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Action Research and LSP Teachers

Abstract

Action research is the process which enables LSP teachers to examine their teaching practice by a systematic and detailed application of various research procedures. Its main purpose is to improve the teaching process and to facilitate the professional development of teachers. It proves useful at the beginning of an individual's professional development and work as well as throughout one's professional career. In this contribution, the author presents the framework of action research, the key conditions and characteristics of action research as a very interesting and, above all, useful method of teacher development and reflection of one's teaching practice also in the field of LSP. In addition, the contribution examines the main positive aspects of action research method and points out some ethical issues concerning it as well as provides one example of its application.

Keywords: action research, LSP, methods, teacher development.

1. Introduction - Definition of Action Research

Action research comprises different research methodologies that result both in action and in research as the research is conducted during active teaching. When carrying out action research, the practicing teacher not only critically reflects on his or her teaching but also develops his or her teaching approaches. Action research is, therefore, dedicated to the examination of an individual's professional work, that is, teaching and other aspects of the development of one's professional career.

However, it is more than just reflection on one's teaching practices. That is, it comprises the systematic and documented investigation into and the analysis of a certain aspect of teaching as well as learning in a specific class, which stems from a particular issue or problem associated with a particular class or groups of students and their particular learning needs. Its basic focus is thus on a small group of individuals in a very specific teaching / learning situation and it is not predominantly interested in generalisations.

According to Dick (2000), action research is cyclical in nature, which means that the findings and/or reflections are incorporated into further teaching practice, which is then reflected upon as well. In addition, action research is participative by definition. That is, it requires the participation of both the researcher and the object of investigation although sometimes the researcher can be the object of his or her own investigation (i.e. the teacher is primarily interested in his/her own teaching, his/her attitudes towards stages of teaching – from materials design to the implementation on class). It is also predominantly qualitative, although it can be made quantitative as well. That is to say, action research uses the natural cycle of action and critical reflection and/or review to achieve the outcome of both action and research, which is professional development of an individual and, consequently, through the dissemination of research findings within the professional community the progress of this professional community (See Figure 1).

As such, action research should form a significant part of professional development and interest by the professional community. However, the primary goal of action research still remains the understanding of the individual's teaching and student learning in a specific classroom to increase the effects of teaching, that is, to enhance teaching and student learning.

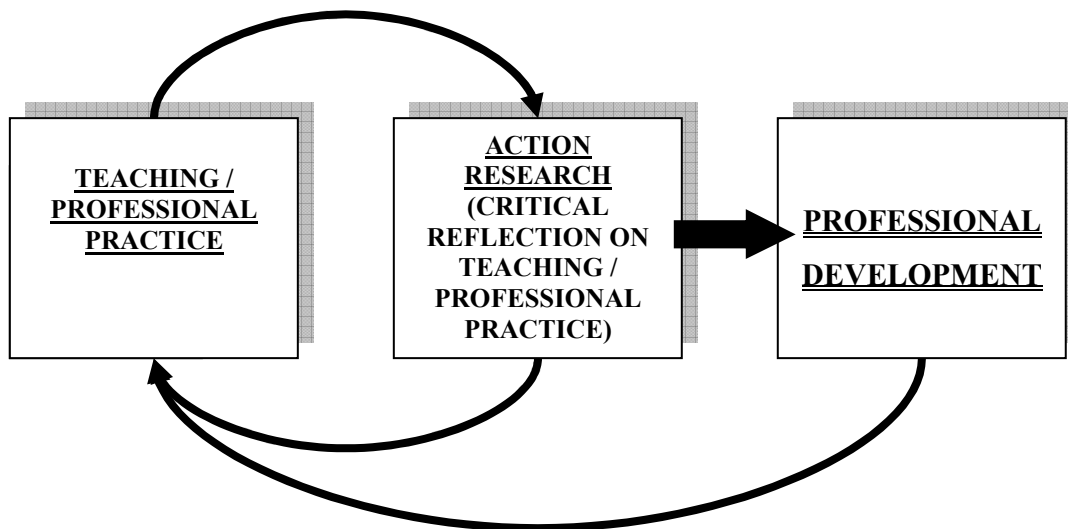


Figure 1: Action research cycle

2. Why Action Research?

Let us now turn to the examination of the reasons for action research. Departing from the above definition of action research, we can conclude that the key question

of action research is '*How to become more efficient in the area under investigation?*'. In terms of the languages for specific purposes, this can be further developed into three main areas of investigation, that is, the development and the improvement of the teaching methods in the languages for specific purposes classes, the development of teachers as the language teaching experts as well as the development of individual teachers as the experts for languages for specific purposes.

