

## **Action Research: Not just about ‘results’.**

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### **Introduction**

This issue of *Research Notes* presents the work of the second cohort of teachers on the Cambridge English-English UK Action Research scheme. I have described the scheme in more detail elsewhere (Borg, 2015) but in essence it runs for 10 months and includes three face-to-face workshops and on-line support for the teachers in between these meetings. The overall aim of the scheme is to support teachers in conducting action research projects in their classrooms.

It is very satisfying for everyone associated with the scheme to have these reports available for wider dissemination. Sharing action research in this way is important, for while teachers’ inquiries focus in the first instance on developing local understandings of teaching and learning, they should, as with any form of research, seek to contribute to knowledge more publicly. Publishing these reports is one way the scheme makes such a contribution; a second strategy is giving teachers space to talk about their work at the English UK Teachers’ Conference in November each year. This for me (and I suspect for the teachers too) has always been a highlight of the scheme.

Here is a brief overview of the projects that are included in this issue (I will not pre-empt reader curiosity by revealing the findings though).

Fiona Wattam’s paper is about teaching writing. She examined whether the use of specific corrective feedback strategies by the teacher and asking students to redraft their writing had an impact on students’ ability to identify and self-correct errors in their written work. Over two four-week cycles, 12 students received feedback first via correction codes, then, less directly, through underlining. What Fiona learned from this project challenged her expectations about what it was that students valued most in the feedback they received from teachers.

Lindsay Warwick examined the use of assessment criteria in speaking tasks in the classroom. Motivated by more general educational work on formative assessment, especially the idea that prior knowledge of ‘success criteria’ might enhance performance, Lindsay investigated whether presenting assessment criteria before tasks would allow students to self-assess their performance more effectively; she also looked at whether any improvements in self-assessment were reflected in actual improvements in their speaking skills (as assessed by the teacher). Nine students took part in the project over seven weeks.

Richard Flynn and Christian Newby studied the impact of weekly self-assessment of written tasks on the autonomy of low level Middle Eastern learners. This project was motivated by the authors’ experience that such learners often lacked the skills and dispositions required for autonomous learning and they wanted to see whether making self-assessment a regular feature of their courses might address this issue. Three participants took part in Phase 1 of the study and another three in Phase 2, with each phase lasting four weeks.

In the fourth paper, April Pugh and Ceri Thomas took as their starting point what they saw as a mismatch between the productive summative assessments their students had to complete

and the discrete-item formative assessments that these students were given by way of preparation. In response to this situation, they introduced productive writing and speaking formative assessments and examined the impact these had on students' performance in the summative tests they did. The study unfolded over two six-week phases, with 10 students in the first phase (six intervention and four control) and eight in second (three and five).

Finally, Andy Taylor focused on students' attitudes to conventional and on-line homework. This project was motivated by the move in Andy's school to implement an on-line learning platform which provided learners with a wide range of exercises they could complete for homework. Twelve students took part in the study, over two five-week cycles. Again, what Andy discovered about students' attitudes to homework challenged his (and perhaps his school's) assumptions about the ways in which students respond to opportunities for on-line language learning.

These projects reflect many key characteristics of action research (see Burns, 2010):

- The topics studied were chosen by and of direct relevance to the work of the teachers
- Teachers' overall concern was improving the educational experience of their learners
- Teachers' introduced an innovation into their work and evaluated its impact
- They collected different kinds of evidence to evaluate their projects
- This evidence was analysed systematically
- The projects evolved through cycles of action, reflection, modified action and further reflection
- The work has been made publicly available for fellow professionals to review, learn from and build on.

Additionally, in two cases the projects were collaborative, and while this is not a requirement for action research it is something that the scheme encourages; in practical terms collaboration means the workload is shared but, the benefits extend beyond that and allow evidence to be collected from different classes and to be analysed in greater critical depth.

### **Continuity and Scale in Action Research**

Our experiences of the Action Research scheme this year have prompted me to reflect on the particular challenges that the UK ELT sector creates for teachers wanting to engage in this form of professional development and I will now comment on these challenges.

In state schools around the world, a teacher knows they will work with the same class of learners for a whole school year and in many university or pre-university contexts language courses are also of a fixed (if shorter) duration (e.g. 10 weeks). In both of these contexts, teachers wanting to conduct action research can plan projects in the knowledge that they will be working with a certain number of learners for a pre-defined period of time. The UK ELT sector, however, is characterized by a large number of EFL schools where rolling enrolment is the norm. What this means is that international students will arrive and leave on a weekly basis and while some students may stay at a school for several months, others will be there for shorter period of time (in addition, it is not unheard of for teachers' timetables and the classes they teach to be changed at short notice). This lack of stability is a major challenge for action researchers in this context because it becomes very difficult to work with a consistent group of students over an extended period of time. This in turn complicates the task of

reaching meaningful conclusions about the impact on students that teachers' interventions are having.

