Action Research in Language Education*

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Action research is a kind of research in language education, but it has its own characteristics. And its implementation will help a lot in both teachers’ professional development and classroom teaching. This article has made a tentative study of the practical use of Action Research and some problems teachers confront in using it. This article is also concerned with some solutions to the problems teachers may face, e.g., being lack of knowledge about action research and expertise, being lack of time of action research, having too large class, being short of support including money, constraints from students and authority’s response. The implementation of action research needs teachers, experts, and school authority’s effort to improve language teaching and language education.

Keywords: Action Research, practical use, problems, solutions

Introduction

Language teaching can be defined as the activities, which are intended to bring about language learning (Stern, 1983, p. 21). But the question is what kind of activities should be incorporated in teaching. The practitioners assume that their job is nothing but preparing the materials and the students, as well as the evaluation of the students’ achievements. In their opinion, the theoretical and methodological problems are the researcher’s business. And in this way, a tension between the theoretical and practical aspects of this profession occurs and this kind of tension is the main source of the communication gaps caused by an increasingly opaque research technocracy, restrictive practice in educational institutions. practitioners are only concerned with their practical teaching while researchers are engaged in their research and they seldom pay attention to the efficiency of the methods they have worked out. Gradually, practitioners have gone tired of the swings and roundabouts of the pedagogic fashion, and they are eager to look for the evidence that would support the latest trend in language teaching.

The solution to this dilemma and predicament both researchers and practitioners face will be Action Research (AR), a kind of classroom research first appearing in America, and with the main representative figures of David Nunan, Lawrence Stenhouse abroad, and WANG Qiang in China (WANG, 2002).

This article will put its much occupation on three aspects of AR implementation in language education. The three aspects are:

(1) Is AR really efficient in language teaching?
(2) What do some of the difficulties teachers face in doing AR?

* This paper is supported by National Office for Education Sciences Planning (No. GPA 105026).
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(3) What are some solutions to these difficulties?

**Preliminary Literature**

It is said that the concept of AR first appeared in America and was created by Collier (WANG, 2002, p. 4). In the 50s of last century, Stephen Corey applied this concept into educational circle. In the seventies, AR has developed a lot owing to the effort of Lawrence Stenhouse and John Elliot (Ibid., 2002, p. 4).

Firstly, what is AR? We may use the definition give by Kemmis and Taggart (1982) as the beginning of this part:

Action Research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices; (b) their understanding of these practices; and (c) the situations (and institutions) in which these practices are carried out. (WANG, 2002, p. 6)

This definition incorporates the thoughts of David Nunan (2001), “an important concept underpinning AR is that of reflective practice” (p. 198). From the definition, we can see that practitioners usually conduct AR into a particular issue of current problems, that is, it is conducted directly by the person who is currently involved in a specific situation. It focuses on a specific problem in a particular setting. We can rearrange the definition of AR as follows: (1) AR is a reflective research activity; (2) It is aimed to solve the practical problems by practitioners themselves; (3) It requires a certain steps to carry out AR; and (4) The purpose of AR is to improve language teaching and help teachers to a professional development.

From this, we can see that the defining feature of AR is reflective practice and its purpose is to help in language teaching and professional development. The following Figure 1 put forward by Wallace (1991) will illustrate this clearly.

![Figure 1. Reflective model of professional development.](image)

Secondly, what are the characteristics of AR? As we have mentioned above, reflective practice is the main characteristics of this kind of research. The other characteristics can be summed up as follows: (1) The subject in AR is limited to the practitioner’s students or activities; (2) The problems concerned are usually very specific; (3) The researcher himself is always the research designer, research implementer, and research evaluator; (4) The methods used in AR are reflective or quasi-experimental; and (5) There is usually an interaction among teachers, or between the practitioner and experts.

