

CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

The approach historically used for professional development for classroom educators, where the emphasis is on 'training' and not on 'learning' is, quite simply, outdated. Classroom action research — with its cyclical nature of systematic investigation of teaching and learning, followed by data-driven improvements resulting from the outcomes of the investigations — provides not only a viable, but also valuable, professional development alternative. Following the development of improvement goals, the process of action research can be used to customize a teacher's professional development, allowing for a much more meaningful approach to professional growth. This approach permits teachers to investigate their own practice and to discover what will and will not work for their students in their classrooms. The integration of classroom action research with professional collaboration and with teacher evaluation is both discussed.

Keywords: Classroom Action Research, Professional Development

ABSTRAK

Pendekatan ini digunakan untuk pengembangan profesional bagi guru, di mana penekanannya adalah pada 'pelatihan' dan bukan pada 'pembelajaran', cukup sederhana, ketinggalan jaman. Penelitian tindakan kelas - dengan sifat siklusnya dalam penyelidikan pengajaran dan pembelajaran yang sistematis, diikuti oleh peningkatan data yang dihasilkan dari hasil penyelidikan - tidak hanya menjadi alternatif dalam pengembangan profesional yang layak, namun juga berharga. Setelah pengembangan tujuan perbaikan, proses penelitian tindakan dapat digunakan untuk menyesuaikan pengembangan profesional seorang guru, yang memungkinkan pendekatan yang jauh lebih bermakna terhadap pertumbuhan profesional. Pendekatan ini memungkinkan guru untuk menyelidiki praktik mereka sendiri dan untuk mengetahui apa yang akan dan tidak akan berhasil bagi siswa mereka di kelas mereka. Integrasi penelitian tindakan kelas dengan kolaborasi profesional dan dengan evaluasi guru akan dibahas dalam artikel ini.

Kata kunci: Classroom Action Research, Professional Development

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been a dramatic shift in views of what developments aimed at enhancing effective approaches to professional development for language teachers. Those professional developments have been the concept of a transformative, rather than a transmissive philosophy of teacher education which involves teachers taking an active involvement in investigating and exploring their own teaching.

In teacher training courses, teachers are generally introduced to theories of language learning and language teaching, curriculum development, teaching methodology, and so on. They also undertake practicum or teaching practice sessions to apply the knowledge of those theories. But later in teaching careers, teachers usually have opportunities to be involved in structured professional development. However, the focus of teacher professional development has been shifting away from the content that should be included in teacher training into the kinds of teacher learning that should be promoted.

It is increasingly recognized that teaching means so much more than mechanistically 'handed-down requirements', it also involves engaging in reflective and self-critical examination of the beliefs and actions that underpin one's classroom practices (Leung, 2009: 53 cited in Burns, 2014: 89).

Educational Development in Indonesia

The sector of education in Indonesia has undergone considerable change during this period as well. As with other agencies of Indonesian government, the national policy on decentralization has led to a shift of both responsibility and control of key elements of educational policy and practice to the provincial and district levels. It is believed that educational decision-making can be more responsive to local needs. Funding levels have increased markedly as well. One result is that access to basic education has improved significantly.

Improving the quality of education available to Indonesian children remains a challenge. The Indonesian government has also taken important steps to make improvements, especially in the area of teacher quality. In 2005, for instance, legislation was passed requiring all new and existing teachers to hold a bachelor degree.

Until that time, it was possible for individuals to enter the teaching profession with only two or three years of college-level training, a situation most common in

remote, rural schools. With the passage of the new law, however, the Indonesian government and international educational development organizations have collaborated on massive in-service teacher development initiatives intended to improve teachers' skills and assist them in earning their bachelor degree. These initiatives have included efforts to train teachers to use active learning strategies in their classroom and to use classroom action research as a mechanism for critically appraising the success of their efforts in the classroom and, where necessary, taking steps to modify their practices in order to improve student achievement.

Teachers' knowledge and skills are necessary to be refreshed and updated since science and technology are growing so fast and the high competitiveness of living in modern society. Without refreshing or updating teachers' knowledge and skills, teachers may not be able to attract students into learning engagement to provide students with appropriate hard and soft skills for competitive living in modern society.

Among the various opportunities available to teachers to engage in learning about their teaching, action research has increasingly been promoted for teachers in Indonesia as well as elsewhere in Asia (Burns in Handoyo and Zacharias, 2014: 89-90).

