




INVESTIGATING ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN EMPLOYING ACTION RESEARCH FOR TEACHER TRAINING IN MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

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In teacher education, action research has served as one of the tools for reflective practice to bridge the gap between the educational theories learned in the teacher training college and the actual pedagogical practice within the four walls of the classroom. In this descriptive and explorative research study, first the concept and characteristics of action research are outlined, supported by a discussion on action research types and models that are relevant to teacher training in Malaysia. Then, this paper explored the implementation of action research component in teacher education in Malaysia by first providing brief background information of action research in Malaysian teacher training institutes. Then, it discussed issues and challenges that are faced in terms of curriculum, teaching methods and objectives. The study also discussed the rationale for integrating action research component in teacher education programme. The result shows that the implementation of action research is hampered by the absence of exposure to action research in the earlier part of the training, the curriculum lacks practical input and the objectives set can be general and vague. It is recommended that action research workshops and trainings are conducted earlier in the training program and that more hands-on learning experience is introduced.

Contribution/Originality: This article contributes to the existing literature by providing an overview of action research implementation in teacher education system in Malaysia. It discusses the issues and challenges that are faced by action research supervisors and trainee teachers. It also highlights the rationale for integrating action research component in teacher education curriculum.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contrary to common belief among Malaysian educators, action research is not a new research methodology. It has been practised in western countries for many decades and it is now gaining popularity in many fields including healthcare and education. In Malaysia the concept of action research in education started to develop in 1990s. Before the year 1993 there were efforts to introduce action research at a small scale by lecturers from Keningau Teacher's Training College and Regional Education Centre for Science and Mathematics (RESCAM). However these efforts were not persistent enough and the objective of introducing action research to the Malaysian education community remained unfulfilled (Meerah and Osman, 2013). Only in 1993 action research came to centre stage with a substantial promotion by Education Planning and Research Division (EPRD) and Ministry of Education

under a World Bank programme called Programme for Innovation, Excellence and Research (PIER). Through this programme various in-service courses related to action research were held for teachers in school. Many teachers voluntarily applied for funds to conduct action research in their respective schools. The Teacher Education Division of Ministry of Education made efforts to introduce action research as one of the core components of pre-service courses in the Teacher Education Colleges all over Malaysia. The practice became central to teacher training programmes offered by the colleges and is still being practiced.

Education Planning and Research Division (EPRD) (2008) summarises the characteristics of action research into two distinct aspects of educational approach and research environment. From the aspect of educational approach action research is seen as follows:

- i. It is an approach to improve the quality of education through intrinsic changes in teaching and learning.
- ii. It involves the systematic process of learning and also develops the competence of the teacher through reflection.
- iii. It involves the formulation of hypothesis and theory based on real life experience.
- iv. The main focus is on questioning the teacher's personal belief and improving his or her practice.

From the aspect of research environment action research is seen as follows:

- i. It is implemented within an actual classroom and not controlled environment.
- ii. It involves collaborative effort between the teacher researcher and his or her colleagues.
- iii. It focuses on issues that are school related.
- iv. It involves some kind of intervention on an issue to explore its results and consequences.

Based on the characteristics presented, it can be concluded that the more important characteristics of action research are that it is carried out by teacher in a real classroom context; it is done collaboratively and is actually a critical collaborative inquiry; using practical action to solve problem and to simultaneously gain insights; the researcher is in the midst of the action of improving their practice and enhancing their understanding of the practice; makes use of a lot of self-reflection; it involves steps in a cycle and is done systematically. Action research shares some similarities with conventional research in the manner that it is the process of the exploration of knowledge; it provides evidence to justify the knowledge; it demonstrates explicit inquiry process that leads to the acquisition of knowledge and it links newly gained knowledge with the existing one.

2. TEACHING ACTION RESEARCH IN MALAYSIA

Action research for Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) trainee teachers in Institute of Teacher Education starts in semester 7 with special focus on action research proposal writing in a compulsory paper called TSL3133: Action research I- Methodology. This is continued in semester 8 where the pre-service teachers implement their action research and write a report of it for TSL3153: Action Research II- Implementation and Reporting. These two compulsory papers serve as a tie up to all the academic papers they learn throughout the teacher education programme. This is illustrated in Table 1.

This case study uses Action Research I- Methodology (TSL3133) and Action Research II- Implementation and Reporting (TSL3153) as samples for investigation. These courses are among 15 core courses assigned for TESL students. The main rationale for investigating these two courses is to bring enhancement in pre-service teachers' professional practice and an improvement in teaching and learning in classroom.