The last question is, what is the difference between AR and Real Research (RR)? Nunan (2001) has defined research as a systematic process of inquiry consisting of three elements or components: (1) a question, problem, or hypothesis; (2) data; and (3) analysis and interpretation of data. Herbert W. Sliger and Elana Shohamy (1989,
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p. 20) hold that research is the formalization of natural processes we all carry out from birth in dealing with the environment, and it involves curiosity about some phenomenon and the posing of testable questions about relationships among observed phenomena. AR really incorporates the three elements proposed by Nunan and qualifies the definition by Seliger. But the salient distinction between AR and RR is that AR is initiated and carried out by the practitioner. Also, the difference is realized by the fact that AR is characterized with intervention and change. Other differentiating feathers between AR and RR are clearly listed by WANG Qiang (2002). She made a though analysis about the difference in nine aspects, ranging from subjects and problem to methods used in AR.

Research Design

This part includes two sections. Section one is mainly about an experimental research with the aim to testify the efficiency of AR in language teaching. Section two is a case study that is used to find out some difficulties teachers face in dong AR and some solutions to these difficulties.

Experimental Research

This part is an experimental research used to testify the efficiency of AR in language teaching. Experimental approaches involve the control or manipulation of the three basic components of the experiment: the population, the treatment, and the measurement of the treatment (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989, p. 136).

Subjects and Population

The students we choose as the subjects are junior middle school students. They are from Grade 2, No. 1 middle school of Binzhou city. We use a placement test to rearrange the students into three classes named as control class 1, control class 2, and experimental class. The English level of the three classes is equally the same. The teachers we choose graduated from Binzhou Teachers’ College and they all have a certain period of teaching experience. The experimental teacher attended an AR training class in Shandong Provincial Educational College in the last summer vacation. And we spend another week helping her working out several AR reports. I order to make her familiar with the steps of doing AR. The other two teachers are required to teach the two control classes respectively.

Period and Treatment

The experimental time is from September of 2012 to January 2013. The teaching method used for the three classes is communicative language teaching. The material used is the textbook co-edited by Longman and PEP (People’s Education Press). The experimental teacher is required to write AR report when she has find some problems in her teaching. Here are the AR reports written by the teacher and he solutions to the problems:

(1) ARR1: Students are not active in taking part in classroom activity.
Inquiry: By interview and questionnaire, the teacher finds that the activity in class is not authentic and interesting.
Solution: Change the topic of the activity and make it close and near to student’s daily life.
(2) ARR2: Students’ writing ability is poor.
Inquiry: Analyzing students’ compositions and talking with experts and experienced teachers.
Reason: Students seldom read after class and they pay little attention to the coherence and cohesion of their
composition.

Solution: Establish a class library. Teach the students some methods of how to connect the sentences.

(3) ARR3: Students do not like grammar.

Solution: Try to make the grammar class interesting. Put the grammatical knowledge into an interesting short story or into short dialogues.

**Evaluation and Analysis**

During the teaching, we tested the students three times in September, November, and January. The scores are listed in the following tables.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Control class 1</th>
<th>Control class 2</th>
<th>Experimental class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sep.</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>69.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov.</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan.</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Control class 1</th>
<th>Control class 2</th>
<th>Experimental class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sep.</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov.</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan.</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 1, we can clearly see that the experimental class has made a large progress in their English learning. At the beginning of this term, the three classes are nearly at the same level. But after a whole term of study, their English has been improved a lot, from 69.6 to 76 in average. This indicates that the students’ learning of English, with the teacher’s AR, has progressed a lot compared with the other two control classes. Table 2 shows that students in the experimental class have also achieved a lot in their writing. The average score for the class at the beginning of the term is 6.3 and it has been increased to 7.8 at the end of the term. Though the experimental class has made a large progress in their English learning, the teacher has really met many difficulties in implementing the Action Research. The following part is a case study concerning some difficulties teachers face in doing Action Research.

**Case Study**

This study is case study. The methods used in this study are questionnaire, interview, and some reflections when we do the Action Research.

