

A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE BENEFITS OF DOING ACTION RESEARCH



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Abstract: Conducting action research appears to offer viable solutions to classroom problems English language educators might face. The aim of the article was to determine the benefits of doing action research from a personal perspective. The study is based on the evidence of action research conducted by me at Alecu Russo Balti State University. The results informed me in terms of what role to take on in the classroom as well as what course of action to embark upon in order to help learners develop their skills to become successful users of the English language and succeed in their courses. They also helped me understand why the set learning objectives were not reached.

Keywords: action research, teacher's role, language education, skill development, technology integration

By means of introduction

Language education is a context bound process where all the participants involved are to be taken into consideration. Its primary goal must be to scaffold students' learning so that they can integrate successfully into the 21st century society with its new demands and expectations. Indeed, a language educator's purpose is to develop not only the 4 basic skills, but also the 21st century skills in order to enable the learners to meet these new demands and expectations. Hence the process of designing one's teaching can become rather challenging.

Once a person is determined to take up teaching as a career, they need to realize that they make a deliberate decision of becoming active learners for the rest of their lives. This implies not only that they should constantly broaden their linguistic

knowledge, but also that they should always make informed choices based on their concrete educational context. While it is extremely important to continually update their theoretical framework for teaching, it is of utmost importance to consider the setting in which the education process takes place above all.

Experience can definitely play a significant role in informing language educators regarding their choices. Yet, relying solely on experience can become a serious limitation in the process itself as there is a high probability for language educators to ignore the learners' actual needs. As a result, the language education process is likely to fail, and both teachers and learners might end up demotivated, putting the blame on one another. Consequently, teachers and learners alike are likely to react in such a situation and not to reflect upon it.

Thus, a language educator's experience and vast knowledge of the subject are not enough to inform their choices regarding the education process in general. It is their concrete education context that should come first when making those informed choices regarding their teaching process.

The teacher's role in the language education process

The shift in the paradigm from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness has resulted in the way the teacher's role is viewed nowadays. The result is quite challenging for teachers as it appears teachers should be able to take on various roles in order to meet the needs of the 21st century learners.

Harmer (1991) offers a detailed description of a teacher's role starting from that of a controller and ending with that of a facilitator. The axis the scholar presents shows the gradual transition from controlled practice with the teacher in charge of the process to free practice with the learners taking responsibility for their own learning. The scholar points to the fact that all roles are important if used appropriately. The teacher should be careful when they assume a certain role. For example, the role of a controller is best suited for the presentation of the new material.

The role of an assessor depends on the type of assessment, i.e., summative or formative. Summative assessment usually

implies a process of signaling out the cases of incorrectness so that the learners know where their mistakes are and work to correct them. Formative assessment mostly relies on the continuous feedback teachers provide during the learning process. It is not invasive and implies more accountability from the students for their own learning.

The role of an organiser is crucial in the language education process. The teacher should design the activities in such a way that there is a logical sequence between them and their purpose is clear to the learners, i.e. they can understand in what way they benefit from doing them. In addition, the instructions should be clearly formulated so that there are no misunderstandings impeding the education process.

The role of a prompter is to be taken on only when the learners need the prompts. The prompts themselves should not be the solutions to the problems, but rather follow-up questions meant to boost their critical thinking so that the learners themselves solve the problem. The teacher as a prompter should be discreet, otherwise, the learners might feel the control is taken away from them, and as a result put the responsibility on the teacher.

The teacher as a participant is when the teacher is actively involved in the activity with the learners. It is true that their status will not allow them to be considered one of the students, but still, it can be highly motivating for learners seeing the teacher involved in the same activity as they are.

The teacher is also a coach for the learners, who can guide them and offer advice when necessary. This role particularly is crucial when meaningful relationships are established. It contributes to the creation of a learning community sharing similar goals and interests. This atmosphere can boost learners' motivation.

Finally, the last role mentioned by Harmer is that of a resource. This is the role in which the teacher finally 'lets go' (Kumaravadelu, 2003: 131) and empowers the students to take control over their own learning. The teacher is there at their disposal, yet not involved directly in the activity. This is the role

to play in a student-centred classroom.