Table-1. Curriculum for Teaching of English as a Second Language

Code	Courses	Credit	Sem.
TSL3013	Introduction to Linguistics	3	1
TSL3023	Literature in English	3	1
TSL3033	ELT Methodology	3	2
TSL3043	Phonetics and Phonology	3	2
TSL3053	Teaching Listening & Speaking Skills in the Primary ESL Classroom	3	3
TSL3063	Teaching Reading Skills and Vocabulary in the Primary ESL Classroom	3	3
TSL3073	Teaching Writing Skills in the Primary ESL Classroom	3	4
TSL3083	Teaching Grammar in the Primary ESL Classroom	3	4
TSL3093	Managing the Primary ESL Classroom	3	5
TSL3103	Linking Theory to Practice	3	5
TSL3113	Developing & Using Resources for the Primary ESL Classroom	3	6
TSL3123	Language Assessment	3	6
TSL3133	Action Research I- Methodology	3	7
TSL3143	Curriculum Studies	3	8
TSL3153	Action Research II- Implementation and Reporting	3	8

Source: Institute of Teacher Education Malaysia (2015)

The following are course description for TSL3133 and TSL3153 extracted from the curriculum document produced by the Centre of Academic Development of Malaysian Institute of Teacher Education or [IPGM Academic Development Center \(2014\)](#):

TSL 3133 Course Description:

This course provides knowledge on action research methods in language education. It discusses research methods in education, types of educational research and research design as well as educational research procedure. The trainee teachers will also acquire the knowledge of concepts of action research and models, action research process, planning and proposal, data collection methods, data collection considerations, data analysis, interpreting the action research data, writing an action research report and article, and ways of making action research data public.

TSL 3153 Course Description:

This course provides skills in implementing and reporting action research in TESL for primary education. It involves the implementation of an action research in school and writing of an action research report, organizing an action research seminar, documentation and publication procedure of action research.

Right at the beginning of semester seven, a lecturer is assigned to each trainee teacher as a supervisor. The main purpose at this stage is to supervise the writing up of the action research proposal. The trainee teachers will be away for practicum in this semester and the supervisor appointed to them would normally be their teaching practice supervisor. This is to facilitate the writing up of the proposal as the lecturer assigned will be more aware of the trainee teacher's main concern in the pedagogical domain and the lecturer would also be more accessible for consultation. Before the end of their practicum, the students would collect their data closely related to classroom interaction like observation. Data collection procedure that involves interview for example can be done in the following semester. At the end of the semester the trainee teachers will have to present their proposal and grades will be given for their overall performance.

In semester 8 the pre-service teachers will be in the same school for internship. This is the time for them to complete their data collection and writing the final report. They would be supervised by the same supervisor who supervised them for the proposal writing. Within this final semester they would also have to write a research article based on their report and to present it at a research seminar jointly organised by them. All these tasks contribute to their final grade. Selected students will be given commendation for their presentation and they are given the

opportunity to take part in research and innovation seminar held by the ITE. Most of the trainee teachers work in this semester goes into the writing up of the final report.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

During teaching education, several issues and queries remain unanswered because the answers require a systematic inquiry that calls for time and resources. Engaging the trainee teachers in reflection especially in the dialogic one is useful for their professional development (Mirzajani *et al.*, 2016; Rashid, 2018). In the ITEs in Malaysia, during the earlier phases of teaching practice that do not involve action research, the trainee teachers are forced to reconcile by making hypothetical statements about solving problems and issues. A consistent issue that has been observed is that many trainee teachers carry on a particular issue since their first teaching practice session on action research and continue it until the final year. This persistent focus on a particular classroom issue shows the unresolved nature of their teaching practice experience. It is reasonable if the action research component is introduced alongside teaching practice as this will give them the much-needed early exposure before they properly implement the full-scale research that is going to be evaluated as the final assessment of their bachelor of education program.

Action research is considered an embedded form of professional development for pre-service teachers (Ado, 2013; Jayakumar, 2016; Mitits, 2018). Johnson (2012) asserts the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice in order to achieve this professional development. A problem that is commonly faced by most pre-service teachers is that their academic papers have only theoretical components as highlighted in table 1.1. Though theory equips the pre-service teachers with the content knowledge for their respective field, for instance, in the field of language, they usually learn grammar, literature, linguistics, phonetics and phonology, teaching methodology and classroom management. The question remains unanswered as to how they should effectively bring all theories to practice? Indeed, there are practical elements within the assignments and microteachings that help them to do so. However, the impact is not so powerful as action research is not properly implemented within the training program. The academic papers from the first to sixth semester are left disconnected from action research as there are no elements in the curriculum that strives to make the connection.

