

**Can busy classroom teachers really do action research: An
action research study in an EAL tertiary setting**

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Recent literature in general and language teacher education has promoted the benefits of empowering teachers to be in control of their professional development and curriculum development through reflection on practice and classroom based action research. The ‘teacher as researcher’ and ‘teacher as reflective practitioner’ movements are strongly influential in teacher education practice at present (Zeichner, 2001). Edge (2001) argues that action research augments the traditional notion of teachers as professionals who take theory and realize it in practice to include the notion of teachers as professionals who generate theory from practice. But how realistic for busy classroom teachers working in New Zealand conditions is classroom action research? Is this activity useful for such teachers and under what conditions is it possible? This paper describes an action research project carried out to investigate these questions. The participants in the study were a group of EAL classroom teachers at an Auckland tertiary institution, themselves undertaking classroom based action research into the teaching of casual conversation. Significant benefits are reported for teaching and research skill development, but there are also constraints. Recommendations are made with respect to the optimum design and resourcing of such teacher action research projects.

Introduction

In recent years a body of literature in general and language teacher education has focused on teacher beliefs and reflection. Key writers in this movement were Schon (1983; 1987) and Allwright and Bailey (1991) who, together with other more recently published writers including Richards and Lockhart (1994), Wajnryb (1992), Nunan and Lamb (1996), Head and Taylor (1997) Richards (1998) and Wallace (1998), have promoted the benefits of empowering teachers to be in control of their professional development and curriculum development through reflection on practice. Teachers have been encouraged in this literature to carry out systematic rigorous enquiry into problematic areas of teaching, learning and curriculum in their own classrooms, devise plans of action, carry out these plans of action and collect data to evaluate the revised plan in a cyclic pattern. The 'teacher as researcher' and 'teacher as reflective practitioner' movements have developed in different forms with different catalysts in the UK, the USA and Australia, but have much in common and are strongly influential in teacher education practice at present (Zeichner, 2001).

The issues which relate to the value and validity of action research when compared to other more traditional kinds of research are dealt with very thoroughly in Nunan (2001), Burns (1999), Mills (2003) and others. These give persuasive arguments for action research as an activity with dependability and catalytic validity which should be taken seriously when done well. Edge (2001) also argues that action research narrows the gap between teachers and researchers. It augments the traditional notion of teachers as professionals who take theory and realize it in practice to include the notion of teachers as professionals who generate theory from practice.

There is clear support from the literature for the proposal that focused and documented classroom reflection is an effective and powerful tool for teacher development. But how realistic for busy classroom teachers working in New Zealand conditions with heavy teaching and administrative loads is classroom action research? Action research carries with it the added expectation of careful data collection, rigorous analysis, reporting requirements, and the expectation that theory will be generated. Is this activity useful for such teachers and under what conditions is it possible?

In 2003 and 2004 an action research project was carried out to investigate these questions. The participants comprised a group of EAL (English as an Additional Language) classroom teachers at an Auckland tertiary institution. These teachers were undertaking classroom based action research into the teaching of casual conversation at four different levels. The researcher was also a member of the group. There were thus two levels of action research taking place, which will, for greater clarity, be referred to as the classroom studies and the group study.

The collaborative aspect of the classroom studies was based on a number of models. It drew on the model successfully used in Australia (Burns, 2000) in that it focused on classroom based English language teaching. However it was more like the Melrose and Reid daisy model (Melrose & Reid, 2000) in its composition, having a member with a basic understanding of the principles of action research and a member with knowledge of the theory of the analysis and teaching of casual conversation, within the group. However, as is the case in most New Zealand teaching institutions other than universities, the group did not (at least initially) have access to any 'expert' action researchers experienced in the language teaching area. In addition it was not easy to find the resources (again at least at first) to grant time release to teachers in order for them to carry out action research, and they didn't have

the time, expertise or confidence to put together a full proposal for a Faculty or University research grant.

