Implementing action research in the modern language classroom

Anne Burns, Aston University and University of New South Wales

Nur Kurtoglu-Hooton, Aston University

Abstract: In this article, we report on an action research project we facilitated with three modern language teachers working in secondary schools in the West Midlands and Yorkshire. Over a period of approximately nine months we worked collaboratively with the teachers to facilitate action research processes in their classrooms, where they were teaching either French or Spanish. We outline the structure we put in place to sustain the project and explain what conducting classroom-based action research involves. We then briefly describe the research projects carried out by the teachers. We conclude by reflecting on some of the impacts of action research on the teachers' practice and on our own thinking as teacher educators.

Introduction

Over the last three years, we have been fortunate to collaborate with modern language (ML) teachers working in secondary schools in the West Midlands and Yorkshire. Together, we have been using action research (AR) as a way of exploring teaching issues identified by the teachers as important challenges in their classrooms. Our first venture into AR in the ML classroom came about through cooperation with Links into Languages (now known as Network for Languages, a national network of which Aston University is a regional centre)[1]. On the basis of this experience, we applied for further funding from the British Academy to extend the research to other teachers. As a result, we have been able to follow up teachers' explorations in their classrooms in more detail and have been able to identify some of the key ways that AR has impacted on their professional lives. In this article, we will first explain what the workshops at Aston University entailed, we will then outline briefly the key processes of AR, followed by a description of the research conducted by the teachers. Finally, we will suggest what impact the experience has had on the professional development of the teachers involved.

The Workshops

The British Academy study involved us in working with three ML teachers from different secondary schools in the UK to facilitate their classroom action research. We also documented our interactions as a group and our responses to the AR collaboration. The teachers, who each participated in the research voluntarily with a view to enhancing

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[1] http://networkforlanguages.org.uk/ (NB: This link may not work in all browsers).

their practices within their classroom contexts, attended three workshops at Aston University.

In the first workshop, in November 2012, the teachers were introduced to principles of action research (outlined and explained below), a form of research which enables teachers to engage in exploring aspects of teaching and learning issues that are important to them in their daily work. In the workshop, each teacher identified an area of particular relevance to their own teaching context that they wanted to explore and investigate in their classroom. When they came to the second workshop in March 2013, they had already put into practice some of their action plans and had the opportunity to report back on their experiences. The facilitation of the workshop involved reflection and was built around reflecting and planning for further action, using concepts discussed in Burns (2010:141-168).

The teachers reported on the teaching strategies they had implemented, the procedure for each action that they had taken, the rationale behind each action, and the learning they had experienced in their first cycle of action research. There was specific emphasis on data collection techniques, insights into the data that were collected, discussion of some initial findings, potential challenges that each teacher faced in their teaching contexts, and a plan of further actions for the second cycle of action research. When the third workshop was held in June 2013, the teachers were ready to report on their action research in more detail, outlining the actions they had taken at different stages and the changes they were able to bring about within their teaching context. The likely impact of the projects on the pupils' learning and the effect the projects had generated in discussions in staffroom settings were also discussed.
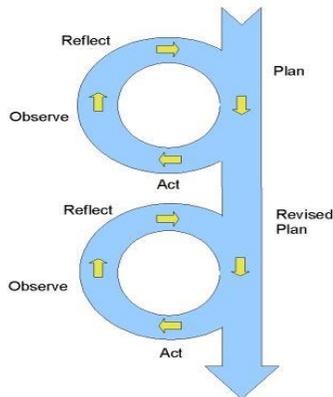
Below we explain the processes involved in AR and then report on the outcomes of each project, which the teachers themselves had the opportunity to share in a public event held at Aston University on 9th July 2013.

Action Research: What Is It?

AR is an approach to investigating issues in our own social and professional contexts and for most teachers this means their classroom or school. It usually involves addressing a dilemma, challenge or curiosity about what is happening in our classrooms that we might want to understand more deeply. It can also mean introducing changes to the way we currently approach our teaching. In the process the action researcher systematically collects information (or data) about the changes that are put in place, so that there is evidence on which to base the discoveries and reflections that emerge.

The process begins by identifying what it is we want to focus on and then carrying out a cycle of different, but interactive, steps to take our ideas further. The model of AR presented by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) (Figure 1), is one of the most widely used as a way of capturing the process, and we used this as a basis for our work in this project.

Figure 1: The cyclical process of action research

Kemmis and McTaggart refer to the steps in this model as the four key 'moments' of AR. Although they may appear to occur in a fixed order, in practice these steps represent a dynamic process through a spiral of activities that can be implemented flexibly as the research progresses.