Harmer adds one more role at the end, and namely that of an investigator. The scholar views this role as the one in which the teacher's behaviour does not relate to the students. It relates solely to the teacher, and their professional development. Jeremy Harmer speaks about the importance of continuous professional development and the fact that teachers should closely observe their own language education process.

Yet, this role might be decisive. It is this role that should inform the teacher regarding the decisions to be taken in the classroom to achieve the set learning objectives. Thus, by investigating the educational setting, the teacher can decide on what roles to take during the lesson in order to scaffold the students' learning process.

Unlike Harmer who focused exclusively on the teacher's necessity to take on various roles in the classroom, Kumaravadivelu (2003) differentiates between three distinct roles. Once the role has been chosen, the teacher is expected to adopt a certain set of behaviours characteristic of that particular role. For example, the role of a passive technician implies that the teacher has the role of a transmission channel through which the instruction process takes place. Such a teacher strictly follows the directives from both their administration and specialized books. The role is totally prescribed and there is very little need for agency from the teacher's part. (action) The teacher's sole interest is in teaching the content. They are the channel through which the information is transmitted. Such teachers are not informed by their learners' needs, but by the theorists, whose information they transmit. This role is still widely used nowadays, although it can be quite demotivational for teachers and students alike. However, there is a tendency to take on namely this role in our Moldovan context. (One reason I can think of is that the burden of responsibility is too high when one becomes in charge of their own language education process.)

The other role Kumaravadivelu suggests is that of a reflective practitioner (it is what Harmer labelled as investigator).

The reflective teacher is expected to question their own teaching and closely observe their educational context in the process.

Zeichner and Liston (1996) believe that a reflective practitioner can solve problems that arise in the classroom because they can step back to examine the assumptions and values of their own teaching. They realize the peculiarities of their own educational setting and consider its needs while designing their education process. Such teachers are autonomous in terms of decision making and take full responsibility for their teaching. They will not be informed by theories in their practice, but by their learners' needs. Theories are not viewed as prescriptions that need to be followed but as descriptions from which the teacher can choose to respond to the learners' actual needs.

Kumaravadivelu (2003) claims that the teachers' continual process of self-reflection and self-renewal should result in the elaboration of their own personal theory of teaching that will enable them to make a change, i.e. to transform the education process. Such a teacher is a transformative intellectual who is able to design their education process taking into consideration the broader socio-cultural context in which they live, which impacts the learners' self and personal identity as anchored in the given society.

The three roles overlap, as all three are informed by the theories in the field of language education. Yet, the passive technician stops there and does not engage in the process of self-reflection in which they try to solve problems by questioning their values and beliefs, and they definitely do not seek to transform their teaching and anchor it in the bigger socio-cultural context of their community.

The principles of Action Research

Action Research seems to offer the necessary methodological support for the reflective teacher to conduct their research in order to solve a problem they are confronted with in the classroom or to improve the quality of their teaching. By choosing to become an action researcher, they choose 'to create social hope and to take action to try to realise the hope in terms of social evolution'

(McNiff, Whitehead, 2002: 16).

The ontological assumptions in action research are expressed in terms of values shared within a concrete context. ‘Action research rests on ideas to do with truth, social justice, compassionate ways of living, respect for pluralistic forms’ (McNiff, Whitehead, 2002: 16). The action researcher will look for ways so that everybody has the same rights and equally lives by the shared values.

When it comes to the epistemological assumptions, i.e. how we come to know what we know, the knowledge is derived from experience. The action researcher never stops learning. It is the process of reflecting on that learning that generates knowledge in action research. While getting to know the principles of action research, many might think that this is exactly what they have been doing in their teaching. Yet, they did not have the theoretical framework to inform their choices, on the one hand, and they did not do it systematically.