The group carrying out the classroom studies was set up at the end of 2002. There were eight members in 2003 and four in 2004. Each member carried out an investigation in their own classrooms. The group met six times in 2003 and five times in 2004 to give mutual support, report on progress and discuss insights gained from their investigations. Between meetings they also talked informally and shared readings from the literature. At an initial meeting the principles of action research and data collection were briefly outlined and discussed.

Research design of the group study

The group study focused on these questions:

What are the issues that arise when classroom teachers of EAL in a tertiary setting in New Zealand undertake collaborative action research?

How does teacher collaborative action research impact on teaching and research skill development?

The data used in this project was derived from:

1. Detailed research notes from the six group meetings held in 2003 and the first three meetings in 2004. This constituted the first eighteen months of the group's existence and three cycles of Action Learning and Action Research. These notes were kept by one of the researchers and checked by each participant for accuracy before the data was analysed.
2. A questionnaire administered at the end of the first semester 2004 after the last documented meeting of the group. This was filled in by those who had been in the group for the full eighteen months.
3. Reflections from the journal of one of the action researchers over the same period.

Broad themes were identified in the meeting notes and the reflections. These were then coded for theme. The material within each theme was then recoded for sub theme. The number of times each theme and sub theme was mentioned in the notes from the meetings was quantified to identify the issues which most concerned members at each point in the development of the group and of their skills. The average number of mentions of each theme per person per meeting in 2003 and 2004 were also calculated. Then the content of the discussion within each of the seven broad themes and sub themes was summarised. The reflections of the action researcher and the summarised data from the questionnaire were used to further elucidate the themes emerging from the meeting notes. The conclusions were given to the participants to check before they were reported.

Themes

The broad themes emerging from the data (and by definition those which most challenged the teacher researchers) were: the ethics and consent process, research methodology and planning, results of the action learning/research, the group process and the relationship/tension between teaching and research.

Table 1 shows the average number and percentage of comments per person per meeting in 2003 and 2004. Methodology and research issues is the theme drawing the largest number of mentions in both years, followed by the group process, then the tensions and relationship between teaching and research. This paper will focus on key issues within these three themes.

The group process

The group was set up on a peer support model rather than with an experienced researcher leading, and so differed in this respect from other similar projects (Burns, 1999, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McGee, 2004; Nunan, 2001). Four members had done research in the context of a post graduate degree, but this previous research had been done in a different research paradigm. Three more had studied research methodology for a graduate qualification. One had no research knowledge or experience. One of the more experienced researchers had also done some reading and attended some seminars on action research. The belief was that the shared expertise would be enough for the group to function well.

Meetings were limited to three a semester to accommodate busy teachers. However, there was some realization that teachers could not work on research in isolation between meetings, and a 'buddy' system was proposed but did not get established in 2003. There was a feeling that everyone was 'too busy' and should not be further burdened.

'Being conscious of how busy people are makes it difficult to approach them'

'didn't want to intrude on others' time' (Notes, Dec 03, p.2) .

The agenda of meetings became more structured as the project developed. From May to October 2003 a list of topics was circulated about a week prior to the meeting and for the last meeting in December there were focus questions.

It is interesting to note (see tables 2 and 3) that the benefits of the group process was the most mentioned sub theme in both years, particularly from July 2003 onwards. Benefits from the group process were anticipated initially, although members felt daunted by what lay ahead:

'the research is a little unwieldy at present'

'The beginning is a little daunting'

'the project seems nebulous at present' (Notes, Feb 03, pp.3-4).

By May benefits for teaching and later benefits for research capabilities began to be mentioned. By October the benefits for research and teaching were evident:

'.....we have....., developed our awareness of this area and shared some innovative ideas about teaching in this area, it has directly informed our practice in the classroom...' (Notes, October 03, p.5)

'Now I can see where the project is going it has been worthwhile' (Notes, Oct 03, p.4).

Support given by the group was also mentioned. In December, as members reflected on the year, the benefits most often mentioned were the provision of a non threatening forum for the discussion of their projects (6 mentions), the sharing of reading resources (6), the learning of

research skills (3) group support (4), and the clarification of ideas by having to voice them (3).

