Challenges of Action Research: Insights From Language Institutes

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Abstract

Action research is a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world to address practitioners' own issues and carry out a close examination of the effects of such an intervention. Classroom-based research, or action research, can be the viable solution to some pandemic academic sluggishness and scientific apathy. However, the erroneous impression that research is an elite discipline belonging to certain talented or conversely boring individuals who always constrain themselves to their desks dissuades some teachers from engaging with action research in the local contexts. This small scale qualitative study was an attempt to investigate the reasons that hamper the Iranian EFL teachers teaching in language institutes to do action research. To this end, a total of 12 Iranian EFL teachers (8 females and 4 males) were chosen through the convenience sampling procedure to take part in the study. The semistructured individual interviews were used to gather the data. Results of the content analysis revealed that such factors as (a) attitude toward action research, (b) lack of fund and support, (c) lack of cooperation among colleagues, and (d) lack of knowledge and confidence in doing action research led to the teachers' apathy in regard to doing action research.

Keywords: Action Research; Iranian EFL Teachers; Classroom-Based Research

1. Introduction

One of the major concerns of L2 teachers, educators, and researchers is related to how language teaching/learning can take place effectively within the context of classroom. They try to find out what appropriate interventions need to occur in teaching practices, teaching materials, curriculum development, and educational policies in order to boost learners' achievement. The question that might arise is what such interventions are systematically based on or what informs the potential changes in the abovementioned aspects. One possible answer is that such changes should be based on previous theories and research findings; this results in evidence-based teaching practices. Instead of making changes based on hunches and assumptions, teachers can make use of research in order to systematically collect information about classroom issues and, accordingly, intervene to bring about

necessary informed changes and improvements. In fact, solving educational problems based on findings obtained from action research has attracted more attention and been a great improvement over teachers' subjective judgment and decisions that are sometimes based on limited personal experience (Best & Kahn, 2006).

According to Elliott (1991), action research is "the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it (p. 69). In action research, there is an attempt to gather information in order to find out how an institute or a school operates, how teachers' practices work and how well and effectively students learn (Mills, 2000). Issues such as poor student achievement, bullying behaviors within schools, lack of interest and understanding in a topic, and the impact of new or different teaching materials and practices can be investigated through action research.

Whereas many types of research are conducted by people who are not directly involved in the phenomena in question and are external to the issue, action research is initiated and carried out by those who are essentially part of the phenomena (Cain & Milovic, 2010; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). In other words, much of the research is carried out for intellectual reasons, including answering intriguing questions or exploring and addressing new areas, whereas the purpose of action research is to make change in personally experienced situations with the aim of solving pedagogical problems and improving situations (Taber, 2007).

Action research by involving teachers directly in the process of research assists them to find contextually appropriate solutions to the pedagogical problems they experience in their local contexts. Action research is considered to be a valuable way through which teachers can improve their teaching practices as well as gain more understanding of the context they are teaching in (Burns, 2010). Teachers, by taking a self-reflective stance, can explore their teaching contexts and, by subjecting their teaching practices to different critical questions, can develop new ideas and alternatives. In other words, action research helps teachers to fill the gap between what really happens in classroom and what they really like to happen.

Action research that is regarded as self-study research can have a number of benefits for teachers. It can lead to teachers becoming more flexible, reflective, and open to new ideas (Oja & Smulyan, 1989). Action research can raise awareness and criticality, resulting in teachers' proactivity in relation to external authorities. Engaging with action research, teachers are most likely to boost their self-esteem and confidence as well as to acquire the skills of self-analysis. Action research can change the pattern of interaction among teachers to more collegial interaction, with a focus on problems and viable solutions (Cain, 2011; Cain & Milovic, 2010; Clayton et al., 2008; Haggarty & Postlethwaite, 2003; Lo Castro, 1994).

However, it is unimaginable for some teachers to tread the territory of action research; thus, they prefer not to mingle with it. Not surprisingly, they have little confidence and mental emotional security in carrying out research, owing to their erroneous impression that research is an elite discipline belonging to certain talented or conversely boring individuals who always constrain themselves to their desks. Worrall (2004) argued that despite the fact that a large number of benefits accrue to teachers by doing action research, there are, however, some barriers such as lack of time, lack of external pressure, and personal disposition that can stop teachers from engaging with action research. It appears that studies on action research need to shift from addressing and discussing the advantages and benefits to revealing the barriers that dissuade or even prevent teachers from conducting action research in their local settings.