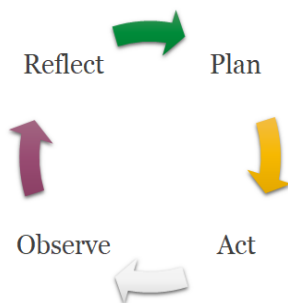
Indeed, language educators can ask themselves ‘How can I help my learners learn?’ or ‘What should I do to motivate my learners?’ Most probably they try to find solutions to their problems. Now a passive technician will simply consult the theories and implement them without considering the context. The reflective practitioner will consider the learners’ needs and look for solutions and observe their effectiveness in practice, always ready to make the necessary changes in order to realize their pedagogical goals. This is a process of introspection where little interaction happens with other participants in the process. The action researcher would embark on a research journey which should be well organized and done systematically in order to get consistent and valid results. They will reflect upon their practice and will analyse the results so that at the end they could formulate their conclusions and share them with the teaching community, thus contributing to the already existing knowledge. They will use the most suited research methodologies in the process.

Being a language educator and an action researcher can be quite challenging, yet it is rewarding. Conducting action research

can truly offer a comprehensive picture of the causes of the problem the language educator is confronting and enable them to design ways of solving the problem. Sometimes, simply reflecting is not enough, as the language educator does not possess the data they could analyse to understand the problem and offer solutions.

Burns (2010: 3-4) gives the example of a teacher who was dissatisfied with the way oral tests happened in her classroom. Although she reflected upon the way the oral test took place, she could not determine the root of the problem. When she applied a more systematic and scientific approach, she was able to establish the problem and consequently fix it. What she did was to keep a journal to monitor her emotions. She also asked the students to take a questionnaire to get an understanding of what they prefer and what they find difficult in the oral tests. She also recorded and analysed some oral tests. She asks students for feedback. In addition, she asked a colleague to interview students after the oral tests. After having analysed her data, she managed to get to the core of the problem and fix it. Reflection was not enough for her as she had a rather erroneous perception regarding the way oral tests happened, and she could not observe her own behaviour objectively. Her reflections concerned what she thought she was doing during the oral tests, and not what she was actually doing. This is why action research can inform a language educator's choices better than reflection. Moreover, doing action research does not exclude reflection, it is one of its constituents. It is embedded in the action research cycle.

Graphically the action research cycle can be presented in the following way:



Once the problem has been identified the action researcher elaborates a plan that will show the course of action to be taken to solve the problem. It is the stage where the research questions are asked and the methodology established. The researcher hypothesizes the possible outcomes of their investigation. Thus, it is prospective.

During the next stage, the researcher implements the strategies they have decided upon in the planning phase. This implies the change in the teaching practice that is hypothesized to scaffold the students' learning more than the traditional way of teaching.

Observation is closely related to action as the researcher closely examines the effects of their action on the learners. This is the phase where the data is collected, which upon analysis, i.e. reflection will provide answers to the questions the researcher set at the beginning. This phase is retrospective, as it informs the researcher concerning further course of action.

It should be mentioned, however, that action researcher generates knowledge from the experience. Knowledge is in a constant process of development and the action research might go on in cycles in order to get the needed answers. It can also be the case that by the end of the action research cycle a new problem was identified. This means that the researcher would plan a further course of action, observe it and reflect upon it.

Norton (2009: 70) suggests the following steps of action research:

- Step 1: Identifying a problem/paradox/ issue/difficulty;
- Step 2: Thinking of ways to tackle the problem;
- Step 3: Doing it;
- Step 4: Evaluating it (actual research findings);
- Step 5: Modifying future practice.

Probably the biggest challenge is in thinking of the methodology one needs to apply in order to conduct the research. The action researcher can use questionnaires, interviews, experimental designs, or observational research. Whatever the method, it might not be enough to validate the results of the

research. This is why the researcher uses triangulation, i.e., combines methods in their research.

A personal perspective of conducting action research

When it comes to my experience of using action research in my career, I found it rather challenging and exhausting. Yet, it is rewarding as it can truly offer a solution to the existing problems. If it does not offer the solution, it offers you the answer that your prospect from the planning phase cannot be applied to your particular educational context.

What the language educator needs to properly conduct action research is probably more support from the institution, not to be overloaded with a lot of tasks to do and to have the basic knowledge of research methodology. It is extremely important to understand that research is a systematic inquiry and only upon analysis can it offer the answers to the sent research questions. There are several factors, such as lack of time or lack of knowledge in conducting research that prevents teachers from undertaking action research (Dornyei, 2007; Norton, 2009). It is true that teachers reflect upon their teaching and look for ways to improve it, yet, they are not always sufficiently prepared to conduct the research per se. That is why collaboration between the teacher and the researcher is extremely important. Thus, the researcher can co-opt the teacher in a research project or collaborate with the teacher by participating equally in the process.