The objectives of the action research component laid out in the curriculum however leave a little room for improvement. As stated in the course learning outcomes one of the objectives is to 'analyse and discuss current issues in education that can be investigated through action research'. This mission statement is rather too general and vague. It is understood that the objective is set for TESL pre-service teachers whose undertakings are closely tied to linguistics aspects and classroom nuances. Thus, it is more reasonable if the objective of action research component of a teacher training programme has linguistics and classroom management aspects as its motif.

A need has therefore been felt to understand the concept of action research, its characteristics, and investigate how it can be implemented in a real classroom. There is a need to discuss curriculum, teaching methodology and objectives of Action research as core courses in the teacher training program. It is necessary for teacher trainees to rise above the challenge and develop pedagogical content knowledge about action research. This problem statement is consistent with a recent study (Darling-Hammond and Friedlaender, 2008; Rashid *et al.*, 2017) which emphasized that trainee teachers should acquire the necessary skills prior to their appointment in schools

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In teacher education specifically, action research has been adopted as a means to assist trainee teachers to take an inquiry stance (McQuillan *et al.*, 2012). Several studies have dealt with the teaching practice component attempting to seek answers to the issues to questions regarding trainee teacher's reflective accounts. These studies provide the evidence of the benefits that action research offers to schools and teacher training programmes. Trainee teachers who carry out action research have been found with a high level of enthusiasm and self-confidence (Pelton,

2010) and they usually find their teaching practicum more meaningful (Kiss, 2016; Vo *et al.*, 2018) They feel the sense of empowerment because their role in school is not just limited to being a trainee teacher. By conducting action research and actively involving in making positive changes in the classroom, they are developing teacher identity in themselves (Zaid *et al.*, 2016) and nurturing the sense of belonging to the school community which would effortlessly facilitate integration when they are posted in schools.

3.1. Concept of Action Research

Based on the definitions provided by prominent scholars in the field of action research, there are several concepts of action research that can be put forth. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) the important concepts of action research are as follows:

- Action research is an approach to mend or to improve education by making changes and learning from the consequences of the changes.
- Action research is participatory where the researcher works towards improving his or her own practice.
- Action research is implemented through a self-reflective spiral that is a spiral consisting of plan, action, evaluates, reflect and again plan, action, evaluate and reflect if necessary.
- Action research is done collaboratively involving those who are responsible of action to improve an educational practice.
- Action research involves the activity of recording, collecting and analysing our own judgements, reactions and perceptions towards an issue as evidence.
- Action research involves the use of personal diary where we record the development and reflection on the learning process.
- Action research involves critical analysis of the working context or place of practice
- Action research starts small and moves towards bigger changes.
- Action research starts with small cycles consisting of plan, act, evaluate and reflect to help us interpret issues, ideas and perceptions with greater clarity.

According to Meerah and Osman (2013) action research involves ‘the desire to learn what the researchers need to know, to improve performance; it is only the focus that is different’. It is a way of dealing with an issue within the researcher’s practice to be able to come up with a design of an effective strategy. More often than not, action research would help the researcher to understand the social context being studied. Action research is considered an empowering strategy where the process the researcher goes through and the adequacy of the action in overcoming an issue will establish a sense of ownership and authority (Meerah and Osman, 2013). In an innovation-based action research, a researcher is expected to design the innovation, conduct the research and subsequently contribute to the field of knowledge. The researcher is in the position to identify a problem and conduct a research to inform the practice. Students’ feedback on an innovation that they utilized is very important to inform the researcher of the strengths and weaknesses of the innovation and to further improve.

Burns (2010) asserts that action research is related to ideas of ‘reflective practice’ and ‘teacher as researcher’. Action research involves the use of self-reflective, critical and systematic approach to explore our teaching context further. Being critical in this sense does not in any way mean taking a negative, derogatory view of our practice. It does not mean seeing our teaching as problematic or ineffective. It leans towards an inquisitive stance where teacher is questioning and identifying an area that could be improved upon to develop new ideas and alternatives. In action research a teacher functions as an investigator of his or her teaching context whilst acting as an active participant in it. One of the main objectives of action research is to identify an issue that the participants, who may include teachers, students, administrators or if necessary parents, deem worthy of investigation (Burns, 2010). In

their practice teachers usually see gaps between what is actually happening in their teaching situation and what they ideally prefer to be happening. The main idea in action research is to solve the problematic issue purposefully in order to trigger changes and improvements in practice. More significantly, changes or improvements in action research are based on insights or information that has been systematically collected. Therefore, any improvements made to the practice are foregrounded in solid and sound judgments rather than assumptions or hunches that most teachers based their teaching on.