Apathy toward doing action research has been a noticeable phenomenon among Iranian EFL teachers teaching in language institutes. The local context in which one of the authors of the present study has been teaching since 2010 is not an exception to this persuasive problem. Although facing numerous pedagogical issues worthy of investigation, the EFL teachers teaching in language institutes in Yasouj, a city located in the southwest of Iran, are disinclined and unwilling to engage with action research. This apathy seems to be unusual because most of the teachers teaching in language institutes have an M.A. in TEFL and are, to some extent, familiar with research and its contributions to the process of teaching/learning. During their M.A. programs, the teachers pass research courses, write theses and term papers, and sometimes take part in research projects. It is assumed and expected that they are aware of the role research can play in their professional development and in improving teaching quality. This trend in which the Iranian EFL teachers, presumably familiar with research and its contributions, are unwilling to engage with action research motivated the present study. In effect, the idea of conducting the present study stemmed from one of the researchers' experience in the local context. The purpose of this small scale qualitative study was to find out why the Iranian EFL teachers teaching in language institutes in Yasouj were unwilling to conduct action research.

2. Method

2.1 Context of the Study

The present study was conducted in language institutes in Yasouj, Iran. Language institutes in Iran are private centers where foreign languages, mainly English, are taught. Language institutes are considered to be the primary places where learners can develop communicative ability in English—a goal that schools fail to achieve.

Because these centers are run by the private sector rather than the public sector, the managers of the institutes try to hire L2 teachers who are proficient in English in order to increase the rate of student retention that, according to Rahimi and Askari Bigdeli (2014), is the factor that influences teaching methodologies and teaching materials.

2.2 Participants

A total of 12 Iranian EFL teachers (8 females and 4 males) were chosen through the convenience sampling procedure to take part in the study. Because the study was qualitative and it required interviews, it was not feasible to include the teachers who were not available due to their teaching workloads. All the teachers, ranging in age from 26 to 34, had M.A. in TEFL. Their teaching experience ranged from 4 to 6 years.

The semistructured interviews were used to gather the data. Each individual interview took approximately 40 min and was voice-recorded. The interviews were conducted in Persian (i.e. the participants' L1) in order to avoid the potential ambiguity and misunderstanding that might occur by speaking English. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for further analysis. The transcriptions were analyzed using thematic analysis that, according to Braun and Clarke (2006) "is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). The steps employed in the thematic analysis encompassed transcribing verbal data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

3. Results

The objective of the present qualitative study was to find out why the Iranian EFL teachers teaching in language institutes in Yasouj were disinclined to carry out action research in their local contexts. There were four themes that emerged from the data and accounted for the reasons why the teachers did not carry out or take part in action research. The themes were (a) attitude toward action research, (b) lack of fund and support, (c) lack of cooperation among colleagues, and (d) lack of knowledge and confidence in doing research.

3.1 Attitude Toward Action Research

Some of the teachers did understand research as an issue completely separated from the act of teaching. In other words, they did not show interest in research because they were simply in the belief that research was not their business. *"I am a teacher rather than a researcher"* was heard from some of the teachers. They believed that the job of a teacher is to teach and not to carry out research.

The cause of developing such an attitude can be ascribed in part to the courses the teachers had passed during their M.A. programs of TEFL. As one of the teachers explained, they were exposed, during their M.A. programs, to a plethora of theories and papers which were not applicable to their local contexts of teaching. *"I am fed up with all the theories and the papers that the teacher asked us to study and take the exam. I do not see their influence today in my teaching."* It seems that what the teachers understood from the research papers and theories during their M.A. programs had shaped the perception that doing research cannot contribute to their professional development and it is irrelevant to their teaching practices.