As regards the languages for specific purposes, it is quite obvious that the applicable teaching methods and their learning are governed by their individual and particular characteristics and requirements and specific contexts of use. However, a further analysis of this aspect exceeds the scope of this paper. With regard to the development of teachers as language teaching experts, action research serves as a useful tool for the investigation into different and/or new approaches to the actual teaching within a specific context(s) of a particular classroom or classrooms.

Looking at the last area of investigation, that is, the development of individual teachers as experts for languages for specific purposes, it should be noted that it offers a great opportunity to develop not only the teachers of languages for specific purposes but the professional field as a whole. Namely, the development and/or rise in the level of professional development of teachers is beneficial for the students and the teachers alike.

3. Conditions for Action Research

In this section, we shall briefly examine the conditions that govern the implementation of action research. In order to carry out action research as defined above and for the reasons as explained above, certain conditions must be satisfied, or at least considered. We shall look at the factors governing action research in more detail as defined by Borg (2006).

As any other kind of action research, the action research carried out in the LSP classroom is governed by numerous factors, such as awareness, motivation, choice of context, theoretical knowledge, skills (i.e. putting the knowledge into practice), resources, expectations, community, recognition and dissemination potential. Let us now look at each of these conditions in more detail. For each of them, we should assess to what extent we are aware of them as well as what our strong points and our weaknesses are. In addition, for each of these conditions, we should think about how they enable us to carry out our research.

First, the individual teachers and the entire professional community (in our case, the teachers of languages for specific purposes) should be aware of action research and of its benefits, which lie predominantly in the advancement of the entire profession and which have been discussed above.

Second, do we as the teachers of languages for specific purposes have a reason to do such research? Are we motivated enough to embark on this cyclical process of self-reflection and self-development as well as the development of the entire professional field? The answer to this question needs to be positive. Namely, the field of languages for specific purposes is a vast one and offers a great potential of research into the improvement and the development of new approaches to teaching, which results in better teaching and, consequently, better learning outcomes.

Third, the choice of context comprises various aspects regarding the decisions we have to make in our investigations.

Fourth, action research cannot be carried out without the prior familiarization with the theoretical knowledge regarding the area under investigation. Here, issues varying from language teaching methodologies and language acquisition theories to characteristics of foreign languages and their specific purposes and uses need to be understood and taken into consideration. That is to say, we develop our teaching practice within the above mentioned theoretical frameworks and our beliefs about what language teaching actually is and how it should be carried out. Further, we need to investigate these frameworks with our research, which then serves as the re-evaluation of these very same frameworks.

Fifth, action research is, as its name suggests and as it has been pointed out earlier, a form of research. Therefore, we have to ask ourselves whether we have enough relevant skills to carry out our particular research. If the answer is negative, then a further study into the research skills is required in order to be able to systematically collect and analyse the data obtained during our research with the purpose to gain the insight into our teaching practices. Here, the predominant concern is with the knowledge of data collection methods, the validity and reliability of the collected data, the knowledge of the main research modes as well as with the ethics and the protocol of implementing our research.

Sixth, we cannot carry out our research without the adequate resources such as material resources (e.g. audio and video recorders), people and, above all, the time. Therefore, before doing the research, it is obligatory to prepare the list of all resources that could make the research as good and as relevant as it should be.

Seventh, the expectations concerning the action research need to be taken into account. There are two different sides to this condition. On the one hand, we should first of all be clear about what our expectations regarding the research and its outcomes are; that is, what we expect to find out and how we plan to incorporate our findings into our future teaching practice. On the other hand, this condition is also related to the expectations others have of us as teachers of languages for specific purposes. That is, are we, as a professional community encouraged and/or expected to do the research in our teaching context? Who encourages or expects us to implement such research? Before embarking on any kind of research, the answers to these questions have to be made clear.

Eighth, the issue of professional community is closely related to the previous condition. It has been mentioned above that our particular research into our teaching contexts and practices enhances and elevates the entire profession. Therefore, we should ask ourselves whether there is a supportive research community for the type of investigations we intend to carry out. If such a community exists, then we need to make use of the knowledge that already exists and in case that the research community barely exists or even does not exist at all, we should find the ways of developing it on the local, national or even international level.