3.2. Types of Action Research

According to Hopkins (1993) action research in education can be classified into informal qualitative research, formative, subjective, interpretive, reflective and inquiry research based on experimental design where all the participants in the research have information and are contributing to the research. Action research can be divided into three categories which are technical action research, practical action research and emancipatory action research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Kember, 2000). According to them, the purpose of technical action research is more towards the effectiveness and efficiency of an educational practice or rather towards a certain product. Action research projects that come under this category are mostly initiated by experts from abroad who commonly become facilitators to local practitioners. The local practitioners heavily rely on them for guidance and information. Practical action research on the other hand involves the facilitators collaboratively working with the practitioners in a research project. They are encouraged to participate actively and to make a lot of self-reflection. Emancipatory action research involves the facilitators and the practitioners working together and the responsibilities are equally shared between them. The practitioners have the freedom to follow traditional approaches and to make decision democratically. McNiff and Whitehead (2011) look at action research from the perspective of the three different approaches. The first one is technical rational empirical research where the researcher stays outside the research field to maintain objectivity. By staying outside the field, the researcher would be able to generate knowledge that is uncontaminated by human contact. The main principle of this approach is the cause and effect relationship between intervention and research subjects. The results are more often than not generated through statistical analysis which allows for application or generalization to other practices or contexts. The second one is interpretive approach which acknowledges the existence of a practitioner as an active participant in research. The researcher observes people in their natural setting and provides descriptions and explanations of what they are doing. The research participants rely on their own understanding of practice and the researcher would provide his or her interpretation of it. The third one is critical theoretic research which undergirds the importance of understanding a situation in order to change it. It theorizes that social situation is created by people who have the prerogative to deconstruct and reconstruct it.

4. SAMPLING AND INSTRUMENT OF RESEARCH

An interview was conducted on twelve pre-service teachers from semester 8 and also five supervising lecturers of ITE, Malaysia. The interview questions were related to the variables of this study namely curriculum, teaching methodology and objectives/ purpose of action research courses.

5. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK: ACTION RESEARCH MODELS

There are several action research models that are adopted in educational research. Some of the models that are regularly employed are by Lewin (1946); Kemmis and McTaggart (1988); McNiff (1988); Elliot (1991) and McBride and Schostak (1994). The different models represent different ways of looking at the research process. Some action research scholars, such as Lewin (1946) and Griffiths (1990) view action research as cycle of steps. Ebbutt (1988) and Elliot (1991) view action research as flow diagrams whilst Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) and McNiff (1988) view action research as spiral of actions. All the models consist of all the basic steps of planning, acting, observing

and reflecting. The different ways of looking at action research process as proposed by Lewin (1946); Kemmis and McTaggart (1988); McNiff (1988); Elliot (1991) and McBride and Schostak (1994) offer us many different options for adoption or integration within a research parameter. However, the basic elements that underlie action research are evident across the models. These basic elements are representative of the four steps in a cycle which are planning, acting, observing and reflecting. This cycle continues to the next cycle of replanning, acting, observing and reflecting. For the current research, two Action research models have been selected: Lewin (1946) and McNiff (1988) models. The rationale behind their selection is that they help in conceptualizing action research as cyclical with possibilities of many levels. One cycle consists of four important steps of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The first cycle will continue to a second cycle consisting of replanning, acting, observing and reflecting. This is illustrated in Fig. 1 (Lewin, 1946) and Fig 2 (McNiff, 1988).

