

ACTION RESEARCH AS A PRAXIS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE TEACHING PRACTICE IN ELT CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

This paper is to illuminate how action research can be used as a praxis to shape teaching as a constant transformative practice in English language teaching (ELT). I will offer a synthesis on what action research is, how professionals have used it in practice, and why action research is a vigorous and enlightening tool for ELT practitioners and teacher educators for their transformative knowledge (re)building process despite some criticisms. Then, I will briefly exemplify two action research projects that I have conducted with different colleagues in different settings.

“The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity. Education is thus constantly remade in the praxis. In order to be, it must become.” (Freire, 2000, p. 84)

Action Research & Its Significance in English Language Teaching

Action research refers to research that practitioners conduct on their own practice through reflective inquiries on their own teaching in a systemic spiral and cyclical process with goals of resolving tensions and challenges and improving their practice (Burns, 2005, 2010; Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014; Riel, 2010). It has been used in various fields by various social actors. To name a few, classroom teachers in all education levels conduct action research for more effective learning

outcomes and improvement of teaching, practitioners in health care services for learning and improving their service, and social activists in their local and regional communities for civic rights and legal rights movements. The numerous types of action research employed in different disciplines are differentiated from each other based on the involvement of participant(s), for example, individual teacher/practitioner action research, collaborative action research, and participatory action research. Action research is also frequently categorized based on its research context, for instance, classroom action research, school-wide action research, and district-wide action research, and also distinguished based on its purposes such as technical action research that is outcome-oriented, practical action research to provide better service and guidance for practitioners, and critical action research that aims for social change and emancipation (See Burns, 2005, p. 58, and Kemmis, McTarrart & Nixon, 2014, pp. 8-17 for the comparison of different types of action research). What the differing types of action research share is the process of its systemic planning, action and reflection in a spiral and cyclical progression and its goal, that is, change, transformation and improvement of practice, whether it is for short-term or long-term or infinite.

Despite its wide-spread use in various disciplines, and well-intended orientation, action research has not been without criticisms. In fact, as Burns (2005) notes, a quite adverse and aggressive sentiment regarding action research reflected in a few well-known ELT publications in the early 2000s ignited contested discussions regarding the conceptualization of educational research in ELT. One of the strong criticisms derives from a view of positivist research paradigm wherein 'scientific' research is understood primarily through statistical and quantitative data that is considered as 'empirical' evidence to 'legitimately' inform and advance the practice as discussed in Borg (2002) and similarly in Burns (2005). In other words, from this positivist and essentialist perspective of viewing knowledge construction and reconstruction, only generalizable research data are deemed as legitimate and eligible to contribute to the reproduction of knowledge and the betterment of practice. Action research from this perspective is then considered as non-scientific work because it is based on individual practitioners' reflective narratives of their personalized practice, whether individual or collective, and is produced by non-experts and thus it is illegitimate to advance knowledge and scholarship.

However, this essentialist understanding of knowledge and epistemology (i.e. how to reproduce the knowledge) is rebutted by numerous educational researchers and language teacher educators whose views reflect more toward social constructivist and/or postmodernist (e.g. Bailey, 1998; Borg, 2002; Burns, 2005; Holwell, 2004; Lotherington, 2002). They refute that action research is a form of empirical research by using various data that are systematically collected and analysed in a planned protocol. The generalizability of the research findings as seen in 'mainstream' research is not part of the agenda for action research. Rather, the results of action research are self-reflective and interpretative to inform very localized practice with action that can lead to better practice and improved learning. Furthermore, action research rejects the hierarchical distinction between researcher/expert and participant/non-expert, advocating for more collaborative and equitable relations of power that operate in the dynamics of conducting research. Teacher educators and teacher practitioners, and teachers and their learners can be co-conductors of research and co-constructors of knowledge building. In essence, action research is rooted in Freire's (1970, 2000) critical pedagogy, seeing the dialectic relationship between teaching and learning and between theory and practice in that each entity exists and progresses through reciprocal support for each other.