**Survey and Interview Participants**

The participants in the formal questionnaire survey were 24 middle school teachers who were studying in Shandong Provincial Educational College. Among the participants, one from Jinan, one from Liaocheng, one from Dezhou, one from Binzhou, two from Heze, seven from Jining, six from Liyi, and the left five teachers are from Qingdao, Taian, Zaozhuang, and Rizhao respectively. The oldest is 35 years old and the youngest, 21. The teaching time of the teachers range from ten years to one year and the average teaching time is five years.
The questionnaire involves three parts and each part has two or three themes. The first part concerns the teacher himself, including teachers’ knowledge about AR and other aspects. The second one is mainly about the teaching environment. And the last one indicates the reaction from the students and the school authority.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis refers to sifting, organizing, summarizing, and synthesizing the data so as to arrive at the results and conclusions of the research (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989, p. 201). But data analysis is not a simple description of the data collected but a process by which the researcher can bring interpretation to the data (Powney & Watts, 1987). The themes and the coding categories emerged from the examination of the data rather than being determined beforehand.

**Results**

The following table indicates some difficulties the teachers may face. Here the number of mentions the research subjects referred to the theme means the times teachers choose this item. The higher the number is, the more difficult a problem it will be to the teacher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source and difficulty</th>
<th>No. of mentions (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Teacher’s conditions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge about AR and applied linguistics</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of contact with experts</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Teaching environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large classes</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of sufficient ongoing support</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of facilities</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Students/school authority</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ passive style of learning</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School authority’s fear of uncontrollable change in classroom teaching</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

Though AR functions as a bridge that connects the communication gaps which exist between the real researchers and practitioners, there are certain difficulties the practitioners meet in doing this kind of research. From the teachers’ perspective, lack of knowledge about the AR and expertise is the biggest problem in implementing AR. More than 90% of the survey participants mention that they are short of knowledge of applied linguistics, and 21 of the 24 teachers said that they need the help of experts in language teaching. Also, lack of time occupies a large portion of the number. 79% teachers said that they did not have enough time to carry out AR.

Another kind of constraints comes from teachers’ environment. Most of the teachers here pointed out that they had so large a class that the regular teaching and manipulating the big class made them have not enough time and energy to conduct a research. The next problem along this line is that teachers are short of support when doing AR, and this condition is more serious in the countryside schools. Owing to being short of money and
support, about 71% participants expressed their opinion that the facilities in the school are either very out-dated or out of use. Some said that they had to work on the data with a pen since their computer does not work well or they have none at all.

The last kind of constrains is from the students and authority’s reactions. Students prefer the passive style of learning, it seems that they like the regular route-learning and spoon-feeding, and they do not like the “reforms” in the classroom. Also, the school authority fear that the teachers pay too much attention on the research and in this way undermines the language teaching.

Solutions to These Difficulties

Language education cannot be separated from language teachers and the improvement of language education must prerequisite language teacher’s education and training. Teachers training cannot be considered as the work of the teachers’ universities; it is a life-long project for both the teacher and the society. Next work we should do is to support the teachers’ research work and try to establish a close contact between experts and practitioners. This kind of contact will certainly do good to our language education and certainly will make our research work valuable and practical. Another important change should be happened to the teachers’ thought. Teachers’ job cannot be viewed as teaching only, it must incorporate research. Only in this way will teachers’ teaching competence develop.

Conclusion

This article hopes to provide a rough framework of Action Research. The first two parts are some preliminary literature of Action Research, mainly introducing some theoretical work conducted by famous scholars. Next part is a research study, including two sections and with the first section to testify the efficiency of AR in language teaching and the second with the aim to find out some problems in doing AR and some solutions or measures taken to cope with the difficulties. From the experimental research we conducted in this article, we know that AR really helps a lot in our teaching, but implementing AR in practical teaching is not an easy job. The implementation needs teachers, experts, and school authority’ effort. Only though the combination of all the factors that contribute to language teaching, will our language education improve gradually.

References