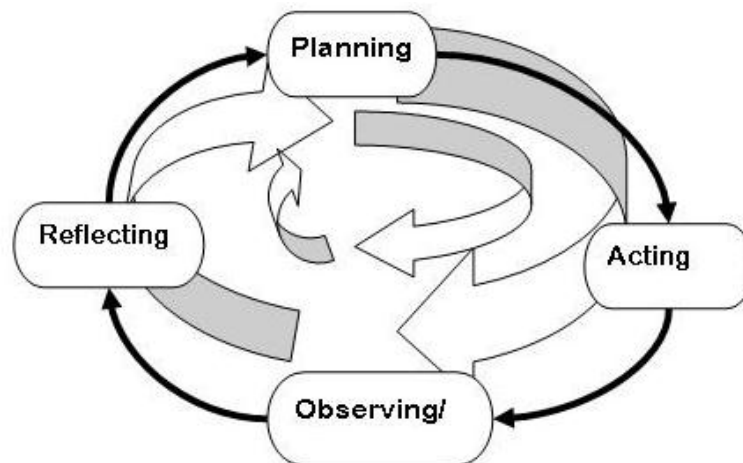


Figure-1. Lewin (1946) Action Research Model

Source: EPRD (2008)

Lewin (1946) asserts that action research is something that is very important for social practice such the field of education and nursing. Even though action research is not scientific in itself, it does bring into it an element of experimentation with that intervention or action that has been developed. His original idea was that the cycle should start with a process of reconnaissance to identify the key features that form the activities of the group being studied. According to him, the process is never a simple process but one that involves successive actions such as planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Fig 1) in a cycle of testing and improvement. He believes that the action within the cycle should arise from a process of exploration of social interactions rather than only from rational deduction.

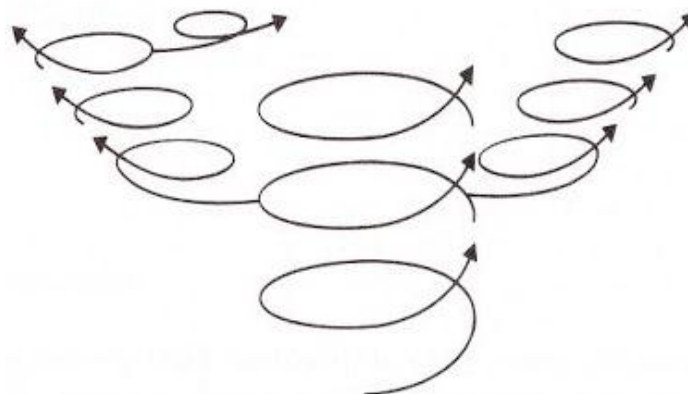


Figure-2. McNiff (1988) Action Research Model

Source: EPRD (2008)

McNiff (1988) opines that action research cycle which also consists of plan, action, observe and reflect, and additionally includes replanning and action and so forth addresses only one issue at one time. Within the spiral of her model there are six basic elements which are observe, reflect, act, evaluate, modify and move in new directions. She states preference over this flexible and dynamic model to appeal to the idea that research should allow for creativity and endless possibility. Therefore, she recommends that action research should enable us to multitask and address several issues at a given time. This would be possible through spin-off spirals as illustrated in her model. According to her, a good action research model should portray that an idea within a practice is never linear but spiral and that human beings are unpredictable and do not necessarily follow a certain fixed, predictable pattern.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

6.1. Curriculum

While solving a teaching or a learning issue in the classroom through the lenses of action research, it would provide a realistic portrayal of what is happening in the classroom (Somekh, 2006). Often educational research ignores the real issues in the classroom and the descriptive nature of a conventional educational research only provides the surface information of issues being researched on. But action research offers an immediate, well thought and customized solution and provides profound information of the issue and the effects of the solution (Townsend, 2014). This signifies how action research establishes the link between theory and practice.

Based on the interview analysis, all of the respondents believe that the curriculum developed for the action research component requires revisions. Most of the respondents hold the view that the action research component should be introduced much earlier to give the pre-service teachers better grasp on the practical aspects of teaching as reiterated by PST7 who mentioned that:

I believe that action research should come earlier like in semester five, yes, when we first have our teaching practice. I think that would help us a lot to teach better and prepare ourselves better for the final action research.

The pre-service teachers also believe that there should be a connect of action research with all relevant academic papers like Linguistics, Phonetics and phonology, ELT Methodology and Classroom management. The current practice surely allows such a connection to be made only by the assigned lecturers based on their own discretion. However, they are of the opinion that it is better if there is a specific clause in the course description that prescribes such a connection. This is reflected through a comment made by PST2:

When we study the TESL courses the lecturer never mentioned about how to use...mmm...the facts, the info that we are learning for action research. Even when I did my first practicum, I really was still blurred about action research...only when we started to look for issue to focus, I realised that I could use all the facts to help me. I think the lecturers should...maybe...bring attention to action research at earlier stage.