Last but definitely not least, the condition related to the recognition and dissemination potential of our action research is again closely related to the previous two. The languages for specific purposes community should strive for the creation of the situations in which the findings of individual researches (although being designed and implemented primarily for particular classroom situations and issues) can be promoted and shared with other members of the same professional community.

Finally, all of these conditions have to be seen not individually but they have to be considered in terms of their interrelatedness.

4. Action Research Process

When defining the very process of action research, the following observations have to be made. After having all, or at least the majority, of conditions for action research fulfilled, one can embark on the actual research. In general, action research can be divided into a number of steps including the choice of research question, the decision about the type and extent of the information needed to answer the specific question as well as how this information is to be gathered. Further, the data and information have to be analysed. Of course, no research is complete without the follow-up writing / reporting about it and sharing it with the professional community. The final step of action research and the primary motivation behind its implementation is the transfer of the acquired knowledge into professional practice, that is, the application of the findings in one's classroom.

According to Chamot (1998) and Wallace (1997), the first step in action research process is the choice of the research topic. It stems from the particular needs and interests of the participants in the research, the teachers and the learners alike. When deciding about the general purpose and topic of the research, we have to make sure that it is related to our personal or professional interests. The research question should be specific, answerable and should lead to significant information that can be then evaluated and the results applied in further teaching practice.

In view of teaching languages for specific purposes as foreign languages, we propose the following examples of research topics:

- *What should I include into the syllabus for my specific group of students in terms of their particular needs and the language I am teaching?*
- *What kinds of language skills should I teach my students considering the professional environment they will be working in?*
- *How effective is teaching and learning of specific terminology through case studies?*
- *How should I adapt my teaching methods for the group I am teaching in order to achieve better learning outcomes of my students?*

These areas of investigation can be applied to secondary as well as post-secondary LSP courses. Of course, this list is far from exhaustive.

These questions are rather broad and should be developed into sub-questions, which could then be investigated further. When carrying out action research, it is better to narrow our investigation and to focus on only a small, yet significant, part. For example, in a research into the development and implementation of Business English courses, I could seek the answers to the following questions:

- *How do I find out what my students will need in terms of specific language knowledge (e.g. accounting, marketing, finance and banking, etc.)?*
- *How do I find out what language skills my students will need in their professional careers?*
- *How can I limit my students' use of mother tongue when they are doing group work, e.g. when working on case studies?*
- *Why do students in one group acquire Business English terminology better and faster than the students in other groups and how can I facilitate the learning of this terminology?*

When deciding on the area of our investigation we must, therefore, take into account the end result, that is, the envisaged outcome of our research. Further, the type and the extent of the information needed to answer the specific question are closely related to the specific question.

The second step is data collection. We have to relate the two previous issues to the question of how this information is to be gathered and what type of information we are gathering. This depends on who the object of our investigation is (i.e. we, as the teachers or our students). This can be done through a variety of ways including field-notes, teaching logs, diaries and research journals, blogs, etc. Further, we can apply a variety of observation techniques for observing student and teacher behaviour as well as use questionnaires or interviews. The observations can be made in writing or can be audio recorded.

Another aspect related to the research has to be taken into consideration when developing the outline of the research and this is the time available. If we plan a small-scale investigation, the time period is more likely to be shorter than the one for a large-scale investigation, which can last the entire academic year or even longer.

When collecting data, we must constantly make sure that it is relevant and valid for the purpose of our investigation.

Once the data have been collected and analysed (i.e. organised and statistically calculated), our research enters its third stage, that is, the assessment of the results. We may keep the results of our investigation to ourselves and apply them in our teaching practice only or we may share the outcomes with our colleagues in the professional community. This can be done through informal channels such as discussions with the colleagues, by the reflection on one's own work as well as through more formal channels such as seminars and conference contributions, presentations of the findings in research journals, LSP journals, etc., where the findings are presented to and shared with a wider professional audience. This gives the teacher-researcher the opportunity to discuss the findings and to gain some further insight into his or her research.

However, the ultimate goal and the final stage of any action research must nevertheless remain its application in the teaching practice as this is its original purpose.

5. Ethics in Conducting Action Research

The last section of this paper concentrates on the ethical dimension of action research, which we consider to be a very important one. Here, we shall primarily look at two aspects of ethics, that is, at the aspect of the abuse of authority and at the aspect of confidentiality.