Snapshots of Action Research in ELT

I have used forms of collaborative action research and critical action research as a practitioner-researcher with different colleagues in different ELT settings. The critical action research that I have conducted follows the characteristics of critical participatory action research (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014) in that it examines tensions in professional practice and aims to transform the practice for more meaningful learning and teaching and moving toward social justice. The following examples are snapshots of action research projects that I have conducted in different ELT settings.

Project 1: Action research in the ESL and English literacy classroom in a TDSB secondary school

I conducted collaborative action research with a TDSB secondary school English as Second Language (ESL)/English literacies teacher for identifying issues of learners' academic disengagement and underachievement using a culturally relevant pedagogy with the goal of increasing students' classroom engagement and investment for their academic achievement. The issues that affected the students' academic performance were complex and convoluted as many of the students in the school were newcomer adolescents to Canada, most of whom reflect socioeconomically underprivileged and socio-politically vulnerable status. Their sociopolitical conditions (e.g., relocating residency due to vulnerable financial reasons, sudden deportation due to the immigration policy changes) were closely affecting their involvement in academic activities and academic success. To address this tension, the initial action research cycle (i.e. phase) was planned to support learners' active engagement in the lesson and class activities to engage the numerous students who were silent in class. Using a culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2013), the students were intentionally grouped with those who had the same cultural and/or linguistic background to mediate their understanding of the lesson and readings which were on the topic of marriage. Students in pairs and in groups read the given texts and discussed their understanding of the texts using their home language and English first and shared their cultural reflections as well as personal opinions related to marriage in English to the class. Most students showed greater interactions with their peers and teachers through their excitement of sharing cultural differences in dating someone and getting married. Even those who had previously remained quiet in class, eagerly participated in class discussions on the cultural differences in marriage. For example, when unpacking the concept of India's caste system in one of the readings, students who were familiar with it shared their prior cultural knowledge about it with their peers, which led to the further discussion of unequal social systems that exist in different cultures.

To strengthen this dynamic of class engagement and further scaffold students' learning in English, the action research cycle was recreated adding another

pedagogical tool, transformative multiliteracies pedagogy (Cummins & Early, 2011). The class was set as a research workshop with a lesson topic on ‘famous Canadians’ which involved a research project wherein students had to present their research on famous Canadians a week later. It was scaffolded through cultural comparisons between famous Canadians and those famous in different countries. In this second action research cycle, the teachers (i.e. main ESL teacher and teacher-researcher, myself) and students had more flexible classroom interactions, and at times, one-to-one discussions based on their inquiries related to their research topic. At times, to their surprise, students reported their excitement learning that some famous Canadians are originally from their home country. This, in turn, increased their investment in their individual research project, leading to them spending more time searching for more information in class and outside class time.

In the presentations of their research projects, students were encouraged to use various tools to deliver their findings. Their presentations were multimodal reflecting various forms of multiliteracies through images, written and verbal expressions, and songs and videos along with their reflection of their lives relating to the famous Canadian’s life stories. Throughout the two cycles of action research with the same group of students in this ESL and English literacy class, I was able to witness that students’ engagement in class activities and investment in their search for knowledge increasingly improved. Despite the multitude and multiplicity of concerns and issues surrounding these learners, the application of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and transformative multiliteracies pedagogy (Cummins & Early, 2011) allowed the learners to express their cultural and linguistic identities and increase their investment in learning.

Project 2: Collaborative action research on Academic vocabulary teaching in an EAP course

Cummins and Early (2015) assert, based on their analysis of the academic language proficiency of newcomer English learners in the Toronto Board of Education, that academic vocabulary is more challenging for English language learners compared to domestic students whose first language is English. Having

this empirical research evidence in addition to the program-wide emphasis on academic vocabulary teaching in the year of 2015-2016 in an EAP program in a Canadian university located in the centre of a culturally and linguistically heterogeneous city, I collaborated with my colleagues who taught the same course that focused on interdisciplinary academic literacy skills (e.g. critical thinking and problem-solving skills, academic reading and writing, research skills, and digital literacies) to pilot an academic vocabulary acquisition project for international students who were conditionally admitted to the university. The initial goal of the vocabulary teaching project was to help students develop autonomous learning and self-motivation, which was the purpose of the first cycle in this action research. Students were assigned to compile a weekly vocabulary diary where they wrote definitions and sample sentences of academic words. Although all students participated in this individual vocabulary journal/diary, which was worth 2% of their total grade, many entries did not meet the instructors' expected goals, and some showed serious ethical issues such as plagiarism, for instance, copying example sentences from online dictionaries.