Classroom Action Research

Research can be defined in many ways. For many teachers, the term 'research' is very off-putting as it brings to mind images of a serious, large and difficult academic study conducted by academics in universities. Too often the term is limited to the traditional university-based social science model of inquiry. While obviously useful to the field, this narrow definition of research often ignores the voices of teachers and their contributions to understanding and improving classroom practice.

However, action research is very different. It is to do with the teacher exploring and investigating in their own classroom challenges, puzzles, dilemmas, and ideas they want to understand in more depth. Action research brings them into the field as contributors of knowledge. Action research is like any other research in that it asks questions, seeks valid and objective answers, and provides an interpretation of results; however, it differs by producing information and knowledge that have immediate application - thus the name 'action' research. This model of research empowers teachers to address significant issues in their classrooms. It encourages teachers to stretch their professional boundaries by looking at their own practice, identifying issues

and/or problems that have risen out of their own teaching experiences, and proposing ways to address them. Action research can, therefore, be a way of bridging the gap between the theoretical ideas that teachers learn in teacher training and professional development courses and what they need to do in their own school and classroom contexts with their colleagues and students (Burns in Handoyo and Zacharias, 2014: 90).

Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives (Stringer, 2007: 1). It is open ended. It does not begin with a fixed hypothesis. It begins with an idea that you develop. The research process is the developmental process of following through the idea, seeing how it goes, and continually checking whether it is in line with what you wish to happen. Seen in this way, action research is a form of self evaluation. It is used widely in professional contexts such as appraisal, mentoring and self assessment (Ferguson, 2011: 8-9).

The fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge. The production and the utilization of knowledge is subordinate to, and conditioned by, this fundamental aim (Nunan, 1992: 49). It aims to feed practical judgement in concrete situations, and the validity of the 'theories' or hypotheses it generates depends not so much on 'scientific' test of truth. In action research 'theories' are not validated independently and then applied to practice. They are validated through practice.

There are several essential features that distinguish action research from other forms of educational research. First, it is small-scale, contextualised and local in character, identifying and investigating teaching-learning issues within a specific situation. Second, it involves evaluation and reflection aimed at bringing about changes in practice. Third, it is participatory, providing for communities of participants to investigate collaboratively issues of concern within their social situation. Fourth, it differs from the "intuitive" thinking that may occur as a normal part of teaching, as changes in practice are based on systematic data collection and analysis. Finally, action research is underpinned by democratic principles; it invests ownership for changes in curriculum in those who are part of the community of practice and are involved in conducting the research (Burns & Rochsantiningsih, 2006: 22).

Some characteristics that are common to all types of action research include (Lodico, et.al., 2006: 290-291):



1. It is conducted in the practitioner-researcher's own educational setting and the practitioner takes an active part in the research. It also ensures that the research is based in the reality of everyday educational practices.
2. It involves collaboration with other educators and persons involved in the educational process. However, the research is characterized by a mutual respect for the expertise that each person brings to the process.
3. It focuses on taking action to change and improve educational practices. At some point, all action research involves action. This action might be as simple as changing an assignment for the next school year, or it might involve a rethinking of how students are graded.
4. It is ongoing and includes several waves of data collection, reflection, and action. Because action researchers are educators who deal with problems in their everyday practices, research continues beyond the initial data collection.

Action research typically involves four broad phases in a research process that forms a continuing cycle or spiral of research and action:

1. Planning: a problem or issue is identified and a plan of action is developed in order to bring about improvements in specific areas of the research context;
2. Action: the plan is put into action over an agreed period of time;
3. Observation: the effects of the action are observed and data are collected;
4. Reflection: the effects of the action are evaluated and become the basis for further cycles of research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, cited in Burns & Rochsantiningasih, 2006: 22).

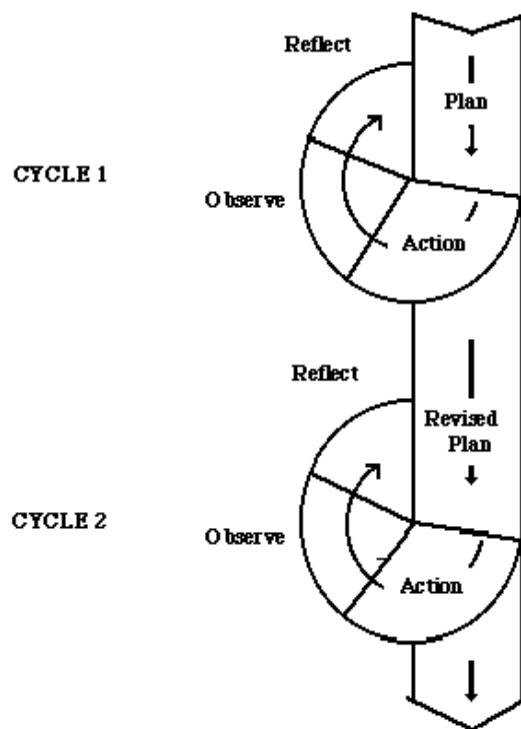


Figure 1: Cyclical Action Research model based on Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) cited in Burns (2010: 9)