This sentiment is also shared by supervising lecturers as they too feel that elements of action research should be introduced earlier on so that pre-service teachers have better grasp on action research concepts and skills. They are of the view that action research elements can be inserted into the curriculum or even further down the process through the coursework and assignments. This is highlighted through a comment made by ARS1 where he stated:

There are things that could be done, but, I think, not at our level...you know, the idea of action research can be introduced when the trainee teachers are learning content subject like literature and grammar...also through assignments, we can set AR related task.

Based on the interview analysis the pre-service teachers and supervising lecturers share the view that curriculum revision is needed where some kind of exposure or link to action research should be established earlier than the status quo. A very sound solution to this is to conduct workshops and trainings at a much earlier stage In

line with this, they are also of the opinion that the instructional mode of the curriculum should be revised to include more practice-oriented topics to facilitate the trainee teachers' awareness and understanding.

6.2. Teaching Methodology

All of the respondents are of the view that the content delivery methods are satisfactory as reflected in this statement by PST1:

The lecturer has good knowledge and conducts the lecture well, and also he gives such a tutorial task that makes us think of the main issue of the topic.

This is supported by PST2 and PST11 who offered positive opinion of the lecturers' teaching methodology:

The lecturer's delivery is of good quality. All the lecturers entering the class will be evaluated at the end of the semester and they put much effort in their lecture session especially in preparing materials...setting up tutorial task and in, always helping us with our coursework. I like the fact that they are very helpful all the time...and even they use Telegram to give us advice and tips for action research.

PST2

I enjoy the classes even if the topics can be very dry and boring, because it is research anyway...the topics can be very boring. However, the lecture is good and informative and helps us to understand research better.

PST11

Generally, the analysis on pre-service teachers' view towards the lecturers' teaching methods yielded very positive results that demonstrate the strengths of this aspect of action research implementation. They mostly accepted the idea that the lecturers possess the experience, knowledge and skills required to deliver the content knowledge of the action research component to them but require more opportunities for self-expression in developing research instruments. This voice is aptly represented by PS15 where he mentions:

We get very confused when it comes to developing the research instruments, I feel the lecturers, do lay out the theories and principles of developing research instruments like questionnaire and interview items...but I think that's not enough because often we got confused and come up with poorly constructed items. If the lecturer can provide concrete examples and lets us do hands on...I mean...let us practice developing instruments...we can come up with better instruments for the action research.

Hence there are some expressions of propositions where a certain aspect of the methodology of teaching could have been made better through real and concrete examples.

6.3. Objectives

For this aspect, the pre-service teachers' and action research supervisors' attention was directed to the following action research objectives as per outlined in the syllabus and they were asked to give comment and reaction to them:

1. Describe the methods of educational research.
2. Explain the basic aspects of research including types of educational research, research designs, procedure and ethics
3. Analyse current issues in education that can be investigated through action research.
4. Discuss action research and its process.
5. Write an action research proposal based on various resources taking into account the research ethics.
6. Write an action research report based on the research data collected and various resources.
7. Present orally an action research report.

8. Write an action research article

Based on the analysis done on the interview data, both pre-service teachers and action research supervisors express general satisfaction over action research objectives. The only contention was raised over the third objective which was cited as being general and vague and thus does not encapsulate the theme of English language teaching and pedagogical concerns. This was best summarised by ARS4 who clarified:

Objective three is perhaps a bit too generic, does not really represent TESL and its accompanying themes. There should be TESL related focus inserted like linguistics, pedagogy and classroom management....to just give that focus and directions...

Such observations are of real use if applied to improve upon the present state of the teaching of action research

7. CONCLUSION

The data collected helped to identify the problem and derive solutions to the issues raised in this study. The role that action research curriculum plays in bridging the gap between theory and practice is undeniable and efforts should be made by the policy makers to revise the curriculum in respond to the results of this study. The other two aspects of teaching methodology and objective should also be given due attention even though they are viewed as being much less problematic. The implementation of action research component in teacher training institutes in Malaysia serves as a platform for reflective practice. The trainee teachers who go through years of academic input in their respective institute have the chance to test their theoretical knowledge in real life teaching contexts through this scholarly exercise. The different concepts, characteristics, types and models of action research defined by scholars outline the significance of action research as a systematic tool of change. The different approaches have different views about how knowledge is acquired and used. However fundamentally we have to realise that these different approaches have a great deal of similarities as well and that they are not mutually exclusive. The fundamental elements of planning, acting, observing and reflecting that overlap would help a researcher further understand how action research is located in different research paradigms.

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