

Action Research: An Effective Strategy for Continuing Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights action research as an effective strategy of continuing professional development to meet the challenges on recent demands for specialized expertise in practicing teachers. Diurnal occupational academic activities take a major portion of time of individuals creating unfavourable situation withholding them to pursue other means of growth as academicians. The paper focuses on feasibility of action research as an effective means as it enables teachers to collect data from observation and reflection on own practices without demanding extra time or being away from workplace. The paper concentrates on professional development, action research for growth, processes of research and its benefits.

Keywords: *professional development, action research, reflective practices, intuitional enquiry*

Introduction

Entire world has undergone a sea change. This has affected each profession resulting extra work to pace with the changing needs and update with required experience to maintain professional standard. Many strategies have been advocated in professional circles at national and international levels providing academicians to pursue their professional growth. Many of such means of professional development remain a mere dream for individuals as workloads consumes extra time. Action research in which, an individual does not require to be away from job and can be conducted based on own academic pursuit proves a very effective strategy for professional growth of those busy academic

individuals. The paper highlights importance of professional development, action research as an effective means, processes of pursuing action research and its benefits.

Professional Development

Value of positive experience in each field of study remains crucial in the changing scenario of academic pursuit. This requires individuals to go beyond diurnal mechanical practices to innovative ideas for growth. A structured way of following such procedure proves productive expansion for many professionals. There have been many ways an individual can engage in for extra information and required wisdom both formal and informal ways. Reading

professional journals, attending conference, seminars and workshops are some operative avenues open for all. Discussion with fellow colleagues on issues and problems enables practitioners gain additional insights. Action research is one such a strategy to accelerate and enhance personal growth especially in areas of English Language teaching.

Action research as an effective means

Action research is a structured means of reflection on own work to sort out issues related to own professional practices. It focuses on concrete and practical issues of immediate concern to a group in which the individual has been associated with for their growth in language learning. "It is conducted in naturally occurring settings, primarily using methods common to qualitative research (Nunan 1992; McKernan 1996) such as observing and recording events and behaviours. Its approaches are essentially 'participatory', in that they are conducted by and with members of the actual community under study (Bailey 1998). Because of its practical nature and focus on immediate concerns, it holds particular appeal for classroom teachers and a promising direction for the building of theories related to teaching and learning." (Burns 1999:24) Action research proves an effective strategy as observation, data collection and analysis remains a part of own practices for specific purpose in solving problems related to teaching and learning difficulties. The very processes enable classroom practitioners gain additional insight leading to research locating innovative means to overcome problems in

ELT both at classroom practices or teacher-training.

Processes of pursuing action research

Action research is a qualitative research and a scientific study to enquiry with objectivity and control. "Qualitative researchers adopt a structured and standardised approach towards their enquiries ... forming research hypotheses ... are based on previous evidence which provides rationale for considering of hypothesis worthy of testing." (Burns 1999:21) Action research reflects "a direct and logical outcome of the progressive position. After showing children how to work together to solve their problems, the next step was for teachers to adopt the methods they had been teaching their children, and learn to solve their own problems co-operatively. (Hodgkinson 1957, cited in Cohen and Manion 1994:190, Burns 1999: 29) Understanding the importance of action research for the dual purposes of solving classroom related issues and for continuing professional development, it is imperative to gain an insight of processes to assume it.

Action research is an enquiry. It arises "out of our professional practices." (Wallace 1998:15) It is a series of interrelated experiences involving a few phases of actions. They are "exploring, identifying, planning, collecting data, analysing and reflecting, hypothesising or speculating, intervening, observing, reporting, writing, presenting (Burns 1999:35) An understanding of the steps makes research work systematic and easier.

