



Encouraging Teacher Development through Conducting Action Research in Second Language Classes at a Kuwaiti Training Centre

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Abstract

Like any other profession, teaching undergoes on-going developments. Therefore, teacher development is a continuous pursuit that cannot be named simply in some workshops organized for in-service teachers. It is more like a continuing education system aiming to foster teachers' professional progress. This way, teachers ought to look for all possible professional development opportunities in order to advance in their careers. In some teaching contexts, development opportunities may not be so varied. This paper suggests that action research can be used as a useful technique in developing teachers in contexts where development opportunities are limited. The paper focuses on the role of action research in developing teachers especially in my teaching context, which is EFL program in an internal corporate training centre in Kuwait. I will review the literature on teacher development, how it is important for in-service teacher, how it would help both teachers and learners, how it differs from training, and the principles, objectives and methods of teacher development. Then, I explore action research as a way of doing teacher development, its role in teacher development. In the last section, I address the need for teacher development within a specific teaching context, namely EFL classes in a corporate training centre in Kuwait. Then, I present an action research case study which could be implemented by in-service teachers in my teaching context as a means of doing teacher development in this specific context.

Keywords: teacher development, action research, second language classes, Kuwaiti training centre

INTRODUCTION

Like any other profession, teaching undergoes on-going developments. Therefore, teacher development is a continuous pursuit that cannot be named simply in some workshops organized for in-service teachers. It is more like a continuing education system aiming to foster teachers' professional progress. This way, teachers ought to look for all possible professional development opportunities in order to advance in their careers. In some teaching contexts, development opportunities may not be so varied. This paper suggests that action research can be used as a useful technique in developing

teachers in contexts where development opportunities are limited. The paper focuses on the role of action research in developing teachers especially in my teaching context, which is EFL program in an internal corporate training centre in Kuwait. I will review the literature on teacher development, how it is important for in-service teacher, how it would help both teachers and learners, how it differs from training, and the principles, objectives and methods of teacher development. Then, I explore action research as a way of doing teacher development, its role in teacher development. In the last section, I address the need for teacher development within a specific teaching context, namely EFL classes in a corporate training centre in Kuwait. Then, I present an action research case study which could be implemented by in-service teachers in my teaching context as a means of doing teacher development in this specific context.

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT: TERM AND CONCEPT

Defining Teacher Development

The teacher development movement has received momentum since the mid-1980s, and has gained impetus through the activities of the Teacher Development Special Interest Group in IATEFL (Maley, 1998). Before exploring the importance and the need for teacher development, it is worth noting that concept of teacher development was not always a clear one. Even the term itself received various definitions. Underhill (1986, p. 1) defines teacher development as a process by which I, as a teacher, become "the best kind of teacher that I personally can be". Underhill (1999 p. 17) further emphasize this meaning after a decade of research on teacher development stating the "teacher development is the process of becoming the best teacher one is able to be, a process that can be started but never finished".

Similarly, Lange (1990 p. 250) argues that the term "professional development describes a process of continual intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth of teachers". Lange's definition concedes with Richards and Farrell's (2005) emphasis that "development generally refers to general growth not focused on a specific job" (p. 4). In a more elaborate definition, or rather interpretation, of teacher development, Bell and Gilbert (1994, p. 493) argue that:

Teacher development can be viewed as teachers learning, rather than as others getting teachers to change. In learning, the teachers were developing their beliefs and ideas, developing their classroom practice, and attending to their feelings associated with changing.

Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 4) suggest that teacher development "often involves examining different dimensions of a teacher's practice as a basis for reflective review and can hence be seen as 'bottom-up'". Teachers always need a renewal of their professional skills and knowledge and as Burns and Richards (2009) comment that this is not to be traced to the lack of or inadequacy of teacher training. They sign up to the facts that theoretical knowledge is changing constantly and that the pre-service teacher education does not provide everything to novice teachers. This means that there is

always a constant change in the teacher's knowledge due to updates of theories and experience in teaching.

