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Conducting Action Research in a Practicum: A Student Teacher's Perspective

This article looks at my reflection as a teacher during a master's degree practicum for a Second Language Studies Program. This particular practicum differs from the other common student teacher-training courses found in master's programs as it incorporated a teacher-training session on conducting action research (AR) in the classroom, a practice that has recently become a decisive element of TESOL programs (Ho, 2012). I taught for 8 weeks at a university in Thailand where my class met 4 times a week for 1 hour, and I also partook in teacher-training courses, 1 specifically on teaching training (3 hours a week) and the other specifically on conducting AR in the classroom. Through the AR methodology I was able to conduct meaningful research that contributed to a greater understanding of myself as a teacher, to improve the classroom environment, and also to bring insight into current research in the field of second language (L2) learning through grounding the AR in current theory. Through following the cyclical process of AR, I was able to gain a deeper insight into my own classroom, teaching, and abilities to conduct meaningful research. This reflective article acts as a reference for other student teachers who may be interested in applying a similar framework to their practicum experience, empowering them to go beyond just understanding teaching practice but also to potentially develop research grounded in L2 theory.

Teaching Practicums in TESOL

Teaching practicums have long been an essential element in giving students enrolled in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) or other similar programs the abil-

ity to apply the knowledge, both practical and theoretical, to an actual teaching experience as student teachers (Ho, 2012). Teaching practicums aim to prepare student teachers for a career after they have acquired their degree, often with a focus on giving the student teacher the ability to organize and manage a class, reflecting through observation and writing, lesson planning, and developing a philosophy of teaching (Crookes, 2003). Teaching practicums frequently incorporate some kind of mentorship, typically involving that of a professor and/or other student teachers who observe and provide feedback to the practicing student teacher. Through highlighting these primary characteristics of the teaching practice, TESOL-based programs believe that practicums give their students a foundation to build upon as they begin their teaching careers postgraduation. Practicums often do not equip their participants to go beyond fostering teacher identity and grasping the features of well-rounded teaching practices, such as those mentioned above (e.g., reflecting, lesson planning, classroom management, etc.; for example, see De Coury, 2011). A large share of TESOL programs that include a practicum are both theory and research driven, also requiring the students to complete a graduation thesis displaying their ability to conduct research in second language (L2) contexts. However, the field of TESOL and L2 studies tends to distinguish research from teaching, permitting less room for student teachers to apply theoretical and research practices to their classrooms. One possible way to allow student teachers to apply not only the theoretical teaching practices they have acquired throughout their study in a TESOL program, but also their understanding of research methodology, would be to include an aspect of conducting research within the practicum experience. To achieve this, the research methodology must be classroom focused, as seen in action research (AR).

Action Research

Applying an AR methodology to a teaching practicum appears to be one of the most convenient approaches as it incorporates some of the core values found in TESOL practicum courses, such as observing, reflecting, planning, and making action (Burns, 2010; Crookes, 2003). However, how AR applies these values is a bit different from how they are understood in practicum courses. Below I have outlined the AR methodology and how I incorporated it as an approach for conducting research in my own practicum experience.

AR is a growing form of methodology that has recently been an area of great interest in the field of language learning (Burns, 2010; Crookes, 1993). Burns describes AR as a set of approaches to research that systematically investigates a given social situation and promotes

democratic change and collaborative participation. Within an AR setting, the researcher and teacher roles are coalesced, meaning that when conducting research, participants not only examine their students but also themselves through reflective teaching/researching practices. Crookes describes AR as being different from other forms of classroom research because the research questions emerge from a teacher's own immediate concerns and problems within his or her classroom. Burns illustrates the common goal of action research as creating a collaborative change to the participants' environment, promoting continual self-development and growth while also generating theoretical and practical knowledge about the classroom situation.

By keeping this goal in mind, AR methodology usually incorporates a cyclical process of plan, act, observe, and reflect as a guiding model, though it is not always followed prescriptively. In terms of identifying and collecting data on specific research topics, using this cyclical process is highly recommended for practitioners (Burns, 2010). Below, I briefly describe the methodology of action research according to Burns's model.

Plan. Identify issues or problems in the classroom and develop a plan of action to bring about improvements within the possible realities of the teaching situation.

Act. Mediate the plan into current teaching practice over an agreed period of time, although continually looking for adjustments, improvements, and alternative ways of action.

Observe. Observe the planned action by looking at the effects of the action by identifying the responses, opinions, and actions of all who are involved. This is also seen to be a data-collection phase, in which the researcher uses open-minded tools to gather data about what is happening.

Reflect. Reflect, evaluate, and describe the effects of the action to make sense of what has happened. This is a time to deepen one's understanding and examine aspects of the action more meticulously, leaving the option to plan and repeat the cycle to improve the situation more, or identify how the action solved the issue.