Another cause that might be responsible for having such a negative attitude is the misconception the teachers had about research. Some of them regarded the act of researching as a monstrous and unmanageable work that needs lots of expertise, and it is beyond the ability of a language teacher teaching in language institutes. They believed that doing research is a task which can be done only by university professors. One of the teachers said that *"You know, doing research needs a lot of knowledge. It is the job of those professors. Action research is a kind of research so it needs knowledge and expertise."* One reason for this misconception is the way the Iranian university professors treat research. In other words, to choose areas of investigation for theses or term papers, the Iranian university professors focus on and look for fashionable topics and ignore local educational problems worthy of attention. This motivates the students believe that exploring local educational issues or problems that arise from the context of the classroom are not worth researching. When asked about the topics of their theses, many of the teachers acknowledged that action research and exploring local issues were not of their professors' interests. That is, studies that can be done through action research are considered to be mediocre and second-rate for thesis or term papers (see the comment below):

> *"I had been teaching for some years at language institutes when I started my thesis. I had a research idea about my conversation classes. But my professor did not approve it because he believed that I would not be able to publish any papers with this idea."*

Thus, the perception of research along with its role in teaching/learning that was formed during the time when the teachers were students appears to have influenced their future direction. One of the teachers stated that:

> *"I read lots of papers when I was an M.A. student of TEFL. Many of the papers related to language teaching/learning are not actually applicable in the context I am teaching. I think researchers are living in a world quite differently from that of language teachers."*

Some of the teachers did not intend to engage with action research because they were satisfied with their current conditions. In other words, they were not interested in action research because it could compel them to move out of their comfort zone. One teacher commented that *"Why should I do action research when students and parents are happy with the institute?"* Another teacher stated that *"honestly, I do not like changes. To make a change means studying and doing new things."* Although interventions and changes could make further development on part of the teachers, this was unwelcome for the teachers who were satisfied with their current situation and their teaching skills.

3.2 Lack of Fund and Support

Some of the teachers did not enter the territory of action research not because of their attitude, but because of the fact that they were not supported by their institutes. Doing a piece of research needs, at least, access to books, articles, and financial support. Because the Iranian language institutes do not appreciate the significance and value of action research, they accordingly do not support the interested teachers who like to explore classroom issues. One of the teachers stated that *"If the institute supports me financially, I will do action research because I like research. Doing research needs getting books, article, making copies, and so on, and as you know, our salary is too low to spend on research."* This shows that the extent to which the teachers are encouraged to do action research or conversely discouraged from it can be partly influenced by the support they receive from the language institutes. A teacher who was not happy about this stated that *"When you talk about research in the meetings, the managers will grimace because they think there are other more important priorities."*

In addition, the teachers who were interested in doing research but did not have sufficient research knowledge argued that the institutes do not embrace doing research and, thus, do not provide the teachers with training programs. A teacher pointed out the following: *"I suggested inviting a university professor to have a workshop for the teachers who like to do research. But the manager declined my request. The reason is simple. They do not want to spend money on such things."*

As for the commercial policies that underlie a large proportion of pedagogical decisions in the institutes, Rahimi and Askari Bigdeli (2014) argued that one of the main priorities in the Iranian language institutes is the issue of student retention. It is a determining factor behind all the pedagogical decisions made in the institutes. The authors held that the teachers in institutes have to sell some teaching methodologies in order for the institutes to reach their goal, that is, student retention.

3.3 Lack of Cooperation Among Colleagues

As pointed out by Cain (2011), the motivation and inclination to do or take part in a piece of action research are boosted "when it is undertaken in collaboration with colleagues and when involving others as critical friends" (p. 12). In conducting action research, teachers might seek permission of other teachers to observe their classes. They may need their colleagues' feedback on the results of the study. In a context where it is hard to find good help and colleagues are not acknowledged by each other, the idea of doing action research will be, to some extent, bizarre. Among the participants, there were a few teachers who complained about the highly competitive and unfriendly atmosphere among their colleagues. They were not happy with the lack of cooperation among the teachers. A teacher stated that *"when I ask my colleagues to cooperate and let me observe their classes or interview them, they try to make different excuses. Actually, they let me down."*

This group of teachers pointed out that there were a number of teaching/learning problems that cried for solutions. The colleagues, however, were not interested in working cooperatively with those who intended to carry out a piece of research. A teacher said that:

> *"I myself am curious to find out the reasons why the intermediate and high level students' motivation to learn English decrease, while the same students were very enthusiastic and motivated at lower levels. I wanted to observe and interview other colleagues about this. But my colleagues did not cooperate."*

Although action research can be carried out individually, its cooperative and collaborative nature continues to be its distinctive feature as providing solutions to the identified problems requires others' cooperation, feedback, and support. As the interviews revealed, there was hardly any communication between the teachers with regard to the teaching problems arising in the institutes. The managers of institutes also did not encourage and support meetings, discussions, and other opportunities for the teachers to cooperate in doing action research. The monthly or weekly meetings held by the managers were to deal with administrative issues rather than to create an environment for the teachers to share their pedagogical ideas. One of the teachers believed that *"The managers can make a change and invite the teachers to cooperate with each other. But the managers do not consider this issue to be important."*

3.4 Lack of Knowledge and Confidence in Doing Action Research

Despite the fact that all the teachers had already passed the research courses at university and graduated after completing and defending their theses, they seemed unable to put their research knowledge into practice and carry out action research.