Plan: The planning stage involves refining your ideas about what to investigate in your classroom, and if possible developing some questions you would like to answer. Then, it is possible to develop teaching strategies or activities to try out.

Act: This stage involves acting on your plans and experimenting with new approaches or activities.

Observe: In this stage, you collect information, or data, on what is happening as a result of implementing your plans. We provide some ideas for collecting data in the discussion below.

Reflect: This part of the process occurs from the time the research begins as you reflect more systematically than usual on what effect your research is having. However, it is also important to identify the overall messages coming from the research, which help you to articulate your personal teaching philosophies or theories about practice.

Frequently, teacher researchers find that they are only just beginning to understand the issues they are investigating after the first AR cycle. As Figure 1 suggests, AR is an emerging process and it is often valuable to continue in a new or different direction, using what you have already discovered to inform the next stage of your explorations.

There are many ways to collect data about what happens as a result of the plans that are put into action. For busy teachers, many of the tools used can double as classroom activities. For example, teachers and students can draw on surveys, interviews, examples of student writing, classroom materials, reflective diaries or journals, self or peer feedback or evaluation, discussions, photographs, maps or diagrams (see Burns,

2010 for ideas about how to use these tools). Teachers can also involve their students as co-investigators in the research, which often increases their motivation to participate more effectively in classroom activities.

One of the most important aspects of AR is the reflection on practice, which not only occurs from the time the research begins, but is also a way of identifying towards the end of the process how the research has (re)shaped the way teaching and learning take place. Reflection involves analysing the data that you have collected, but also considering what the analysis tells you about your classroom, your practice and your students' learning. New insights can continue to be drawn out of the cycles of AR until the process reaches what you consider to be a logical conclusion.

The Teachers' Research

The three teachers, who worked with us during the period November 2012 to July, 2013 were Liz Black, from Stokesley School in Yorkshire, and - from the West Midlands - Olga Cordero-Nieto, from Cardinal Newman Catholic School, Coventry and Nofer Fari, from Smith's Wood Sports College, Birmingham[2]. We briefly describe their research and the key insights they gained.

Liz, Stokesley School

Liz worked with Year 7[3] students, who were involved in Challenge 7 lessons incorporating Drama, IT, Geography, RE and MFL. She wanted to improve students' English oracy and literacy and to see whether learning a foreign language, French, also had an impact on students' understanding of dialect, grammar and use of register. Using 'dilemma-led learning' and Storyline approaches, she initiated a virtual campervan journey through Britain, during which the students had to create their van and deal with various unexpected situations. One involved being snowed in at a Scottish campsite, where they met a lost French lorry driver, French families and a Cuban dance troupe. The students had to communicate to give directions, hold conversations, and create a menu for a French recipe. Not only did the students have to collaborate to use their problem-solving skills, but they also had to extend their understanding and use of grammar and vocabulary in both English and French.

At the end of Liz's project, 80% of the 84 students involved in Challenge 7 indicated, through a survey, that they felt more confident about grammar, which was also assisting them in learning French. Their parents were invited to an information evening that explained the project and several subsequently completed surveys and interviews. One parent commented: "His command of language has improved a great deal and Challenge 7 has boosted his confidence".

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[2] The teachers' names have been used here with their permission.

[3] Equivalent to S1 in Scotland

Nofer, Smith's Wood Sports College

Nofer's school is situated in a location ranked in the top 5% of the most deprived areas nationally. His Year 10[4] French class were a top set of 13 female and 11 male students, 50% of whom had been identified as Gifted and Talented. He wanted to improve their motivation and maximise their achievement in GCSE French. He focused on experimenting with various techniques and activities to meet the students' aspirations to succeed, which he had fostered continuously over the three years he had taught them. He developed challenging and thought-provoking homework assignments, involved the students more in leading the lessons, offered after-school 'Question and Catch-up' sessions, increased formative assessment for learning by giving detailed feedback, and created language "checklists' that transformed the course criteria into the grammar and discourse points to be achieved. Each time he introduced one of these new practices, he discussed them with the students and they reflected on whether and how the activities had worked, after which he adjusted them again as necessary. The students reported that they felt able to take more control of their own learning, as they had clearer understanding of the levels to be achieved for high results. By introducing the criteria to be achieved step by step, Nofer observed that their confidence developed as shown by their greater willingness to participate in class and their higher scores on class tasks.