Teacher Development, Teacher Training and Teacher Education

According to Richards and Farrell (2005), teacher development is one of the two goals of the scope of teacher education. Therefore, teacher development constitutes a significant part of what can be called "continuous teacher education". Now, is there a relationship between teacher development and training? From the above definitions, we may conclude that teacher development involves self-reflection into current teaching practices, enquiry on more effective teaching practices, exploration of new teaching theories, changing teaching techniques, growth of knowledge about teaching. Teacher training is related to activities directly focused on a teacher's present responsibilities and is typically aimed at short-term and immediate goals" (Richards and Farrell 2005, p. 3). Thus teacher development has a wider scope than mere training.

Training involves learning the theory while development involves the professional growth. James (2001, p. 151) contrasts teacher training with teacher development arguing that "teacher development often focuses on the extension or development of teachers' existence knowledge or skills. It may be partly or wholly initiated by teachers, and is more individualized and flexible than teacher training with respect to the participating teachers". Ur (1996, p. 3) suggests that training "can imply unthinking habit formation and an over-emphasis on skills and techniques".

Thus, we may summarize the relevance of both teacher training and teacher development in the course of teacher education in some points. Training is referred to as 'top-down', while development is referred to as 'bottom-up' (James, 2001, p. 152). Teacher training is done with experts, while teacher development is done with peers. Training focuses on skills and techniques while teacher development focuses on developing attitudes. Training can be presented or managed by others; whereas development can be done only by and for oneself.

Principles and Objectives of Teacher Development

Clearly, teacher development is an on-going pursuit which needs to be framed by clear principles and objectives. The literature addressing on Teacher Development principles is not ample. However, there are some online sources for this but are either generic, i.e. related to professional development in general, or field specific, i.e. related to a specific field of teaching. In an article appeared in the IDRA Newsletter by the Intercultural Development Research Association, Villarreal (2005) suggests seven principles for effective professional development for diverse schools. Of these we can take the following two principles to be applicable in EFL teaching context:

- Professional development is a lifelong process
- Professional development is based on adult learning

However, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has published very useful and comprehensive guidelines titled (Principles of Teacher Development. 2008) which elaborates such principles. The following excerpt is the summary concluding the guidelines (pp. 8-9):

1. Professional development should deepen and broaden knowledge of content.
2. Professional development should provide a strong foundation in the pedagogy of particular disciplines.
3. Professional development should provide knowledge about the teaching and learning processes.
4. Professional development should be rooted in and reflect the best available research.
5. The content of professional development should be aligned with the standards and curriculum teachers' use.
6. Professional development should contribute to measurable improvement in student achievement.
7. Professional development should be intellectually engaging and address the complexity of teaching.
8. Professional development should provide sufficient time, support, and resources to enable teachers to master new content and pedagogy and to integrate this knowledge and skill into their practice.
9. Professional development should be designed by teachers in cooperation with experts in the field.
10. Professional development should take a variety of forms
11. Professional development should be job-embedded and site specific.

The above principles capture the essence of teacher professional development and frame the teacher pursuit to do teacher development.

The Methods of Teacher Development

There are a number of activities which promote teacher development such as the knowledge growth, experience and attending workshops and conferences. Teacher development can be pursued as individuals for example by reading or as members of a group for example by conducting workshop mix theory with practice. These activities may be classified into individual and collaborative. Collaborative can be further subdivided into 'one-to-one', 'group-based', 'institutional'. Richards and Farrell (2005) label these into activities that can be achieved individually, collaboratively or a response to an institutional directive. Ur (1996) suggests some possible development areas including personal reflection, sharing with a colleague, in-house staff meetings, and many others.

Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 14) introduce the types of activities for teacher development in the following table:

Table 1. Activities for Teacher Development adapted from Richards and Farrell (2005)

Individual	One-to-One	Group-based	Institutional
Self-mentoring	Peer coaching	Case studies	Workshops
Journal writing	Peer observation	Action research	Action research
Critical incidents	Critical friendships	Journal writing,	Teacher support
Teaching portfolios	Action research	teacher support	groups
Action research	Critical incidents	groups	
	Team teaching		

One significant notice here is that action research is present in all types of activities. This means that it can be done through all the methods. It can be achieved individually, one-to-one, group-based and institutionally. Therefore, it is worth exploring the effectiveness of Action Research in doing teacher development.

ACTION RESEARCH

Hines (2013, p. 151) defines action research as "a process of systematic inquiry that seeks to improve social issues affecting the lives of everyday people". In an agreement with this vein, Howes (2009, p. 45) suggests that action research "assumes that a momentum for change can be created through the identification of a particular problem and by addressing this problem through a reflective, collaborative process of engagement and critical evaluation".

Burns (2009, pp. 289-290) introduces an elaborate definition of the action research in teacher education as follows:

Action research is the combination and interaction of two modes of activity – action and research. The action is located within the ongoing social processes of particular societal contexts, whether they be classrooms, schools.... The research is located within the systematic observation and analysis of the developments and changes that eventuate in order to identify the underlying rationale for the action and to make further changes as required based on findings and outcomes.

This systematic inquiry definitely seeks solution(s) to practical problem(s). Johnson (cited in Hines, 2013, p. 153) "asserts that action research bridges the gap between research and practice". Similarly, Burns (2009, p. 290) argues that the main purpose of action research is to "bridge the gap between the ideal (the most effective ways of doing things) and the real (the actual ways of doing things) in the social situation".

The process of action research consists of three main stages "commonly referred to as the 'Look, Act, Think' model" (Hines, 2013, p. 153). The process begins with gathering information about the problem in the 'look' stage. Then, the information gathered is subjected to analysis and feature identification in the 'think' stage. Then, the information and the results of analysis are used to devise a solution for the problem in the 'act' stage. This process is represented in the form of helix or spiral as in figure 1 below (Stringer, 2004).

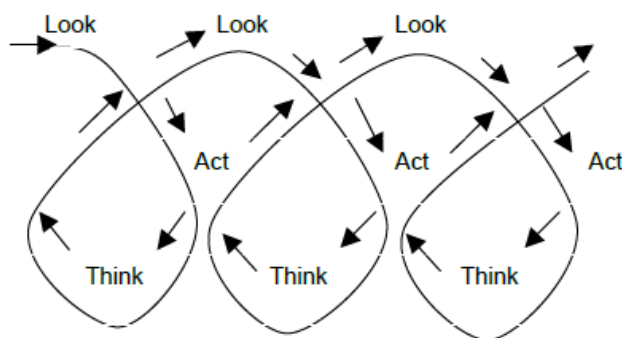


Figure 1. Action research helix (adapted from Stringer, 2004, p. 4)

However, this process can be expanded to include five cyclic stages which are: designing the study, collecting data, analysing data, communicating outcomes, and taking actions. This is called action research cycle which is the common research process according to Stringer (2004). Figure 2 depicts these five key steps.



Figure 2. Action research cycle (adapted from Stringer, 2004, p. 5)

According to Burns (2009), there are more complex models for action research but the most common action research study model would consist of four stages: planning, action, observation and reflection. This model was designed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). It can be summarized in the following 4 steps:

1. develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening.
2. act to implement the plan.
3. observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs.

4. reflect on these effects as the basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of stages (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 10).

In applying my proposition on action research, I will apply this model as it is more suitable to my case study.

Action Research and its Role in Teacher Development

Although action research did not assume a significant impact on second language teacher education until 1980s (Burns, 2009), it proved to play significant roles in teacher development. One major role played by action research is that it transforms the teacher from operative agent to a creative "problem solver". It enhances the teachers' ability to make informed decisions regarding teaching practices (Roberts, 1998). Action research promotes constructive perspectives (Williams & Burden, 1997) in the practice of teaching.