The results obtained from the interviews indicated that some of the teachers were not familiar with research methods and the essential stages in research such as data collection procedure, data analysis, and interpreting the results. One of the teachers who had graduated two years before the time of the study and was teaching English for 5 years highlighted lack of knowledge and timidity with using statistics:

> *"What I studied about research was forgotten. Now, in fact, it is a bit difficult to remember all those, of course, complicated, stages of doing research. I sometimes get back to them, read them, but I am not familiar enough to start research. The worst part is the statistics; I cannot do analysis. And, this was my problem when I was doing my thesis."*

It appears that apart from doing theses, the teachers had not been engaged sufficiently with empirical research. And what they had learned about research during M.A. programs was confined to some textbooks. As one of the teachers stated,

> *"I sometimes come across issues and problems in my teaching which I think can be researched. But I do not know where to start and how to proceed and finish it. I passed some research courses when I was an M.A. student, and we had two sessions allocated to action research and its stages. But I hardly ever understood how to go about it."*

One possible reason for the teachers' lack of knowledge in action research can be the insufficient time allocated to the issue and the significance of action research in M.A. programs. This is partly because the motto of "publish or perish" is so prevalent among the Iranian ELT professors (Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2015). Such a trend makes the professors consider studies conducted through action research unsuitable for publication. Instead of motivating the students to address local teaching/learning problems, the professors try to focus on areas which have the capability of being published in reputable journals. Such a trend and tendency diminish the popularity of action research.

Starting action research for few teachers was fraught with doubts and dilemmas to the extent that it could leave them in frustration and apathy. A teacher with 5 years of teaching experience stated that *"I think I am not able to do action research because I might make mistakes in different stages. I may fail to analyze data. I think it is hard needs much confidence."* As Cain (2010) pointed out, due to lack of confidence, teachers regard their own findings to be shaky and not worthy of disseminating or publishing.

4. Discussion

Conducting action research can empower teachers to plan and teach more effectively. It is capable of increasing teachers' knowledge and teaching skills. When the result of action research is shared with colleagues, it will result in collaborative working that, in turn, helps teachers reflect more effectively upon their teaching practices. Hargreaves (2001) argued that when teachers' pedagogical decisions and practices are driven and informed by research evidence, the result will be effective and beneficial teaching/learning, hence high-quality education. However, there are some challenges facing teachers, dissuading them from engaging with action research. Worrall (2004) argued that the extent to which teachers believe in the significance and contribution of action research to their professional development as well as to improvement of their teaching practices, they will show tendency toward carrying out or taking part in action research. In contrast, when teachers perceive research as something completely separated and unrelated to the act of teaching, they will be unlikely to think of doing action research. The same held true with some of the teachers who participated in the present study. They regarded research as an activity that was irrelevant to teaching.

One way to change attitude of the teachers toward action research is by professors' giving more attention and significance to action research when students are doing M.A. programs in TEFL. It should be noted that the majority of the Iranian M.A. students of TEFL are teaching in language institutes while doing their M.A. Thus, inviting the students to address local teaching/learning issues through action research as their thesis topics or term papers, the professor can raise significance of action research in the eyes of the students as well as practically familiarize them with steps essential for action research. This can, further, remove intimidation facing the teachers who are in the belief that doing a piece of action research involves a sophisticated knowledge of statistics. It is doubtless when students or teachers understand that, through action research, they can develop professionally in the field as well as employ effective teaching skills and practices, they will probably start to develop positive attitudes toward action or classroom-based research.

As mentioned earlier, the Iranian professors of TEFL are obsessed with research topics and areas that have the capacity of being published in reputable international journals. Consequentially, they want students not to focus on classroom-based research because the obtained results may not be welcomed by editors of international journals. There is a need for change in the Iranian professors' perspectives toward action research and also a shift in the policies of international journals in accepting more systematically and well-conducted action research studies than they are used to. This also can change teachers' attitudes and further encourage them to investigate their classroom issues through action research.