Exploring is recording of general observations of a situations. Identifying involves refining areas of concern. Planning concerns to preparation of an action plan for collecting data using appropriate research methods. Collecting data focuses time and procedure and process of gathering data. Analysing data is a process in which the researcher considers data as stimulus for reflection. Hypothesising/speculating is a phase of anticipating in advance the actual occurring of the research (learning, behaviour or progress). Intervening refers to adopting a mode of changed practices based on hypothesis of speculation and deliberate action on experimentation. Observing connotes assessing of outcomes and intervention, reflecting on effectiveness of action and redesigning a set of strategies for implementation. Reporting involves articulating the actions taken, collection of data and insights gained in the process of the research and sharing with others. Writing is a final phase of summing up and recording entire process of the said research for presentation. Presentation, the last phase, is sharing results and effectiveness of the research to a wider audience in a big platform.

Action research is a cyclic process. Deciding topic of action research is vital for smooth conduct of the same. For selecting and developing the topic, there are certain steps that enable the researcher to be precise in deciding a topic. Eight specific headings of topic selection simplify the process as suggested by Wallace. They are:

1. **Purpose** Why are you engaging in this action research?
2. **Topic** What are you going to investigate?
3. **Focus** What is the precise question you are going to ask yourself within that area?
4. **Product** What is the likely outcome of the research, as you intend it?
5. **Mode** How are you going to conduct the research?
6. **Timing** How long have you got to do the research? Is there a deadline for its completion?
7. **Resources** What are the resources, both human and material, that you can call upon to help you complete the research?
8. **Refocusing/fine-tuning** As you proceed with your research, do you suppose you

will have to rethink your original question? (Wallace 1998 :21)

There are constraints in action research. The problem related to data reliability and validity. Reliability refers to fairness to all research subjects (students) related to marking scheme. In other words, finding an answer to the question, 'will there be comparable results of the research if conducted by different researchers in a different classroom?', etc. Validity denotes the concept of testing what the researcher supposed to test and not something else. In other words, the researcher need to confirm the test items that is designed really tests

what is intended to. In most cases, some results of action research will be subjective in certain cases, especially, in the results of an interview if conducted expecting opinion on the effectiveness of lesson transaction and student responses.

Research techniques adopted for action research play a dominant role. There are couple of established research techniques used in action research. They are (a) field-notes, logs, teaching journals, diaries, personal accounts and verbal report, (b) observation techniques, (c) evaluation and trailing, interviews and questionnaire, (e) case studies, (f) experiments, etc. Researchers while taking up action research need to decide on facts concerning ethical issues. If the action research conducted no way helps students progress in their language learning, the researcher is not supposed to engage it leading to waste of student time and efforts. In such cases, it would be considered use of unwanted authority for the sake of doing action research.

Benefits of Action Research

Professional development for practicing teachers is a must considering the recent demands in each field. Workload being tremendous, professionals find very little time to pursue some other means of growth. Action research provides scope for reflection-on-action and improve their practice as it remains a highly-focused investigation on own classroom practices. It enables classroom practitioner collect data from own classroom in a systematic way and analysis

of them can help taking appropriate decision for planning future course of action while planning, executing and solving existing problems in English Language Teaching and learning. The action research also encourages collaboration between individual in the same institution and sharing of ideas can demonstrate invaluable insight for school improvement. Action research empowers individual to move on to reflective practices.

Conclusion

Professional development plays a dominant role in updating with the required insights in the fast-paced world. Various institutions and organizations have emerged in recent years providing new avenues to teacher trainers, researchers and classroom practitioners. Academic workload and subsidiary activities in an intuitional context consume major portion of time for individual and stand on their own continuing professional growth. Action research is one of the many strategies an academician can use since it can be done as an integral part of daily duties and responsibilities. Action research enables practitioners to reassess learning- teaching difficulties and other issues of classroom transaction strategies and solve immediate problems in learner development and school improvement. Different researchers do action researches on various topics raising new questions that make the researchers move deeper into their investigations. Sharing research results and findings enables collaboration leading to building a professional learning community with other teachers.

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