In addition to the above, according to Howes (2009, p. 49) action research outcomes "that we are interested in include teachers feeling more skilled in terms of personal and professional reflectiveness and collaboration; evaluate their practice and as a result feeling more successful at engaging all pupils". In a similar vein, Noffke (1997) holds that action research foster professional understanding, teachers' personal growth and greater empowerment. Action research leads to sharing knowledge and to the improvement of teaching which are important elements in teacher development.

Thus, we may sum up that action research gives the teachers a chance to rethink their own teaching, to engage critically and to work collaboratively with colleagues. During action research process, teachers can reflect on what was going on their classrooms before and after the change. The process presumably leads to a change which enhances the teacher development and can also lead to institutional improvement.

CONDUCTING ACTION RESEARCH IN EFL CLASSES AT A CORPORATE TRAINING CENTRE IN KUWAIT

In this section, I will suggest a way of introducing action research for doing teacher development in my teaching context. I will discuss the need for TD in this specific context, why AR is right in this context, and how you might find solutions for the teaching problems in the same context.

The Case for Using Action Research

The Need of Teacher Development in my Teaching Context

The subject teaching context is an oil sector corporate training centre serving Joint Operations (refinery between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia). The centre offers English Levels program using Headway Plus syllabus. As teachers, we are responsible for teaching English to Arab staff working for two companies, one Kuwaiti and the other is

Saudi. The planned purpose of the English program is to help staff communicating with English native speakers in the oil field and refinery. The teachers include native speakers and non-native speakers. Teachers at the centre have to try their best to maintain high professional standards and to pursue professional development.

The teachers have been in-service for periods ranging from 7 to 15 years. Apparently, teachers are with different levels of experience, knowledge, skill, and expertise. Moreover, the students are adults with ages ranging between 25 and 50, and in usually with no tertiary education. The challenge facing us, as teachers, is to engage such students who have not studied English for long time and who do not have a motivation to learn English. This lack of motivation affects the teachers as it creates a great barrier between them and the students. I think that developing individual teaching skills would greatly help achieving this student engagement issue.

With the various level of adult students enrolled into the program, teachers at the centre have to develop their teaching skills to accommodate for different students' needs. As Kutner et al. (1997) suggest that efforts for teacher development would result in teachers gradually acquiring a body of knowledge and skills needed for enhancing the "learner outcomes" through improving the quality of teaching. Thus, the need for teacher development in this specific context is highly pragmatic.

The Rationale of Using AR in my Teaching Context

I believe that there are three cases for using action research in this teaching context. Firstly, teachers at the centre teach students coming from almost the same backgrounds, whether educational, cultural, or working. We face some typical challenges and issues with our students. Coupled with the unity of syllabus, these challenges tend to be intensified. Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 171) argue that "through the process of planning and carrying out action research, teachers can develop a deeper understanding of many issues in teaching and learning as well as acquiring useful classroom investigation skills". This is highly applicable to the teaching context in the centre. Second, the teachers in-service have been working at the centre together for more than two years. This allows a good deal of freedom in providing comments and reflecting on each other's teaching practice. This suggested action research mainly aims at encouraging these in- service teachers and is suitable for the initiation of teacher development groups. The immediate objective of the suggested action research is to share knowledge and experience. The research would be conducted on a specific problem faced by all teachers at the centre. It is likely to be effective in presenting new techniques to solve that problem. Third, according to Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 171), action research has three main characteristics:

- Its primary goal is to improve teaching and learning in schools and classrooms and it is conducted during the process of regular classroom teaching.
- It is usually small-scale and is intended to help resolve problems rather than simply be research for its own sake.

- It can be carried out by an individual teacher or in collaboration with other teachers. These three characteristics make action research ideal for our teaching context, taking in consideration all of the above features.