Although researchers (e.g., Edge, 2001; Rochsantiningsih, 2005; Tinker Sachs, 2002) highlighted the contributing role of action research for L2 teachers who work collaboratively and try to reinvigorate and innovate their teaching practices, the Iranian EFL teachers, due to their incapability to work in collaboration and lack of cooperative spirit and environment, cannot proceed to do action research.

Lack of cooperation among the Iranian EFL teachers can be discussed through the lens of culture and its influence on the way the teachers view and treat the act of teaching. The cultural tendencies of the teachers influence the way they teach as well as interact with other colleagues. In general, people's perceptions of their selves heavily influenced by their culture fall within a continuum from individualistic to collectivistic (Storti, 1999). The individualist culture is characterized by having independence, self-reliance, and personal freedom. Individuals try to be self-sufficient and satisfy their personal needs. Group membership is not essential to their identity, survival, or success. In other words, there is more psychological and emotional distance from others, and the smallest unit of survival is the individual, rather than the group.

On the contrary, membership and serving a role in groups constitute a major part of individuals' identity in the collectivist culture. The well-being and success of individuals is largely dependent on the success of the group(s) for which they claim membership. Harmony, the interdependence of group, and the needs and feelings of others are valued and emphasized. As compared to the individualist culture, there is less psychological and emotional distance from others, and the smallest unit of survival is the group, rather than the individual. As far as the findings of the present study are concerned, the Iranian EFL teachers try to work independently and define themselves more in terms of what they can achieve personally. They are not willing to work cooperatively in groups or teams. There is a perception that independent work ends in more success than team or group work.

The reason why the managers of language institutes do not advocate action research can be attributed to their unawareness of the contributions that action research can make to the quality of teaching as well as to the teachers' professional development. The managers are accustomed to having an intuition-based perspective toward the teaching/learning issues. In other words, they rely on their personal experience and invite other teachers to do so when encountering teaching problems. In addition, the primary goal of language institutes is to enable language learners to develop communicative ability in English—a goal that schools fail to achieve. To this end, they use the internationally recognized English text books that are assumed to guarantee high-quality teaching. The perception is that the use of such materials is unlikely to lead to any teaching or learning problems. In case some problems arise,

they are considered to be minor that can be solved through intuition and personal experiences. It is postulated that making the managers aware of the benefits of doing action research is likely to change their policies and they, thus, support the interested teachers who are enthusiastic about engaging with action research. In doing so, one viable solution is that the interested teachers launch a piece of action research that is intended to address critical and important teaching/learning problems for which the managers seek solutions. The teachers can offer the practical solutions, obtained through action research, in order to find a practical way around the problems. In this way, it is likely that the managers start to appreciate significance of action or classroom-based research and probably provide the teachers with sufficient support.

According to Furlong and Sainsbury (2005), taking part in action research can enhance teachers' confidence and knowledge by collecting and using evidence in order to learn about their own teaching/learning interventions. However, as far as the results of the present study are concerned, the teaches were not adequately confident to start action research simply because they were not familiar with action research during their M.A. programs and, thus, did not have a clear understanding of how to conduct it. Because any piece of research requires special knowledge and skills to be done systematically, language institutes can provide the teachers with the training programs that familiarize them with the essential steps of action research and, thus, build up and increase their confidence.

Over all, the results of the study are in line with those of Worrall (2004) who found that such reasons as lack of time, lack of external pressure, and personal disposition might stop teachers from engaging with research. Despite the fact that the teaching practices employed by the Iranian EFL teachers can be more evidenced-based and contextually appropriate through action research, the teachers, due to the abovementioned reasons, resist engaging with action research.

5. Conclusion

The results obtained from this study indicate that there are a host of deterrent factors preventing the Iranian EFL teachers who teach in language institutes from embarking on action research. To overcome this deficiency, the researchers suggest in-service educational programs organized by the managers of the institutes with the aim of turning teachers to researchers familiar with action research procedures. What is more, the misconceptions and misunderstandings plaguing teachers must be clarified through practical instantiation and exemplification of the facile processes of turning the classroom events, routines, programs, task, techniques, and procedures into profoundly informative research studies. Further, a supportive group environment should invite teachers to collaborate with each other in research projects. Workshops, seminars, and webinars can be held in order to familiarize teachers with the procedures and steps essential to

carry out research as well as to enhance their confidence, which is considered vital for conducting research projects.

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