In the responses to the questionnaire there was more mention of the benefits of sharing roles – getting ethics approval, sharing readings and knowledge of the theory and a greater proportion of the benefits reported were of the gaining research skills. All four respondents (June 2004) reported getting ‘a lot’ or ‘some support’ from the group process.

In spite of the benefits reported throughout, there were flaws in the group process as set up in 2003 and this was becoming obvious by December. There were comments that meetings were not frequent enough to get help with the detail of the research process, that because of time constraints at meetings issues which should have been addressed were ‘skimmed over’, that members needed more one to one support at this stage of their research skill development and yet they were reluctant to approach other members for support because they knew they were already stretched to the limit in their jobs. As a result a buddy system was set up in 2004 so that pairs could meet at least monthly between group meetings. There was also a more conscious focus on research processes and brainstorming solutions to problems in meetings in 2004.

The changes were evaluated formally in the questionnaire and less formally in the meetings in March and June. The consensus was that the buddy meetings held some of the same benefits as group meetings and were more useful for grappling with the detail of the research process. Benefits included not having to ask for time as a favour, keeping one another ‘on track’ (2 mentions), preventing members from getting off focus (2), a ‘security blanket’, the clarification of thinking by having to more frequently articulate ideas and plans, the triggering of ideas and ‘bouncing ideas off each other’. These benefits were mentioned more frequently by members whose research projects and subjects were similar to those of their ‘buddy’. It is interesting to note that other collaborative action research projects for teachers have been set up with a large group meeting initially, mid project and at the end, but with smaller groups working together locally on similar projects between meetings (Burns, 2000; McGee, 2004; Nunan, 2001). Both types of meeting had benefits for confidence and this was more of an issue as the reality of having to write up and present drew closer.

In summary there was a movement from a lack of confidence, uncertain focus and little structure in meetings to more confidence, more focus, more structure and a two tier group process.

Research Methodology

As might be expected, the most discussion focused on the methodology of the research being planned and carried out, particularly at the beginning and middle of each cycle (see tables 4 and 5). The next most mentioned subtopic was the focus, followed by the teaching interventions used in the classroom, then the problems encountered during the course of that research.

A high number of comments in the early and middle phase of the first cycle in 2003 were about finding a focus for the research, and this remained an ongoing theme in all meetings in 2003. For some members this was partly because teaching casual conversation was not a central issue for them in their current class. In hindsight, it would have been helpful to run workshops or discussions at the beginning of the project to help members identify a focus for

their research arising out of the problematical issues facing them in their classroom, as reported in Burns (2000).

Planning the research - in particular deciding on the timing of the different stages of the research, adapting the instruments used to collect this data, and working out the practical details of collecting it - was challenging for members. However most used similar kinds of data gathering instruments, namely pre- and post- teacher assessments or observations, written student pre- and post- self assessments, and written student questionnaires. The similarity of instruments made it easier later for the group to share ideas on collecting, collating and analysing the data.

The next issue was how to adapt or design and administer the pre-test. Administering the pre-test without unduly encroaching on class time and coping with technical and logistical problems were all challenges. Discussion of these issues continued until July 2003 as different members of the group started their research. After the tools were adapted consent needed to be obtained from the participating classes. It was necessary to build up trust with the students before introducing the concept, and then introducing it simply in language they could understand.

When members looked back on the second cycle at the December meeting, further skills had been learned as the research process continued. In the October and December meetings members discussed issues relating to collating, coding and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data:

'Challenges – analysis of the material – very subjective' (Notes, Oct 03, p.3)

'She found it quite difficult to do the research because of the complexity of the data' (Notes, Dec 03, p1)

'What she had learned most was methods of gathering data and analysis.' *'She learned not to analyse the data until she had it all, to only analyse the data for the students who had done the whole thing'* *'Next time would use the skills I have developed, would keep it simple ie not doing analysis that is useless...'* (Notes, Dec 03, p.3).