Action research process embarks on a problem finding, and then formulating possible actions for the problem, applying an action, and finally evaluating on the outcome of the action. These activities go round in a circle. Sometimes, we should repeat the process until we can get the desired behavior.

Action research is fluid and flexible, so it needs to prescribe more than a set sequence of steps to follow. However, the following steps, which describe a common sequence for action research, will hopefully provide some guidance for teachers setting up their first action research project (Lodico, et.al., 2006: 291-293).

1. Reflect on your practice and identify a problem or something you want to improve.
2. Set the problem in a theoretical and research context by reading published literature on the topic.
3. Reflect on your own experiences with the problem. Action researchers spend a good deal of time reflecting and thinking about their own practice.
4. Identify persons with whom you can collaborate.
5. Make a plan for systematic data collection (not just armchair impressions).

6. Collect and analyze your data, reflecting on what you are learning throughout the process of data collection.
7. Create a plan of action based on the results.
8. Plan the next cycle of research to carry out your action plan and assess whether it improves practice.
9. Analyze all of the data collected and reflect on its meaning for practice.
10. Form tentative conclusions and determine what questions remain to be answered.

Action research can be done as an individual or as a collaborative group. Collaborative inquiry has the advantage that teachers are able to talk to each other and allows for diversity of thought and construction of meaning.

Action Research for Professional Development

Continued professional development is essential, and many times mandated throughout a practitioner's career. There are a variety of avenues for remaining current in the field. Action research is different from other types of professional development. This practice allows practitioner researchers to create personal plans for professional development which encourage construction of meaning, development of a community of learners/practitioners, and critical reflection on their practice. In short, action-inquiry research has the potential to transform teaching and classroom practices.

It is no surprise that classroom action research has become a prominent issue in teacher training in Indonesia over the past decade. It is now widely seen as a potentially important tool for the continuous improvement of teaching at the classroom level and the development of reflective, professional educators at all levels of Indonesian education. Action research is now therefore a mandatory part of the pre-service training of Indonesian teachers because it contributes to the professionalization of lecturers and teachers in concrete ways.

The aim of an action researcher is to bring about development in his or her practice by analyzing existing practice and identifying elements for change. The process is founded on the gathering of evidence on which to make informed rather than intuitive judgments and decisions. Perhaps the most important aspect of action research is that the process enhances teachers' professional development through the fostering of their capability as professional knowledge makers, rather than simply as professional knowledge users. In an age of centralization and the proliferation of

national guidelines and strategies, action research can help teachers feel in control of their own professional situation.

When action research informs professional development programmes, they work from the point of view of the person who is learning. Perhaps our knowledge, as teacher, is intuitive or only roughly worked out, but we still have the answers in ourselves, ready for the right stimulus to set them off. We don't need a trainer so much as a supporter, or critical friend, who will listen to our ideas, challenge them, and help us to find alternatives. This kind of facilitative model means that the supporter is also learning; they are not expected to have answers to our workplace-based questions. They actively learn with and from us; it is a dialogue of equals. Of course, being an effective supporter means developing a high level of interpersonal skills, sensitivity and wisdom. Developing these skills is a research process. The supporter is asking questions such as, 'How do I help you to learn and find out your own answers?' We have formed a community of critically questioning, caring colleagues.

Doing action research helps teachers to grow professionally, to show how they are extending their own professional knowledge. It does this in many ways, including the following:

1. Doing research helps to examine our own practice and see whether it lives up to our own expectations of ourselves in the work.
2. By showing other people what we are doing, we can establish a systematic evaluation procedure.
3. We can identify the criteria, or standards, that we and others are using to judge the quality of what we are doing. We identify how we understand our professionalism, in negotiation with others, and we show how we are trying to live in this way.
4. We should always try to maintain our professional learning. Too often people assume that once they have achieved qualified status, they don't need to learn any more (Ferguson, 2011: 32-33).