Purpose and Benefits of Conducting the Proposed AR in my Teaching Context

In her chapter on 'Action Research in Second Language Education', Burns (2009) numerates various purposes and benefits of conducting action research in educational contexts. Particularly three of these are applicable to the action research I suggest for my Teaching context.

- To address and find solutions to particular problems in a specific teaching or learning situation (Edge 2001; Hadley 2003; Burns, 2009: , p. 291)

This suggested action research is intended to find a solution for a recurrent specific teaching problem faced by the teachers involved in the research. This problem is the disengagement of intermediate level students in reading classes. The next subsection will elaborate this issue.

- To facilitate the professional development of reflective teachers (Coles & Quirke 2001; Kitchen & Jeurissen 2004; Burns, 2009, p. 291)

Using action research in my context would help the teachers to create a link between theory and practice, as they had to explore new methods of teaching English to apply them in the classroom to find out a satisfactory result. Through reflection on their own practices, the teachers would achieve significant changes to the understanding of teaching.

- To acquaint teachers with research skills and to enhance their knowledge of conducting research (Burns and Hood 1995; Crookes and Chandler 2001; Burns, 2009, p. 291)

As we have indicated in the outset of this section, teacher at the centre focus mainly on the practice of teaching. A major benefit of engaging them in this action research would be to enhance their knowledge of conducting research.

Description and Design of the Action Research Case Study

The Theme of Action Research Case Study and the Expected Problems

The action research case was carried out by three non-native teachers (Zahraa, Youssra, & Ammar) who were teaching the same intermediate level but different classes. We selected one specific problem to be subject to action research. The problem was that the students in our reading class were reluctant to read the passages in the reading classes. They claimed that they read the passage, but in fact they just went directly to the comprehension questions and looked for the specific answers randomly without reading the whole passage. Clearly, this made the reading class purposeless and without content.

We started to get more information about action research methodology and how to implement it in the classroom. We agreed to follow the four step process described above: planning, action, observation and reflection. We proceeded in the steps in the same sequence. However, we expected two main problems that might face us with the study. One of them was concerned with the students' willingness to be involved in the action devised to be implemented. The other was concerned with an intended deviation from the standard syllabus textbook used for the level.

Implementing the Procedures of Action Research

The following is description of the four steps of the research conducted, preceded by a pre- research stage, i.e. initial reflection.

Pre- AR: Initial Reflection

The classes that were involved in this study case included students in the intermediate level with a number of 12 adult students per each class and the Headway Plus (Intermediate level) was the textbook for those classes. The students were generally unmotivated in reading lessons and there was also a struggle to make reading lessons interesting for them as they did not have the passion to read the texts in the book. Thus, changing the strategies of presenting the reading text was the action that needs to be taken as there must be pre-reading strategies that would encourage the students to read with passion.

Moreover, following up the reading classes with the other teachers was necessary and needed. Thus, the questionnaire in Appendix 1 was the tool for collecting information from my colleagues on that issue. The questionnaires' results aligned with mine as it was found out that my colleagues faced the same problem in their classes. The results also showed that we did not focus on the pre-reading strategies such as showing visuals and videos in presenting the topic of the reading passage and this was justified passively as the students were adults and visual aids would be out of their interest. The results of the questionnaire also showed that we got our resources only from the textbooks and we did not get any reading texts from authentic resources. Overall, the problems were precisely defined based on the results of the questionnaire which made our planning step easier and clearer.

Step 1: Planning

Planning step started with preparing a variety of authentic reading texts from different resources such as current newspapers' articles and different websites. Then, we shared a strong belief in the significance of authentic readings in increasing the students' motivation and excitement in reading. Moreover, there was an effective planning for our lessons delivery as they included pre-reading techniques using different types of media such as data show, visuals and videos that were related to the topic of the target reading passage. Therefore, this planning of this case study was determined to be achieved *in a three weeks timespan*.

