Cambridge English

Teacher Development

Action research for busy language teachers

This article is a follow-up to my Cambridge English Teacher webinar, *Professional Development Through Action Research for Busy Language Teachers*, a recording of which is available in the Resources section. The webinar looked at different approaches to, and different aspects of, teacher professional development, with a focus on action research (AR).

Definitions of action research

Chamot and her colleagues give a clear and concise definition of AR: '[It] is classroom-based research conducted by teachers in order to reflect upon and evolve their teaching. It is a systematic, documented inquiry into one aspect of teaching and learning in a specific classroom' (1998: 1).

Another definition comes from Richard Donato: 'Action research is conducted by teachers and for teachers. It is small scale, contextualized, localised, and aimed at discovering, developing, or monitoring changes to practice' (2003: 1).

These definitions highlight key aspects of AR, including the specific classroom-based context in which it is carried out by teachers in a reflective and developmental, systematic and documented way, leading to positive change. During the webinar, a number of participants pointed out that good teachers always reflect on their teaching and are always thinking of ways to improve their teaching; so how is AR different?

That's a good question, and one which Chamot et al. answer: 'The purpose of teacher research is to gain understanding of teaching and learning within one's classroom and to use that knowledge to increase teaching efficacy/student learning. Reflective teachers do this every day, only not as carefully and systematically' (1998: 1).

The third definition we looked at during the webinar comes from Curry, who includes AR's important collaborative aspect, as the most successful AR projects are carried out by small groups of teachers, who know each other, work well together, and trust each other. 'Action research consists of investigations initiated by teachers who want to improve their teaching practice by understanding it more fully. An action researcher may undertake a solo project in his or her classroom, or involve colleagues in investigating a question of shared interest' (1).

Seven steps of action research

There are different ways of carrying out AR, and the webinar raised the question of whether an AR 'template' exists. As most AR is highly localised, and carried out within a specific teaching and learning context, there are many different ways of doing it. There are, however, a number of recurring steps and stages that are common to most AR projects:

1. Identify a change
2. Observe the present situation
3. Plan different possible interventions
4. Carry out the intervention
5. Observe the effects of the intervention
6. Evaluate results
7. Publish/Share findings

Step 1 Identify a change

In the first step, the teacher-researcher identifies some aspect of what is happening – or not happening – in their classroom that they would like to change. For the AR to be focused, the change needs to be quite specific. A goal such as wanting to improve or increase learners' motivation to learn English may be highly desirable, but its scale and scope is overwhelming. Goals need to be more focused, and less all-encompassing, such as the teacher wanting to encourage and enable learners to produce more of the target language orally in class.

Step 2 Observe the present situation

In the second step, the teacher carefully observes the present situation in class. In our example of increasing the target language spoken by the learners, the teacher makes notes and records how much target language is currently being spoken (if any), using audio recordings, film, or a teaching journal, with entries focused on this aspect of the classroom activity.

Steps 3 to 6

Steps 3 to 6 all relate to planning and carrying out some kind of intervention, then observing and evaluating the effects of the intervention. In our example, the teacher could plan a number of ways to create more in-class oral production of the target language, for example, using pair-work and small group work, using poems and songs, music and movies, etc.

A common problem at this stage is what I call 'premature evaluation', i.e. teachers evaluating before they observe. For example, if the learners tend to revert to using their first language when put into small groups, then the teacher should note this observation in their journal. However, if the teacher writes 'Putting learners into small groups didn't work', that would be an evaluation, *not* an observation.

This is an important point, as teachers are often so used to giving corrective feedback in class that they can easily forget that observing and evaluating are two quite different activities. It is important to remember that steps 5 and 6 need to be carried out carefully and separately.

Step 7 Publish/Share findings

There is not universal agreement on the last step, as some researchers feel that it is not essential for teachers to publish their work, and they point out that teachers do not usually have the time, energy or incentive to do so. However, for other researchers, the sharing of the AR process, findings and outcomes are an important part of building professional communities of reflective teacher-practitioners. The compromise is that the important part of the final step is for teachers to share their AR work with their colleagues, whether or not it is published elsewhere.

The concluding point to make is that the seven steps represent an AR cycle. So, rather than being a linear process, with a clear beginning and end, it is an ongoing cycle of identifying, observing, intervening, re-observing, evaluating and sharing.

References

Details of all the works referred to here and during the webinar are given in the Discussion Forum. If you'd like to continue the discussion, please visit the forum and add your opinion.

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