Thus, action research is an excellent fit for teacher professional development. Adult learners have particular needs and requirements: they are autonomous and self-directed; they have a foundation of life experiences and knowledge; they are goal-oriented and relevancy-oriented; they are practical and need to be respected (Lieb, 1991, cited in Wachholz and Christensen, 2004: 55). Current professional development models rarely are structured with all these needs in mind, yet the action

research model responds directly to adult learner needs. Within the action research structure, teachers have flexibility to pursue continuous learning led by their own investigative questions, thus becoming more motivated and involved in the professional development itself. Action research allows teachers to consider their work systematically, and they are richly rewarded for their efforts. Thoughtful reflection translates into enhanced teacher efficacy. And, when teachers are confident, they communicate beliefs of their own efficacy to students. With continued practice, they become able to draw on an increased repertoire of skills, with expectations of the probable success of different approaches. Teacher research has tremendous potential to influence what we know about teaching and learning, and what teachers are learning will greatly impact the future of schooling.

Action Research in Action: A Case Study

In order to provide a more concrete illustration of what is involved, the example below highlights the action research process undertaken by an Indonesian high school teacher.

Teacher A taught English at a medium-ranking high school in Semarang where students achieved under average results especially in the writing skill. He felt his students were demotivated and very challenging to teach. Although he himself was high-motivated as a teacher because of his high-expectation to make his students get the good result, but it faced by students' silence, fear, and passiveness. They had led to a lack of enthusiasm for learning English with the teacher in the classroom. It described their relationship 'unfriendly'. In the classroom, student participation was almost non-existent and outside the classroom he had heavy responsibilities for his anger, which made him a petulant in class. In his word:

I taught my students because that was what I had to do as a teacher. I had high-expectation to make them be successful so I really care whether they learned and mastered something from my lesson. The classroom atmosphere was not relaxed. Everyday I get into the classroom with anger and long speech. I show unhappy faces in class. I knew quite well that my students talked behind my back and called me a 'killer' teacher.

Teacher A was responsible for teaching English in the second grade and his teaching syllabus and texts were mandated by his school. Students found the writing

activity in his class too difficult, mainly because of the lack of vocabulary, less in grammar mastery and having no initial ideas. As he reported:

The failure of teaching writing was because students could not use and choose the diction in the writing. They did not understand the grammar to make a good sentence. And they also felt difficult to find the initial ideas to start writing: they did not know what topic they want to write especially for hortatory explanation text.

To begin his research, he made a plan to get the students to write a simple story as a pre-writing activity and to try different ways to interact with his students in class. In order to collect data on how this plan was working, he decided to make notes in class and used them to write a diary after the lesson about the activities and events that had occurred.

One of Teacher A's potential problems was that the students would not want to complete the writing homework, and so in the first lesson, he rewarded those who had done the writing with extra score. In the first two lessons, between two and five students did not complete the writing. Then Teacher A introduced new technique namely *graphic organizer* to make writing process easier than the conventional one. By lesson three, students applied the technique to write and all his students were completing the writing homework, and he noticed that they were showing better result in writing the simple story. They were also completing the tasks more readily and enthusiastically. In general, he noticed, their motivation was also increasing. In the fourth lesson, the students did writing of hortatory explanation text, which he checked in class and Teacher A saw that:

By applying the *graphic organizer* in writing skill especially for writing hortatory explanation text, which students felt it was so difficult to understand, the students could write better and easier. Their writing could organized well and the ideas they delivered in writing were so clear. In addition by checking it in the class, it reduced the time of correction.

In this lesson, students showed even less difficulty in completing the tasks, they enjoyed writing hortatory explanation text, and their motivation seemed to increase even further. In his diary Teacher A commented:

When I introduced *graphic organizer*, students felt that writing tasks become easier. The technique helped them in organizing ideas, structuring sentence,



and conducting specific writing. Thus can improve students' motivation to learn. When the students were motivated, the class atmosphere was more alive.

At the end of the year after Teacher A's students took their examinations, several of them asked Teacher A to teach them again in the third grade; where in fact he only teach English in the first and second grade of this high school.

At the conclusion of Teacher A's action research project, he wrote the following about what he had learned:

My research project was a journey that took me many places I had not previously envisioned. I not only learned about how students write and how to assist them in becoming better writers, but also about my own teaching and learning practices. I am more confident in my abilities to assess the needs of a particular class and to adjust the lesson and assignment to meet those needs. I am confident my teaching career will follow a similar journey with new discoveries and unexpected side trips. The process of learning how to evaluate the progress of my class and my progress as a teacher has been invaluable.