The researcher goes continually through this cycle until a satisfactory outcome to the issue has been achieved and the researcher believes it is time to stop (Burns, 2010). Therefore, during my own experience in a TESOL practicum, I incorporated an AR model in terms of research design, data collection, data analysis, and management of the course and curriculum. Throughout the practicum and AR cycle I was able to discuss my findings with multiple teachers in my practicum cohort, or *critical friends* (Burns, 2010). These critical friends also observed my class and then provided their perspectives

on my teaching, research questions, and analysis; they were able to provide insights and deepen thoughts unknown to me. The critical-friend process acted as a form of interrater reliability, where any misunderstandings of my data analysis were discussed until a mutual and justifiable understanding was made.

Context of the Practicum

The practicum course I participated in as a partial fulfillment for a master's degree in Second Language Studies took place at a midsize university in eastern Thailand. The practicum was divided into two three-hour training sessions for teachers. The first training session dealt specifically with teaching, focusing on reflection, developing a teaching philosophy, collaborating with peers about lessons and activities, lesson plans, and classroom management. The other three-hour teacher-training course was on conducting AR in our individual classrooms. This course took the teachers step-by-step through the AR cycle and acted as an environment for communication and collaboration on our individual research projects.

I taught one course titled Business Presentation Skills for 23 international business students in their first to third year. Therefore, proficiency in English was quite diverse with a range from self-assessed categories of high-beginning to intermediate. The course met for one hour four days a week for eight weeks. The teacher-training courses each met once before individual teachers began their classes.

Applying AR to the Practicum Experience

As mentioned above, Burns (2010) describes the importance of teachers' using AR to improve their own classroom situations. A *critical incident* is a problematic situation in the class in which the teacher/researcher believes he could apply the AR methodology to improve the outcome of the course. In this sense, the critical incident can be seen as a *gap* in the teacher's own practices.

My critical incident occurred early in the second week of the course when I was unable to upload my lesson that used Microsoft PowerPoint (PPT) because there was no Internet connection in the classroom. During this "critical" moment, there was a clear problematic situation that if left unaddressed would hinder the rest of the lesson. Looking around at other potential resources to use as tools and unsure of what to do, I decided to conduct the lesson using the whiteboard only. By doing this, I saw a change in my students' activity and how I, the teacher, conducted the class. Students began to be more responsive when I would ask a question and then they would see their responses on the whiteboard, and I myself became engaged

through seeing my students' excitement. During my reflection on the day's class, this brought forth a question in my own teaching practice: "What are the strengths and weaknesses of both PPT and the whiteboard?" and "How can these tools be used for eliciting and exposing students to new forms of English in the L2 classroom?" It became clear through my reflection process and through later discussions with members of the practicum cohort that I needed to be critical about the tools I use in the classroom and the potential advantages or limitations to these tools, which led to the above questions to guide my AR study.

Addressing the Critical Incident: Action Research

The critical incident helped to raise questions in my own teaching practice and from these questions I decided to apply the AR methodology to not only improve my own class setting but also potentially contribute to the understanding of PPT and whiteboard use in L2 classrooms.

I began by creating a data-collection plan. Following the AR methodology alongside practicum approaches, I decided to keep a daily teacher-reflection journal. Using a reflective journal allows the teacher-researcher to reflect on personal feelings and perceptions of the class as well as the perceived attitudes and actions of the students (Burns, 2010). Therefore, I used a reflective journal to deepen the understanding of my own teaching practices as well as to look for ways to improve the classroom environment. After every day of teaching throughout the eight weeks of the course, I wrote reflections in an electronic journal on my own computer. Part of my journal specifically addressed my research questions. As a reference in my reflective journal, I would examine daily photographs I took of the whiteboard and the digital files of the PPT, as this allowed me the ability to look back on my practice as I reflected. By using the reflective journal and digital data, I was able to take my observations from the class and then reflect upon them, which would later heavily influence the planning and acting of my teaching.

Because I desired the ability to triangulate my data, I used other forms of data collection as well. Throughout the eight weeks of the course, the students completed six journal entries. Four of the journal entries, one every two weeks, focused on the overall content of the course, responses to activities and presentations, students' lives outside the classroom, and my teaching practices. Through these four "general" journal entries, I attempted to see if the students commented on the use of PPT or whiteboard without being prompted to do so; the entries also contributed to the understanding of my own teaching

practices and overall efficiency of the course. The other two student journal entries were explicitly aimed at the research questions of the study, asking students' perceptions on the use of PPT and the whiteboard in the class. This aided my ability to get a direct response from students on PPT and whiteboard use, which were used as a part of the AR cycle to improve and adjust my use of these tools and address the research questions.

Two audio recordings were made during this study. The purpose of the recordings was to support and further examine my analysis in the reflective journal. It was necessary to hear how I conducted the class and how students responded to the use of PPT and whiteboard.

I gave an exit questionnaire on the final day of the course. Questions were directed at various aspects of the course, seeking students' overall impressions, attitudes, and perceptions of my teaching, course content and structure, and activities as well as the use of PPT and whiteboard. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather final thoughts on my teaching and examine how the use of PPT and whiteboard had developed and to understand changes from my initial observations and reflections of the students and their journal entries.