In response to those issues, a new approach to academic vocabulary teaching in the following semester (i.e. the second cycle of this action research) was introduced with the ideas of performance-based, multimodality-enhanced, and learner-directed vocabulary teaching. This approach to vocabulary teaching was greatly influenced by Cummins' (2009) transformative multiliteracies pedagogy to facilitate students' development of their multiliteracies skills where they increase their capability to express ideas multimodally in multiliterate forms.

In their vocabulary presentation/performance groups, students were encouraged to use multimodal forms including various traditional and alternative tools to present their work, that is, teaching academic words to the class in a constructive and creative way. Also, their presentation/performance was to incorporate various forms of literacies (e.g. conventional oral and written literacies and digital and filmographic or performance-based) with a goal to foster critical literacy skills with critical awareness of how language is learned and how language intersects with cultural elements. For their presentations, most groups used Powerpoint slides or Prezi that included various modes of expression such as images, graphs,

charts, and videos. Some groups also performed skits, created digital games and quizzes, and made the class move around as part of the activity for reviewing and testing the academic vocabulary.

The preponderance of students' reflections regarding the most useful way of learning academic vocabulary showed that multimodal activities (e.g. combinations of games, quiz, skits, musical chairs) added to the vocabulary presentations as they were stimulating for students to use and helped them remember new words. Students created a unique learning environment and opportunity where they were able to think of the cultural and academic context in which the words could be used, and they were able to say the words and explain the words adequately in an appropriate context. Students' investment and their accountability in learning increased as they were participating in activities as active agents in their learning as well as developing creativity while working on the collaborative vocabulary acquisition project.

Their reflective thinking on their own learning processes was continuously exercised throughout the semester when discussing issues related to the vocabulary presentation preparation with instructors in class and during office hours. Students not only improved their academic skills, such as clear oral delivery and organizing ideas concisely but also had opportunities to develop interpersonal and pragmatic skills such as collaborating ideas and coordinating/negotiating roles in tasks and respecting individuals' rights to learn and maintaining the group harmony by mutually contributing to the group presentation. This also created opportunities for instructors to learn from learners' creative methods of learning, which in fact informed my teaching in the following year where I adopted more digital education apps such as Kahoot and Quizlet. This highlights that learning and teaching is indeed a dialogic and dialectic process.

Concluding Remarks

I have articulated the importance of action research in teaching practice and showcased how action research is executed in two ELT settings. The process of action research collaboratively evolves through reflective inquiry and appropriate theory through its spiral and cyclical cycles. Action research begins

by identifying areas of tension or concern, proceeds with appropriate action, observation, and collection, and analysis of tangible and non-tangible data (e.g. students' journal entries, presentations, class observation, dialogues between students and instructors during office hours, formal and informal reflection surveys from students, teachers' reflection), and continues this cycle through revised action, observation, reflection, and analysis. It is important to note that critical action research goes beyond the fixing of 'problem' in practice. In critical action research in ELT, teacher practitioners and/or educators mediate practice through empirically-proven pedagogical tools that render possible the creation of equitable educational opportunities for students' learning and knowledge construction. As such, I believe, critical action research as seen in the examples mentioned above, allows teacher-researchers to (re)structure their teaching toward more transformative practice by creating more space for learners to express their prior knowledge and to become the main social agents in their learning. It is also crucial that critically oriented action research should include appropriate critical pedagogical lenses that inform teaching practices to be appropriated in the localized teaching context.

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