DISCUSSION

Not many teachers are likely to know what to do in classroom especially when he/she is faced with a problem or problems. The teacher mostly will turn to more senior teachers for help. It does solve the problem. However, the solution given by others cannot be personalized in a particular class sometimes. The teacher has to find out what was wrong and how to get it right.

In addition, doing action research can help improve the teacher's self esteem. Documented action research can be one source of solving problem. It also helps develop the teacher's repertoire. Finally, the teacher can use action research he or she has done to help others whenever they have difficulties.

The case of Teacher A shows that while action research may be unfamiliar and seen as time-consuming to teachers, it can have dramatic and lasting effects on teaching practice and teacher motivation. There is now a considerable body of research that shows that teachers who engage in action research acquire many benefits (Borg, 2012, cited in Burns in Widodo and Zacharias, 2014: 96). These include:

1. Becoming more knowledgeable and self-directed about teaching
2. Testing practical knowledge and their own theories about teaching

3. Feeding their research back into continuing changes in practice
4. Gaining research skills and skills in analysis and reflection
5. Understanding more about their students and their students' learning
6. Being more open to students' needs and addressing them in their teaching practice
7. Increasing their professionalism and personal development
8. Engendering greater confidence as teachers
9. Boosting teachers' status and feelings of self-efficacy
10. Learning more about the broader educational context of ELT in their country.

However, if teachers are to have positive experiences of conducting action research, there are various issues that need to be considered by teacher education policy makers, teacher educators, and school principals (Burns in Widodo and Zacharias, 2014: 96). It can be highlighted that teachers should be given dedicated time for the research so that they can come together, share their experiences, and feel motivated by the recognition that their research is valued. It is unlikely that action research will produce positive responses where teachers have to add research to already heavy teaching loads. Also, teachers should be provided from the beginning with clear information about the scope and timing of the research, whether they will be able to select the topics they are interested in researching, and how their research will be recognised and valued in relation to ongoing curriculum improvements.

Engaging in the process of action research is a tool one can use to bridge the gap between school and the world outside school. Most important is that educators be aware of these conflicting modes of knowing, of the way paradigms influence not only our own ways of thinking and perceiving but those of others.

Action research assists practitioners and other stakeholders in identifying the needs, assessing the development processes, and evaluating the outcomes of the changes they define, design, and implement (Johnson, 1993, cited in Wachholz and Christensen, 2004: 55).

Creswell as cited in Lodico (2006: 296-297) poses the following questions as guidelines for evaluating action research:

1. Does the study clearly address a problem or issue in practice that needs to be addressed?
2. Did the researcher develop a logical plan and collect data in a systematic, valid way?



3. Were different types of data triangulated or compared?
4. Did the researcher collaborate with others who had an interest in the problem?
5. Did the research lead to a change or a solution to a problem that made a difference?
6. Did it improve the lives of others or empower them to make changes in their lives?
7. Did the plan of action contribute to the researcher's ability to reflect on his or her professional activities?

CONCLUSION

Teacher research is a unique research genre. The range of projects undertaken by teachers in this study is an excellent example of the practical possibilities of action research for examining important school innovations. The majority of teachers reported that they were able to impact student performance in the classroom. Furthermore, they believed they had created better classroom learning environments by empowering students as decision-makers in their learning and classroom behaviour.

It is very advisable for teachers that they know how to conduct action research. By doing action research teachers are actually developing themselves. The research is done in a series of planning, execution, and evaluating the feedback of action. Therefore, teachers have to explore in their knowledge about how to act to solve a classroom problem. In other words, they will make a quest to find out the answer.

As a form of alternative professional development, action research can be seen to offer teachers opportunities to professionalise their work by investigating how effectively teaching and learning are carried out in their classroom. Schools and school principals have an important role to play in supporting and encouraging teachers to work together and to see professional development as something that can be school-based and not owned by external 'experts'. Teachers are the experts in their own schools and classrooms and their knowledge and experiences can be productively captured through such professional learning. In this way teachers become active educational agents who are able to share what they have learned to create more effective learning opportunities for their students. In this way too, teachers are given opportunities to rise above being classroom technicians and to become professional classroom educators (McNiff, 1988, cited in Burns in Widodo and Zacharias, 2014: 97).

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