Olga, Cardinal Newman Catholic School

Olga's Year 10 (S4) Spanish GCSE class was composed of 20 students. She was concerned about their lack of motivation and attention in class. They were often distracted and appeared uninterested in the activities she presented. Although her students responded quite well to 'fun' lessons involving games, she was not convinced that learning was occurring at a deep level. She changed her teaching approach to include tasks that involved more thinking and reflecting skills and collaborative work and asked her students to give their opinions about these tasks, not only about their enjoyment of them but also about what they had learned. To Olga's surprise, the students took their feedback very seriously and she learned that they especially enjoyed team tasks where one student was given the responsibility to be the 'captain', leading and instructing the group. She found from these class discussions and her own observations that the students' level of motivation and achievement increased noticeably. During our visit to Olga's class we observed firsthand the pupils' enthusiasm for the new activities and how they competed to be team captains. Olga also reported that they started to complete the tasks much more quickly than previously, and achieved higher scores.

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[4] Equivalent to S4 in Scotland

The Impact of the Action Research

The action research projects carried out by Liz, Nofer and Olga had a noticeable impact in their teaching contexts and on their own motivation as teachers. They each acknowledged the value of carrying out AR in their own classrooms. In explaining the outcomes of her research, Liz stated that:

> As a researcher directly involved in the research, I found that I was not so afraid to make changes as I went along and respond to the thoughts of the pupils and adapt my planning. […] as the key aims of action research are to deepen teachers' own understanding of their classroom, I would say that it has been very beneficial to me and I have been doing a lot of thinking about how first and second language acquisition could be merged more effectively. I would certainly recommend this type of research to any teacher who desires to reflect on and improve their own practice.

Nofer summarised the importance of the reflection process he experienced during his project, stating that:

> After each implementation of a new initiative, it was important to reflect on this to assess and track the impact and adjust according. Ultimately, it became clear that in breaking down the journey towards the final goal into manageable and achievable steps, pupils were more able to take control of their learning, which in turn snowballed into building confidence, improving interest, and finally increasing attainment.

Olga, too, stated that she had benefited greatly from having carried out her AR project. During the first workshop, she acknowledged that she "felt demotivated and frustrated" because her pupils "seemed to lack curiosity for learning, autonomy and perseverance". By the end of the project she felt refreshed as a teacher:

> The research has allowed me to get to know my students much better and the most curious thing is that motivation and independent learning have improved in my other groups because I piloted some of the ideas with them too.

Olga also stated that her enthusiasm for AR had only just commenced and that she "could easily continue exploring in my classroom for another two years".

Concluding Remarks

We believe we can claim that this action research project has been an engaging and enhancing professional development experience for the teachers. However, it has also affected our own development as advocates of action research and as teacher educators. It has become very clear to us that teacher professional development has the most profound impact when it is closely tied to the specificities of a teacher's own classroom and to the challenges and aspirations that the teacher concerned holds for his or her students. We concur with the view of Freeman and Johnson (1989: 405) that language learning pedagogy needs to be understood, not from the perspective of decontextualised subject-matter knowledge, as it is often presented in teacher preparation programmes or in-service workshops, but "against the backdrop of teachers' professional lives, within the settings where they work, and under the circumstances of that work". Adopting an action research approach when working with

teachers enables teacher educators to appreciate more deeply the nature, realities, challenges and self-perceptions implicated in teachers' work. It is a learning experience as much for the teacher educator as for the teachers they work with. This approach also allows for 'unproductive pedagogies' to be challenged and reshaped through collaborative dialogic work and classroom investigation, which, importantly, is scaffolded by supportive others. Our experiences in this and our previous project have confirmed to us that our own teacher education approaches should continue to be based on the following central principles (drawing on Legutke and Schocker-v Ditfurth, 2009). Teacher education needs to be:

- Inquiry-based: developing a research approach to teacher learning, where the complex dynamics of the classroom can be explored and understood more deeply

- Experiential: negotiating and understanding action-oriented models for language teaching that will enable teachers to sustain exploratory and critical action into the future

- Experimental: developing dynamic responses to classroom interactions and routine practices, in contrast to recipe-type models (e.g. presentation, practice, production) that may be taught in pre-service programmes

- Collaborative: opening up the classroom and its challenges to other colleagues, to encourage a view of teaching that is based on peer-dialogue, sharing of expertise, and continuous learning.

We aim to seek further funding opportunities to continue working with modern language teachers through action research in the future and would encourage readers who are interested to contact us. In the meantime, we hope that this brief account has inspired other teachers and teacher educators to adopt action research into their work.

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