If we look at the studies that are presented in this issue of *Research Notes*, we can see how teachers have attempted to respond to such a challenge; they have tried to identify a core group of students who they know will be studying with them for an extended period (typically 4-5 weeks) and to make them the participants of the study; other students may join and leave the class during the period of action research, but they will either not be involved in the study and or else any data they provide will not be analysed. A consequence of such attempts to work with a consistent group of learners over a number of weeks is that the groups teachers do eventually work with tend to be very small; Flynn and Newby were only able to involve three students in each of their two phases while for Pugh and Thomas their two intervention groups were made up of six and four students respectively, with three and five in their control groups. Such sample sizes are problematic when an attempt is being made to use quantitative data to reach meaningful conclusions about the impact of an intervention on a learning outcome and it is an issue that has troubled me for some time. Let me try to articulate here my feelings on this matter and to offer some thoughts on how it might be addressed.

Firstly, it is important to stress that while continuity is an important facet of action research, continuity does not have to mean continuity of *participants*. Continuity can be achieved through an extended period of study having a consistent focus, even though the individuals taking part may vary over time. For example, students' attitudes to particular language learning tasks can be studied over time irrespective of the changing nature of class membership. The nature of the work students produce can similarly be assessed over time with different individuals. Perhaps, then, one way of improving the feasibility and quality of action research in the UK EFL sector is to focus from the outset on topics and investigative strategies that do not assume a consistent sample will be available for several weeks. In university pre-session programmes this will be less of an issue, but it is a feature of most EFL schools in the UK.

Secondly, the problems created by sample attrition and instability are exacerbated when teachers adopt research designs which involve the quantitative analysis of causal relationships. Lindsay Warwick's study, for example, was very carefully planned and conducted. The small number of students she worked with, though, and the inevitable lack of control she was able to exert over a range of variables, meant that her statistical results were inconclusive. Similarly, Flynn and Newby's attempts to study the relationship between regular self-assessment tasks and improvements in learner autonomy were limited by the fact that they were only able to retain three learners for each phase of the study. In both these cases the teachers collected qualitative data through interviews to supplement their quantitative measures, yet the latter seemed to carry more weight in shaping the overall findings in these studies. This does not mean, of course, that the process of doing the project did not enhance in valuable ways teachers' understandings of their teaching and their learners; it does mean, though, that answers to questions about whether a particular intervention has a particular result will always be inconclusive.

To summarize my thoughts, then, what I am saying is that rolling enrolment imposes significant limitations on sampling which make it difficult for teachers in the UK EFL sector to work with the same group of students over an extended period of time. This challenges one of the core principles of action research – the idea that teachers can improve understanding

and educational practice by going through repeated cycles of intervention, evaluation and reflection over time. A desire to work with a consistent sample also typically means that this ends up being small, and this makes it difficult for action researchers who adopt quantitative pre- and post-measure designs to reach firm conclusions.

What this suggests then is that in the UK EFL sector action research will be more productive when it is designed in a manner that allows teachers to involve all of their students (or at least all the students in a class), irrespective of the duration of their study period. It would also seem that in such contexts there are particular benefits to including a qualitative element (e.g. by talking to learners or describing their learning in more narrative ways) as well as more common quantitative measures.

### **Action Research and Teacher Motivation**

One indisputable fact about action research is that, irrespective of how conclusive results are, teachers always find the process extremely rewarding. And in many ways, when we ask teachers about how action research has affected them professionally, they talk less about specific results and more about the impact of the process on their motivation, enthusiasm, confidence, awareness of their learners, and criticality regarding their own assumptions and practices (Edwards & Burns, 2016; Goodall, Day, Lindsay, Muijs, & Harris, 2005 provide related insights into the impact of CPD on teachers). These are powerful outcomes, so powerful in fact, that an argument could be made that this is where the true sustained value of action research lies; not in generating clear-cut results, but in providing the kinds of professional reinvigoration and attitudinal realignment that will stay with teachers long after the formal conclusion of any particular action research scheme. And this is perhaps, too, how I hope this collection of papers will impact on readers; the projects do provide interesting insight into a range of key aspects of ELT, but what they provide above all is inspiration to make readers want to start examining teaching and learning in their own classrooms.

### **References**

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