Step 2: Action

Different reading passages from authentic resources and effective lesson planning with interesting pre-reading techniques were delivered to our classes in a timespan of three weeks. Moreover, there were group discussions among the students on the topic of each passage that paved the way to the actual reading of the content of the passage with the passion to find out more about the topic. The actual reading included two stages; the first stage was reading for gist as the students had to skim the passage to get the answer of an exciting and a general question. While the second stage was going through he detailed questions and reading extensively in order to find out the answers for those questions.

Step 3: Observation

The results of this action were very positive as the students who did not get involved in reading and who used to feel bored during reading and answering the questions started to challenge and compete with each other as they had the passion to know extensively about the interesting topic that motivated them to read the content of the passage. Thus, it can be said that the students were motivated enough which made them eager to know about the true facts in the authentic materials. Those results that were identical to the other colleagues' ones highlighted the great impact of the authentic readings such as an article from a newspaper as it seemed very authentic to the students. Overall, reading authentic materials had a great influence rather than reading traditional and old news texts in the course books no matter how authentic they were as the students believed that those texts lost their authenticity because they were old news.

Step 4: Reflection

After conducting these strategies in a timespan of three weeks, the students were asked to complete a questionnaire (Appendix 2) in order to investigate how far they enjoyed and were interested in the reading lessons. The questionnaire results were positive and it was found out that most of the students were interested in the reading lessons because of their authenticity and the followed strategies in presenting the topics of the reading passages. Moreover, a reflective questionnaire (Appendix 3) was conducted for all the teachers on the effect of the changes we made in the reading class that came up with results that highlighted the importance of using daily authentic readings in the classroom and how it is important to start with pre-reading strategies that would attract the students' attention, fuels the compulsion to read and encourage them to read enthusiastically.

CONCLUSION

From the literature reviewed and based on the application of the case study, there is evidence that action research is a useful practice for teachers. Action research serves a dual objective, namely serving as a vehicle to devise solutions for existing teaching issues and promoting teacher development. In addition, it provides teachers with the practical skills and specialized knowledge essential to achieve positive change within

classrooms (Stringer, 2008). We can conclude that action research should be emphasized as a prominent method of teacher development.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Initial Questionnaire for Teachers

1. What are the techniques you follow in teaching reading lesson?
2. Do you start with reading for gist?
3. Do you start pre-reading strategies, such as showing them pictures, videos, generating ideas about the main topic?
4. How many times do you ask the students to read?
5. Do you use any authentic readings from different resources like newspapers, magazines or advertisements?
6. Do you change the reading techniques (skimming reading, extensive reading, reading for gist) or do you use only one technique each reading class?
7. Do you face any difficulty with the students in reading class? What are these difficulties?
8. What changes could be made to teaching reading lesson in a more interesting way and encouraging the students for extensive reading.
9. Are there any different techniques for teaching reading that would better prepare students for reading extensively?
10. How can the questions be changed so that reading is encouraged?

Appendix 2: A Questionnaire for Students

1. Do you enjoy reading from the newspapers, magazines and advertisements?
2. Do you find that the reading is challenging for you or boring?
3. Do the reading starters clarify the reading topic for you?
4. Do you enjoy the reading warm up such as showing videos and pictures?
5. Do these warm up skills help you to understand the topic of the reading passage?
6. Is the vocabulary unblocking enough for you to understand the passage?
7. What are the skills you need to improve in reading class?
8. Do you feel a difference before and after reading authentic readings?

Appendix 3: A Posteriori Questionnaire for Teachers

1. How effective were the changes you made?
2. Is there any kind of improvement in the reading class?
3. Did the students feel a difference after those changes?
4. What have you learned?
5. Do you feel a difference before and after using the authentic readings?
6. Did you feel the importance of warm up the students before reading task?
7. Do you feel that there should be different techniques in reading such as skimming reading, reading for gist or reading extensively?