The first time I applied action research was while doing my PhD investigation. My choice was due to the belief that by doing action research the institution will benefit from it as it would result in the improvement of the educational process, and transform the way academic writing is taught at the university. Therefore, I dared to take on the role of the transformative intellectual to a certain extent (Condrat, 2017).

It is important to mention that my action research was conducted in cooperation with a teacher from the university. There were two central questions that I sought to answer, and namely:

1. What is the students' understanding of academic writing?

2. Can blogging enhance academic writing skills?

The second central question sought to establish how students respond to the use of blogs for academic writing tasks; what strategies the teacher can apply in order to help the students to improve their academic writing skills; and what the role of the teacher is.

The project was designed for 12 weeks, starting from September 4th, 2014 and ending November 23rd, 2014. Every week the students were assigned to complete a new task. The objectives of the tasks communicate my intentions to the students, i.e., what I think they could achieve by completing the task.

The first week was devoted to explaining what the experiment consisted of. We also established Wednesday as our meeting for debriefing. The following 11 weeks were devoted exclusively to writing academic tasks. My intention was to help the students respond to actual writing tasks, and thus boost their academic progress.

I triangulated my research as I wanted to get valid and consistent results. In particular, I used background questionnaires in order to get the bigger picture of the existing problem (72 respondents took the questionnaire), then I analysed the existing documents related to academic writing in our department (i.e., how much students are expected to write for academic purposes). Then I worked with my focus group which consisted of 6 students. I used observation notes during the study. Similarly, I asked the students to take a pre-treatment and post-treatment survey. The students' writing and comments were another source of data I analysed.

The results of the research indicate that if the blogging practice were integrated into the curriculum, the students could manage to create their micro-discourse community where they would share knowledge and thoughts. It would also create the platform for their interactions on an academic level to take place. However, the teacher's role is still important in this interaction. Students seem to lack autonomous learning and they constantly look up to the teacher for advice and wait for the teacher to have

their final say. We may assume that if this practice is applied systematically, the teacher's presence might be on request. If for example there is something which is unclear, the students will address the teacher..., otherwise they will rely on themselves or their peers.

Blogging can be used as a tool to communicate, to compare one's work with another's, whereas the practice of sharing and peer-commenting could enhance the students' academic writing skills.

The study showed the following benefits of blogging:

- helps the students become aware of the writing process;
- helps to develop reader awareness;
- creates the environment for learner autonomy and boosts collaborative learning;
- makes writing more interactive;
- makes writing more purposeful, increasing the students' intrinsic motivation.

In this research the use of blogs seemed to be beneficial for students. Yet two major problems in the use of blogs were signalled out.

The first one is physical (sometimes the computers do not work or the internet connection drops), the second is psychological (students are afraid to share their work online, or it is difficult for them to overcome the fear of commenting on a peer's post, or they are afraid of failure).

On my return, I did not have the chance to further implement the practice. The reasons did not depend on me.

Action research was also conducted when dealing with the process of designing the education process (Condrat, 2018). I applied backward design to planning my courses that year. 53 students attended my course in *Discourse Analysis*. I have designed the course taking into consideration the principles of backward design. As my strong belief is that theory does not contribute to the students' enduring understanding, the purpose of the study was to help students apply the knowledge to their contexts appropriately.

At the beginning I wanted to determine what their understanding of discourse is. Students were asked to come up with a series of expectations they have regarding this new course. It should be noted that all students thought of discourse as a public speech. Consequently, their expectations ranged from improving their abilities to create a speech to delivering the speech correctly. Similarly, students hoped to improve their overall language proficiency level as well as their analytical skills.

During the course of the instruction the students' understanding was assessed by asking them to perform certain analyses. Yet, the constant interaction during lectures and practical classes offered a better insight of how their understanding of the subject is proceeding. At the end I wanted to see how the intended purposes had been realized. The students were asked to state what the purpose of the course was. It should be noted that 88% of the students gave accurate explanations and meaningful interpretations, 6% of the students misunderstood the task and did a totally different assignment where they proved they can effectively apply the knowledge gained at the course. However, 11% of the students offered inaccurate answers, which basically consisted of copying some definitions related to discourse and discourse analysis.

