope of this investigation to be assessed in such short-scale and less experienced researchers.

Altrichter, et al. (1993) focused on the importance of teachers' investigating their work to renew their profession. As a characteristic of professionalism, individual teacher-researcher should communicate his work to colleagues since "... the practice of an individual member of the profession should be open to scrutiny by professional colleagues" (Ibid).

Teachers' publicizing their work is a requirement of professional accountability since it shows their commitment and it is a way of disseminating knowledge (Ibid). The process also increases teachers' confidence and authority.

The target teachers in the present study also confirmed the same thing. They adapted professional dialogue when they try to enrich their own research. They also presented their findings to the school community. This adds to their responsibility and confidence. Teachers involved in action research stated that they benefited in getting fresh ideas about their profession, make connections with experienced researchers and learn to reflect on it (Scheeter and Ramirez in Nunan 1992; Dadds and Hart, 2001).

Elliot (1991) focused on action research being change agent in education. He argues action research as a form of teacher professional renewal. The quality of the professional growth, however, highly depends on the level of willingness of everyone involved to tolerate diversified ideas and innovations obtained from literature and colleagues. Making use of the knowledge in the literature and exploring new ways introduces change in meeting the demands of the real context.

In light of the findings obtained from the study, it can be said that what Elliot (1991) said is compatible to this study. AR offered opportunities to consider ways of changing their practice.

AR can make teachers reflective practitioners (Dadds and Hart, 2001). It can make them think of their practice deeply and reflect up on it. The teachers in the present study also said that they have become reflective teachers because of their practice to enrich their research.

With regard to the effect of reflection on professional efficiency, Wallace (1991) claim that reflection play a lot to improve teaching. Experiential knowledge refers to what teachers learn from their own direct practice. AR as a kind of experiential knowledge can teach teachers by bringing their attention and keeping them conscious to observe the effect of intervention.

In-service programs should involve from the experiences of the teachers (Nunan, 1989). Facilitators should be there to assist teacher-researchers on their activities. The findings of this study indicated that the teacher researchers need technical assistance to check on their activities.

Many scholars such as Nunan (1989) suggest that collaboration is important in action research inquiry. However, unless there is some stimulation done to promote teachers' interaction prior to the actual investigation, the teachers may not use it. The findings from this study also revealed that the teachers did not see much benefit out of collaboration. This shows that either the teachers are practically unable or personally unwilling to do collaborative research (Nunan, 1992).

Evaluation is an important part of action research activity. It is useful when done formatively than summatively as Nunan (1989) suggested. The evaluation of the target teachers were done summatively only. It should have been better if they do it during the course of the project.

With regard to empowerment and autonomy, action research is suggested by scholars to allow teachers to be self-directed (Nunan, 1989). When they explore their personal methodologies and subject it to evaluation and reflection, they will expand and improve it by themselves. "...action research must necessarily be concerned with change." (Nunan, 1992). The change, however, will have pressure to the extent that the teachers are 'given the feeling that what they do is important' (Scheeter and Ramirez, in Nunan 1992).

Action research is essential for the continued growth of the teaching profession (Johnson, 2002). To keep track of the dynamic change and innovation prevailing, teachers should involve in discovery and dissemination of new ideas. Through this, education can move forward. Action research allows teachers become part of this evolution (Ibid).

In sum, all the participants felt that the process helped them for their professional growth though they may sometimes fail to articulate it. What they produce may not also be as such significant. Anyhow, they learnt something from the experience of the critical inquiry. Takaki also felt the same thing when he says:

I learned that there is no failure in conducting action research. The fact that I'm involved and I'm learning through the process is important. (Takaki, 2002)
So, a lot is learned in the process which benefits far more than what actually is produced.

5. Conclusions

The EFL teachers felt that the action research involvement helped them develop their profession.

As a result of their involvement in the inquiry, they changed their perception of research and their role as teachers and researcher. Their interest towards action research develops as they do the research. Their consciousness about EFL teaching raises as they do research on their own classroom and environmental problems in relation to English language teaching. The teachers felt that AR brings opportunity especially for female teachers who have other responsibilities at home and in the surrounding. Action research has brought many changes on the teachers' method of teaching, perception and practice. The teachers felt that individual action research is more beneficial than collaborative. The action research engagement made the teachers read, explore and expand on professional literature. As a result of the action research involvement, the teachers have become reflective practitioners. The action research empowered the teachers with leadership, autonomy and innovative thinking and exploration. The teachers affirmed that they are going to continue on the inquiry. Some of them have already started doing on their new topics. Others show great interest on it. All of them mentioned that they have planned to do action research in the future.

In Ethiopian educational system the instructional method is dominated by the old and traditional system. The action research engagement caused the teachers to re-examine their philosophical trend towards their roles as teachers and their contribution as researchers. The teachers have come to realize the way they teach and how to improve it. This implies that the teachers have become critical thinkers of the potentials and pitfalls of their practice on the students' learning.

The teachers perceived the action research endeavor as a step towards their development as reflective teachers. Many of the teachers who conducted action research are found in the same school. This means that the existence of competent researcher creates other too. The action research tradition began when the regional bureau offered award for those who conduct action research. To break the reluctance of teachers' involvement in action research, award bearing action research projects should be prepared. The teachers' perception shows that they are comfortable with doing action research. This indicates that in-service action research is economical,

effective and efficient method of professional development. The teachers read and explore literature to enrich their research. This implies that some push factor should be there to break the silence of experienced teachers who have developed comfort with what they have.

The teachers felt that the individual work is more beneficial than the group work. Many scholars on the area, however, suggested that action research is best done in collaboration. The implication is that the nearby college or university should work in collaboration with the teachers to show how best they can do in team. Many of the teachers have many years of experience. Still they are satisfied because they learn about action research and make use of it even if it is towards the end of their career. It arouses their motivation. This means that their knowledge of the action research brought completion to their profession. The place they give to action research skill is so high that they feel complete when they have it.

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