As explained in Wallace (1997) , it has to be pointed out that it is considered unethical to take up the time the students have for learning on the activities that do not lead to the success and advancement in their learning. In short, they should not be involved in any kind of research that is not beneficial to them. Therefore, when designing the action research plan, the teacher-researcher has to think very carefully about the rationale behind his or her research and make sure that in case the students are engaged in the research, they will somehow benefit from it.

Another significant dimension of ethics in any research is the issue of confidentiality. Regulated by the pertinent legislation which stipulates that any kind of research has to be carried out only when all the participants give their consent, the confidentiality issue becomes even more topical when we plan to present the findings of our research to the professional community, regardless of its size. Namely, all the participants in the research have to agree that the data obtained during the research and which include their contributions as well can be published in any form. This is particularly the case when the data are recorded either as audio or even video material. If granted the consent, the researcher may publish the findings; otherwise, the results of the participants who do not wish to give the consent should be omitted.

In our opinion, both of these dimensions have to be closely observed if we are to make a real and valid contribution not only to our individual teaching practices but to the professional community as a whole. All in all, the researchers have to observe the 'good manners' and should take into consideration the persons they are working with (Wallace, 1997).

6. Action Research – A Case

Based on the theoretical framework of action research, the author of this contribution carried out in the summer semester of the academic year 2007/2008 a small-scale investigation into her own teaching, which will be useful in later reflection and course design for the next academic year.

The areas of investigation were mainly the realization of teaching objectives and planned outcomes for every lesson. Here, I concentrated on the students' understanding of instructions and classroom materials, on grammar and vocabulary issues that had to be dealt with in the following lessons, on communicative activities, on additional and/or new materials, etc.

The main idea behind this investigation was to answer the following questions:

- *What was really good about the lesson?*
- *Were there any problems (if so, what went wrong)?*
- *What could I do to improve my teaching and, consequently, the students' understanding next time?*

The investigation was done via field-notes (i.e. notes taken during lessons) and a teaching log (i.e. notes taken after classes). Both the field notes and the teaching log will thus serve as the reminder of the things that worked really well in class and could be applied also next year. Of course, these notes were not very extensive – sometimes just a phrase or two, or a short paragraph (e.g. '*next time, add more word-formation exercises – they really need that*'; '*prepare questions such as those for BEC Vantage*'; '*check that article about women and management boards in the New York Times – it can go well with the topic*'; '*The lesson was really OK – the students obviously like to work on cases.*'; '*I thought the article about venture capital was easy to understand, but they found it a bit too difficult – prepare more tasks next time → glossary of terms or maybe 'connect the word with the corresponding definition' activity.*').

However, it is important to note that this was really a small-scale investigation and that it should, undoubtedly, be expanded in the next academic year.

7. Action Research and LSP in Slovenia

In Slovenia, action research has been applied in various scientific fields (e.g. geography, adult learner education, sociology, social work, etc.) and at various levels i.e. primary education, secondary education, tertiary education.

Unfortunately however, there seems to be the lack of such research in the LSP context. We believe that it would be beneficial to carry out studies that would investigate the use of this method also in this field. The secondary school and university teachers of languages for specific purposes should investigate the issues concerning action research as well as carry out the research and describe their findings.

8. Conclusion

This contribution examined action research as a useful tool in the professional development of teachers of languages for specific purposes. The main idea of action research is to gather information about one's own teaching practices and gain the answers to specific questions or the 'burning issues' of one's professional engagement while carrying out teaching or any other kind of activity related to one's profession. It is cyclical, participative and qualitative and its goal is one's improvement in professional and, predominantly, pedagogic terms.

Action research is governed by numerous determining factors which have to be observed not only individually but in terms of their interrelatedness if we want it to be relevant not only to our particular teaching situation but to a broader professional community as well. It is governed by the factors such as awareness, motivation, knowledge and research skills, resources, expectations, recognition and dissemination potential, etc.

The process of action research is divided into a number of steps from the initial definition of the research question, through the data collection via various methods, to data analysis and assessment of results and, ultimately, to the implementation of the research findings in teaching practice as well as the dissemination of the results. Here the ethical issues of authority abuse and confidentiality should not be overlooked.

As regards the action research in the field of languages for specific purposes in Slovenia, it can be said that a lot of work can and should be done by this systematic and documented investigation precisely because of the broad scope of issues that action research can help deal with to enhance the advancement of the professional fields by the development of each teacher who is engaged in the teaching of

languages for specific purposes and who is, at the same time, the expert and researcher in the field of languages for specific purposes per se.

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