The results of the investigation indicate that backward design can help teachers in the process of planning the whole instruction process. Indeed, proceeding from where one wants to get, it is easier to plan the steps to be taken in order to realize one's goals. Thus, teachers should have a clear vision of their final ends from the very beginning in order to make the instruction process purposeful and motivational for the students and for themselves.

I applied the principles of action research while trying to flip the traditional grammar classroom. While working with first-year students at Alecu Russo Balti State University of Moldova in 2018-2019, I considered flipping the traditional way of teaching grammar (Condrat, 2019a). As a consequence, students were encouraged to study the grammar topic at home, and then in the classroom they were supposed to do various tasks that will focus

on the development of their higher order thinking skills. I also made a series of YouTube videos devoted to the grammar topics that they were supposed to cover so that they can turn to them whenever they needed. It should be mentioned that they enjoyed looking at their teacher at home and taking notes of what she said. One of the students even admitted to watching them together with her family.

However, the problem appeared when students were asked to do the tasks in the classroom. They knew the content but they could not apply it to real life situations. Moreover, when asked to collaborate in order to do the given tasks, they could not do it. It turned out that the 4Cs were underdeveloped, i.e. that they could not properly communicate, collaborate, and think critically and creatively. My assumption was that if applied systematically such an approach to teaching grammar or any other theoretical classes at the university level could help learners develop higher order thinking skills, which are so necessary in the 21st context. However, this model does not seem to work for our students. I tried to apply the same strategy for my classes of grammar this year as well, and only 2 students out of 16 were able to do it. Thus, there is a larger, global problem related to students' lack of motivation. They seem reluctant to approach the task systematically, and spend energy on it. And in my opinion, this is the biggest problem language educators are facing at present. The learners do not seem to realize that education takes time and effort, and that learning does not happen together with a click of a mouse.

Another research I conducted related to the use of social media groups in the process of scaffolding the students' learning (Condrat, 2019b). I created a Facebook page meant to assist learners while studying English stylistics. The results appear to indicate that learners are not used to perceiving Facebook as an additional educational tool meant to enhance their learning process to which they should contribute with their own knowledge and ideas. They regularly accessed the page of the group and, some of them would put a like to the post I made, yet, they did not

make posts of their own, although they were constantly encouraged to do so. I assume that this is because of the erroneous perception learners have regarding the use of social media for educational purposes, on the one hand, and their insecurity of being able to contribute something to the group discussion, on the other. I was more hopeful during the experiment and thought that at the end that group would benefit the learners. Yet, I do not think that it contributed to their learning. They did not form that discourse community that would have enabled them to get a better understanding of the subject matter of stylistics, on the one hand, and to be able to make proper stylistic analysis. The only thing they did was to put likes and hearts to my post, and no other reaction.

Now, with the pandemic we are constantly looking for new ways of motivating our learners (Condrat, 2020). I can say it is a difficult task. And one thing that I find particularly discouraging is the learners' unwillingness to interact during online classes. They do not seem to realize that meaning can be co-constructed together. What I'm trying to apply right now is to ask them to respond to a task by writing something on a document word or a PowerPoint slide. Thus, they watch a video and then they are asked to write the key points made in the video in their own words. Then I asked them to share their screens with the rest of the class and comment on what they have on their slide. What I've observed is that few students transform the information, i.e. apply higher order thinking skills, most of the students simply reproduce what they have watched (now this is extremely easy as YouTube, for example, gives the possibility to watch the video with captions on). So now I'm thinking what modifications I can make to my plan in order to get to the desired results.

By means of conclusion

Regardless of the results one gets after conducting action research it definitely informs the language educator in terms of what to do in the classroom. The 21st century setting is quite challenging as such and urgent solutions are necessary to solve the existing problems. I could now conclude that a teacher should be

more of a transformative intellectual as I believe that the situation we are confronted with is linked to the socio-cultural setting we are all part of. It is useless to put the blame on either the students or teachers. We need to reform a system that does not meet the 21st century learners' needs.

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