'Next time...would do more forward planning' (Notes, Dec 03, p.4).

By now, with the benefit of hindsight, some members were realising that they would have benefited from adapting the tools more carefully in order to deliver the data they were seeking - in some cases eliminating extraneous items and in others making the options in the survey more specific.

Some members of the group used reflective practice - completing some aspects of the research process but not all – in 2003, as a pilot for the action research they planned to undertake in later cycles. Three reported in the December 03 meeting a gain in confidence at this stage. In December of the first year, concerns about the kind of validity achieved in action research began to emerge as members contemplated reporting on their research in the next year. As a result, the meetings in 2004 had a more conscious focus on research methodology. A number of skills learned by fellow members of the group were passed on. This process started in 2003 but was more in evidence in 2004 with the greater focus on research methodology, and was greatly facilitated by the buddy system. New issues that arose in 2004 focussed around the later stages in the action research journey. As writing and

presentation became a reality members began to share their concerns and strategies surrounding this process including the value of fluency writing and the process of narrowing and adjusting the focus for reporting purposes. Other issues discussed in March and June 2004 were the categorising and presenting of different types of data, the use of statistical tools, handling large amounts of data and the analysis and moderation of test data.

At the June 2004 meeting the highs and lows of the research journey were also discussed. Concerns about the scarcity of time available to complete projects were raised here and in earlier meetings and this issue remained unresolved. Issues relating to the validity and rigor of action research in general and of some of the data gathering in particular were also discussed. These were resolved later with advice gained from action research contacts. It was also encouraging that three of the projects focusing on a similar approach to the teaching of casual conversation were throwing up remarkably similar results, and that this fact strengthened the validity of their findings. However for some members there remained a feeling that in spite of the pool of research experience in the group, being led by or at least having some input and advice from a more experienced researcher sympathetic to or experienced in action research approaches would be beneficial. Responses to the questionnaire also indicate that members still felt their lack of experience created many of the difficulties for them in completing this project. They felt they had lacked (and in some cases still lacked) experience in strategising, using research analysis instruments, designing research, data collection and narrowing the focus to generate research questions. Burns (2000) and Nunan (2001) both advocate input and support from experienced researchers for teacher researchers.

In this project, then, there was significant learning about research methodology, but through the process of doing the research and through contact with other members of the group and their contacts, rather than from formal input. For some this was not enough.

Teaching and Research

The relationship between the participants' dual roles as teachers and researchers was the third most frequently mentioned theme in the meeting minutes (see Tables 6 and 7) and possibly the most interesting for this study. Of the sub themes under this general heading, time was the most often mentioned issue in both years, followed by the benefits of being a teacher researcher. Time was also the difficulty most frequently mentioned in the responses to the questionnaire. Lack of time was identified as issues by Nunan (2001) and also mentioned by Burns (2000).

All members mentioned the difficulty of finding time to do the research to their satisfaction and still fulfil their other professional roles, especially teaching:

'Research conflicts with time for teaching/curriculum development – much bigger project than expected'

'Time on top of teaching'

'fitting the "extras" of the research process into an already busy teaching schedule in the classroom (e.g. consent, pretest, self assessment)'

'Having the time to plan the research properly. Lack of time to do the research as thoroughly as I would like once planned'.

'Not time to do recordings and transcripts which would have created more reliable data'.
(Questionnaire data, p2 – 3)

The data from the questionnaire were interesting. Even the two members who undertook small scale classroom based research with a narrow focus (and who in fact applied for no funding) reported needing 15-34 hours to complete to draft stage. Of these one was happy to put in the extra time:

'The reality is that you have to be prepared to in a considerable amount of time yourself, but to my mind, the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages.' (Questionnaire data, p.5).

The two who undertook bigger projects and got 40 hours release estimated in their responses to the questionnaire that they would need 80 hours (before writing up) and 200 hours at least (to get to draft stage). Here again, in retrospect, there was a need for some mentoring by a researcher experienced in applying for research grants.