I would continually apply the cyclical AR process of plan, act, observe, and reflect as I was gathering data. Changes to my teaching practice were often made on a daily basis because of the reflective journal; however, larger changes to my teaching were made after analyzing other forms of data, such as the student journal responses or audio recordings. Throughout the eight weeks I was participating in the teacher-training AR course, where I could then discuss my analysis with critical friends and gain a deeper and wider insight into my data and teaching practices and then take further action in my teaching. Therefore, by incorporating the AR methodology into my teaching I was able to continually discover findings that led to the improvement of my course and teaching. Some examples of these were as simple as having clear legibility or drawing pictures on the whiteboard for student comprehension, or including multimedia within PPTs to express certain ideas through examples. Although all of these relatively simple daily or weekly findings helped to improve my class setting and my teaching practices while addressing my research questions, if they did not undergo a more thorough data analysis, be grounded in a theoretical framework, and be embedded in L2 literature, it would be much more difficult for them to be applied to the greater body of research in L2 learning. Through applying the AR methodology and analyzing the data collected, a more clear understanding of my teaching practices emerged through the process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

Reflecting on the Findings

After the practicum had finished I reflected upon how my teaching had changed. I saw a teaching philosophy emerge, and I felt more confident in managing, preparing, and teaching a class—all of which I had expected from the beginning of the practicum. I was also able to draw upon the various forms of data I collected, such as the reflective journal, recordings, student journal entries, and the exit questionnaire to deepen my thoughts on how I could continue to improve my teaching practices. For example, through using the reflective journal and photos of the whiteboard, I saw that drawing pictures and diagrams spontaneously is a useful exercise with the whiteboard, as seen through an entry in my reflective journal:

I was using the board to draw pictures. This came in handy when I was talking about “making a pitch” in sales, which is a part of their presentation ... after drawing the image, the students clearly understood the concepts.

However, I then felt I had the opportunity to contribute my data and findings beyond my own teacher development and to a larger body of research (such as presenting at the local TESOL conference and working toward a journal publication), and in doing so adding to both teacher and researcher understandings of L2 learning.

After the practicum had finished I reflected on the overall findings in accordance with my specific research questions. To gain a deeper insight into my research questions and how the findings contributed to answering these questions, I began to undertake a more rigorous data analysis. All forms of data underwent recursive inductive coding. All written forms of data—the reflective journal, student journal entries, and exit questionnaire—were first coded in schemes that targeted specific research questions. The audio recordings were partially transcribed by applicability to the research questions. The written transcriptions then went through the same coding process as the rest of the written data. Through this data analysis, a process of triangulation was used to specifically target each research question. Because my data had already undergone the critical friend process, interrater reliability was justified.

To gain a deeper insight into these findings I began to investigate the literature surrounding the use of PPT and whiteboard in L2 and first-language classrooms to see how my individual findings were similar to, different from, or unique in that already existing in the literature (for instance, Knight, 2012; Nielsen, 2012). After finding the “gap” in the L2 literature and seeing how my findings could be applied

to fill that gap, I then needed to ground my research in current L2 learning theory. Upon the discovery of Van Lier's (2004) theory on affordances, I could then ground my overall findings in appliance with not only the literature surrounding my AR but also a theory that acted as a backbone for my interpretation. Because I had the opportunity to apply the AR methodology to my teaching, I was not only improving my own practice but was able to gather meaningful data to contribute toward a larger body of research, since I now had the opportunity to write up a research study correlating with L2 literature, grounded in theory, and using a research methodology.

Conclusion and Final Reflection

Throughout the practicum I found that my teaching practices and identity improved and increased immensely. I felt more confident as a teacher through comprehending basic classroom management, preparation, and so forth, and I could also view my teaching with a critical eye by going through the AR process. I had the opportunities to reflect and then gather data, often from student perspectives, analyze, and then apply the findings to my teaching practice. Also, I was able to gain a much broader understanding of my own classroom dynamics through conducting AR and by applying my reflections to the values in the methodology of planning, acting, observing, and rereflecting. After which process, these core aspects of AR became clear values of my own teaching practice. Burns (2010) describes how AR can contribute to a teacher's understanding of his or her own classroom and then allow the opportunity to engage with L2 theory, and the practicum setting is no different. AR not only enables student teachers to teach but empowers them as teacher-researchers. The outcome of their AR could provide insight to both teachers and researchers alike as it is both grounded in theory and has taken place in an actual classroom context. Using AR in a practicum greatly expanded my understanding of the dynamics of my classroom, and it aided in my ability to address critical incidents in my classroom, even ones beyond the research questions. By addressing the guiding AR questions, I walked away from the experience with a greater awareness of both PPT and whiteboard, which continues to have an impact on my teaching today. Likewise, through my analysis of the research questions, numerous aspects of my teacher practice emerged, allowing for a greater breadth of reflection, such as ways to promote participation or methods to more easily integrate course content into activities. Allowing student teachers such as myself to conduct research empowers them to go past having a singular identity as an L2 teacher and also may give them a greater sense of autonomy in becoming their own researcher, making

them more prepared to continue to higher degrees of education or simply capable of interacting with research developed in L2 studies.

Author

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