CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.

Doing Action Research
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INTRODUCTION

For teachers, a primary reason for doing classroom research is to become more effective teachers. Research doesn't necessarily offer clear answers to pedagogical questions but it does provides new insights into the teaching and learning process. As Johnson (1992) puts it,
The importance of research is not so much that it supplies definitive answers to questions such as 'What is the best way to learn a language?' or 'Which is the most effective method of L2 teaching?' It does not. Rather, research can help us gain a richer understanding of the many interrelated factors involved in learning. It can help us see how the ways we organize learning environments can promote or inhibit growth. (p. 5)

A second reason for teachers to undertake classroom research is to better evaluate existing research. Once teachers become involved in the research process, they gain experience in forming research questions and selecting the methods that best answer these questions. They understand the challenges of analyzing data and drawing conclusions. They also become sensitive to the many practical problems that exist in doing research.

In spite of these benefits, there are a variety of reasons why teachers may be hesitant or unable to undertake research. For one thing many teachers have not been trained to undertake research. Often teacher education programs focus primarily on how to teach. Little or no attention is given to training teachers to research their own L2 classroom. Another factor that often discourages teachers from doing research are very practical issues such as heavy teaching loads or lack of support on the part of administrators. These are very real problems that can discourage teachers from doing research.

For many, action research is viewed as one of the most effective research methods for producing sound L2 teaching practices. This is because action research, by definition, involves a systematic inquiry into the issues and problems that teachers face with the goal of improving pedagogical practices. Hence, this paper will focus on clarifying what is meant by action research.

ACTION RESEARCH
Defining Action Research

Action research has been defined in a number of ways but it typically has three major characteristics: it is carried out by classroom teachers, it is collaborative, and it is aimed at

changing things. Burns (1999) expands on these characteristics, maintaining that action research has the following features.

1. Action research is contextual, small-scale and localized – it identifies and investigates problems within a specific situation.
2. It is evaluative and reflective as it aims to bring about change and improvement in practice.
3. It is participatory as it provides for collaborative investigation by teams of colleagues, practitioners and researchers.
4. Changes in practice are based on the collection of information or data which provides the impetus for change. (p. 30)

There are several features of this definition that are important to highlight. First, action research, as the name implies, involves <u>action</u> in that it seeks to bring about change, specifically in local classrooms. It is also <u>research</u> since it entails the collection and analysis of data. Finally, it is <u>participatory and collaborative</u> in that teachers work together to examine their own classrooms.

The development of action research was influenced by the work of Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist, who in the 1940s outlined a method for dealing with social problems that consisted of a four-stage action cycle: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. In this cycle researchers develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening, act to implement the plan, observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs, and reflect on these effects as the basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of stages. (Kemmis & McTaggart as cited in Burns, 1999, p. 32)

<u>Action Research Procedures</u>

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) provide a clear description of the stages of action research. These stages are as follows.

Stage 1: Researchers <u>identify, evaluate, and formulate a problem</u> that is viewed as critical to their everyday teaching. This problem need not be restricted to a particular class but could involve curriculum innovations in a school system.

Stage 2: Researchers <u>consult with other interested parties</u>—teachers, other researchers, and administrators—in order to focus the problem more clearly and perhaps suggest the cause of the problem.

Stage 3: Researchers <u>review existing studies</u> to find out what can be learned from comparable studies.

Stage 4: Based on their reading, researchers may <u>modify or redefine the initial statement of the problem</u>.

Stage 5: Researchers specify the research design including the participants, choice of materials, and procedures.

Stage 6: Researchers clarify how the project will be evaluated with an understanding that this evaluation will be continuous.

Stage 7: Researchers implement the project undertaking the data collection process.

Stage 8: Researchers analyze the data, draw inferences, and evaluate the project.

During the final stage of analysis and reflection, researchers may decide to implement another cycle, thus continuing the research process.

Let us take an example. Suppose you are concerned by the amount of L1 being used in your language classroom, particularly in group work. You talk with other teachers in the department and they suggest that to deal with the problem, you need to find out what students are talking about in the L1. You decide that for a couple of days you will put a tape recorder near several of the groups to find out what they are talking about. You tell the students that you will be doing this for several groups and that they should carry on as they normally do.

You then listen to the tapes and compile a list of things that student use the L1 for, such as explaining the directions for a task to other group members, translating unknown vocabulary words, planning what they will say in their reports, talking about what they did last night or will do after class, etc. You decide that some of these reasons for using the L1 are justified such as using the L1 to explain unfamiliar vocabulary. However, other times the use of the L1 is not justified, such as talking about social activities. You decide that you will tell students that they may use the L1 in their groups but only for discussions related to the task they are doing. They are not to talk about their social life during group activities. You tell them that if they do this, they will receive fewer points on their group work assignments. You then randomly tape record groups again, checking to see whether or not there is less use of the L1 when talking about social activities.

As you can see, this process involves, identifying a problem, talking with colleagues about the problem, determining a plan of action that involves gathering data, analyzing the data to determine the next action to take and then starting the cycle all over again. This process is what is termed action research.

REFERENCES

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