Another time-related issue was the allocation and use of time that had been granted. Where teachers had a number of roles (teacher, administrator, leader, counsellor) there was a need to realistically set aside the time granted for research and 'ring-fence' it so that it could not be swallowed up by the tasks relating to the other roles for which the deadlines were more immediate.

'Really difficult to focus today as my other job intruded – phone calls and knocking on the door.....distracted and made me doubt my decision to "ring-fence" this time'
(Journal entry, 27 May 04)

Some conflicts arose for members of the group between their role as teacher and their role as researcher. For example there was a tension between the need to postpone a request for informed consent from students until a relationship had been built up with the class, and the need to start teaching the skills that were to be the focus of the research at the optimum time for the class. Similarly there was a need to wait for ethics approval to come through before pre-testing could begin, resulting in a similar delay in starting teaching. Another researcher faced a triple role of the interlocutor in the role play situation - teacher, examiner and researcher, as opposed to the usual dual role (teacher and examiner). It was felt that this put extra demands on the teacher-student relationship. A final resource issue related to handling technical data gathering tools (video and audio) that were sometimes difficult to organise. The organisational challenges complicated the teaching process.

However there were many benefits seen in undertaking the teacher - researcher role. Benefits for the teacher role mentioned in both the meeting data and in the responses to the questionnaire were – better or faster professional development, an incentive to read more deeply and widely, becoming a more reflective teacher and doing more systematic reflection, getting reliable instead of merely anecdotal feedback on practice with data which can be analysed and which led to more soundly based development in practice, an incentive to focus more on problem areas instead of accepting limitations in teaching, and the development of better teaching materials. Those mentioned only in the meeting data (though implied in some of the responses to the questionnaire) were the incentive to think more deeply about teaching, intellectual stimulation, the generation of theory which would be of use for other teachers in the same context, and some personal gains such as a gain in confidence in talking about methodology, and a development of critical faculties. These benefits were also mentioned by Zeichner (2001), (Burns, 1999) and Nunan (2001).

The reported benefits for the role of researcher in the questionnaire were the development of research skills of analysis and design, becoming more aware of the link between theory and practice, and developing, through the use of research methodology, the ability and skills to stand back from teaching and observe more critically and objectively. The reasons for this development were also mentioned. Members of this group said that their development was accelerated because they had to 'lead others' or 'front up' or 'articulate' about what they were doing and the difficulties they were encountering.

'I learned a lot as a researcher because I had to support less experienced researchers and also to confront my own inexperience and find ways of overcoming the difficulties I had. Because I met in a group I couldn't gloss over or escape from these difficulties – I had to name them and own them'

'It also helped me tremendously to have to articulate what I was doing and learning and planning. This helped me to sort out some difficulties more quickly than I would otherwise have done' (Questionnaire data, p.2).

They also could do it in a supportive environment:

'Being supported by feedback and also challenged.' (Questionnaire data, p.2)

'the fact that we reported back and that you could run an idea past someone else in a non-threatening environment' (Notes, Dec 03, p.1)

A satisfaction in being able to do research which feeds into teaching was also voiced. In spite of the benefits, all members felt and expressed their lack of experience at different times. This was also found to be a factor in teacher research by Nunan (2001) and Burns (2000).

'...I am aware I am very much a novice and still have a lot to learn'. (Questionnaire data, p.2).

Issues of resourcing for time and role conflicts, then, were offset by the considerable benefits for teaching and research skill development.

Discussion and recommendations

There are possible constraints on the validity of some of the data in the group study. Firstly there may have been issues of power relations affecting the data in the meeting notes. Although the culture in the School in which this study was undertaken is a non-hierarchical one, the fact that two members had influence in the selection and appointment of staff and that two had limited term contracts means that the influence of this relationship on the data cannot be ruled out. However the very nature of this kind of group means that there will inevitably be senior staff leading it and it is hard to see how this kind of bias can be avoided. Secondly, case study research such as this does not lend itself to generalization, although the issues raised may be relatable (Bassey, 1981) to groups of action researchers in similar contexts. Finally the number of participants, particularly in 2004 was small. With greater support, more teachers might be encouraged to join and remain in such a group.

It is clearly beneficial for teaching and research skill development to set up groups to do action learning and action research focusing on areas that are problematical to teachers in this

context, provided resources are available to do this. Realistic contact release must be available for teachers doing action research to allow for the extra time involved and to minimize the conflict between research and their other roles. Teachers also need support to limit their projects to what is realistic in the time available. Institutional support and time release is also advocated by Burns (2000) and Nunan (2001)

Voluntary membership of the group is desirable and members of the group need to have a common focus. Burns (2000) also supports the self selection of teacher researchers and the relevance of the focus for them as does Zeichner (2001), who lists voluntary membership as one of the conditions under which benefits accrue to teacher researchers. Other conditions mentioned by Zeichner are intellectual challenge and an extended research period, both of which were inherent in this project.

It is likely that an improvement on the model used in this project would be for smaller subgroups or pairs to be formed from the outset, each group having a more narrow common focus within the broad theme and working on the same or similar projects at a similar level. These pairs should meet briefly at least once a month between group meetings to discuss day to day challenges and give mutual support. For maximum benefit, group meetings should have a tight agenda circulated beforehand

Supporting teachers and streamlining the research process for them is important. Thus a group ethics application and the use of similar data collection instruments can make the group learning more efficient and focused and save time. Ensuring one or more members of the group have some knowledge of the literature on the theme and can provide or recommend readings is also helpful in this respect. These measures were an important part of the Australian projects and are advocated by Burns (2000).

Teachers with less experience in research should be given guidance on background reading in research methodology before the project starts. If resources are available workshopping may be desirable at the beginning in a group with a varied amount of experience to teach the principles of action research, methods of finding a focus which is realistic, selecting and designing the data gathering tools and planning a research timeline. Burns (2000), Nunan (2001), McKee (2004) and Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) have all used and advocate workshopping to support teacher researchers.

It would be desirable for a researcher sympathetic to or experienced in action research and with experience in applying for grants, presenting and publishing to be a member of the group or available to the group. They should also possibly be involved in running the initial workshops.

Conclusions

This paper has described a study into the processes of teachers undertaking collaborative action research in their own classrooms. Major benefits for teaching and research skill development have been reported. For teaching there were benefits in professional development, the development of reflective skills, materials development, the generation of theory relevant to the context and the growth of confidence. Research skills were learned through individuals 'learning by doing' and also through the sharing of expertise and experience. There was, in addition, more general, but equally valuable learning about the research process, including the amount of time needed to do research, strategies in time management, the nature of the research process, and the benefits of doing research in a group.

There were issues and constraints with the number, format and timing of meetings, the optimum type and timing of peer support as well as need for release time and the tension between participants' roles as teacher and researcher and sometimes administrator. A number of changes to the structure and process of this kind of teacher action research have been recommended as a result of this study. A valuable follow up project would be to evaluate the revised structure and process when these changes are implemented.

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Table 1

Average number and % of mentions of each theme per person (rounded) in 2003 and 2004

	2003		2004	
Group Process	2.7	22.5 %	2.4	27.5%
Methodology and research issues	6.4	53 %	5.4	62%
Consent	.5	4 %	.15	2%
Teaching vs Research	1.5	12.5 %	.38	4%
Results	.9	7.5%	.38	4%
Totals	12		8.71	

Table 2

Themes arising in group minutes: the group process 2003: Group Process (No of mentions)

Month (No present)	Feb (7/8)	May (8)	July (7)	Oct (6)	Dec (5)	Total
Power relations	0	0	0	0	2	2
Communication	6	3	0	0	11	20
Feelings	7	1	1	1	4	14
Benefits	0	2	8	8	34	52
Plans (for group)	0	0	0	2	0	2
Totals	13	6	9	11	51	90