Chapter 10
Challenges in Teaching Tertiary English: Benefits of Action Research, Professional Reflection and Professional Development

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Abstract This study identifies challenges that teachers face in English classrooms at the tertiary educational level. A focus on the complications that commonly arise from curricular, extra-curricular and professional hurdles helps to resolve those problems and provide answers through recommendations for increased collaboration, reflection and action research. The results indicate the benefits to teachers of participating in professional and language development courses, creating a more comprehensive course syllabus/outline, professional reflection and increasing efficiency by using action research.

10.1 Introduction

Teachers at many levels are increasingly more distracted from their immediate classroom responsibilities, while at the same time, their classroom responsibilities are growing more encompassing and rigorous. This is especially true at the tertiary level where the final goal of preparing competent and capable students has real world and immediate implications. Some of the most common struggles facing English teachers include helping students to develop oral, aural, written and verbal communication skills including, pronunciation and grammar. The practical problems teachers face include the classroom related concerns of management and student motivation both of which are a means, directly related to the preparation and implementation of multiple assessments ends. In addition to these challenges, teachers are faced with modern trends of high-stakes-test scores acting in place of school and state policies [1]. The *defacto* policies demand that teachers present demonstrable learning improvements through adequate student test-pass-rates. An example of these tests is the International English Language Test Proficiency or IELTS [2].

Teachers react and cope in various ways. On the positive side there are those who vary their teaching style to foster a non-threatening learning environment or one

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which encourages effective communication [3]. However, some alter their teaching methods away from student-centered and toward, the less preferable, test-centered style [1]. Others reject the demands dictated by their supervisors; yet remain adamant for a less obtrusive change [4]. On top of this, teachers have extracurricular work such as creating and improving curricula of their schools. While professional development is widely regarded as a necessary component for successful institutions, it is not always provided. Teachers, however, do need a professional growth technique or strategy on which they can rely to improve themselves and their work. Thus this study will argue that incorporating the practice of action research can provide a beacon for teachers struggling to cut through the fog, created by their ever-increasing responsibilities, in the interest of efficiency related to all of their work. When action research is incorporated with regular professional reflection, collaboration and professional development, English teachers at the tertiary level will experience increased efficacy in their classrooms and in their work. The following literature review explores the guiding theories, which lead to this assertion.

It is always wise to acquire wisdom from the past to face the challenges of the present. Ryan [5] suggests that knowledge of language theories, the numerous language acquisition and development theories, is necessary for an informed investigation of this topic. Some of the theories include those of Noam Chomsky who developed many theories that acknowledge the presence of innate language skills in children; Lev Vygostky, believed socialization of humans can be seen in *self-talk*, a behavior linked with the practice of thinking in a language and Carl Rogers who believed that given positive regard, a person will naturally realize their self-actualization [3]. Applying these theories in language development suggests the following: Language and grammar skills are innate in people, can be developed through socialization, which is expressed in self-talk and is changeable by experience through adaptation. Thus it can be reasonably assumed that students, with proper guidance, can reach fluency and achieve English proficiency in communication.

Action research is widely regarded as a useful tool for teachers. According to Moll [6] "One type of research that has been carried out by teachers in their classrooms is 'action research', that is teacher-initiated classroom investigation which seeks to increase the teacher's understanding of classroom teaching and learning, and to bring about change in classroom practices. It is precisely this type of research that we believe should also be brought into the university classroom. Action research promotes reflection of one's own practice." The primary focus of this research is defining the roadblocks that teachers face in guiding their students to achieve English proficiency in communication. As action research is useful in identifying questions and determining methods and solutions to problems, it will be the primary tool used within this research.

10.2   Significance of the Study

This study shall identify the challenges that teachers encounter in a tertiary educational institution. After thorough identification of the challenges, suggestions for solutions and recommendations based on current techniques and strategies will be

offered. The results of this study will benefit participating teachers and their students by exhibiting to them the importance of including action research in their work. Through collaborative professional reflection with the teachers, a promotion of professional development and incorporation of action research, an increase in English efficiency and English language abilities is predicted. Additional benefits include developing more comprehensive course syllabuses and outlines along with an expansion of professional and language training for the teachers. The students of teachers who practice action research will likely see the most benefit as their language skills improve due to improved teaching techniques. All of this will help both teachers and students succeed in their chosen fields, especially related to using English for professional purposes as the target language becomes increasingly prevalent on a global scale.

10.3   Reflection in Teaching: Theoretical Background

Reflection in teaching is largely elaborated in Dewey's writings [7]. Reflection appears as the most viable of all theories since reflection "enables us to solve problems while we are engaged in our normal practice. It allows us to confront and overcome anomalies (doubts, uncertainties, surprises, interruptions) in our experience. It can help us look back and understand what has happened" [7]. Dewey defined reflective thinking as "the kind of thinking that consists of turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration" (Dewey, as mentioned in [7]). It is different from daydreaming since reflective thought in Dewey's concept is disciplined, problem centered, purposeful and directed—"intent on understanding and creating meaning from an interaction or realization" [8]. The only similarity between reflective thought and daydreaming is that both are conscious streams of thought and internal processes of the mind.

Heflich and Iran-Nijad [8] describe the five phases in the reflective cycle of thought that Dewey writes about. It is interesting to note how these are very much amenable to the practice of English education: (1) a doubt or uncertainty that arises unconsciously about an activity (a lot of espoused methodologies in English teaching are Western based and may not be much applicable in the local context); (2) the active organization of the uncertainty into a question to be solved (objective measures confirming the presence of the problem is taken into consideration); (3) the problem is thoroughly organized and a tentative solution is formulated (here the outlines of the possible solutions are written based on teacher's knowledge and first-hand experience of the class); (4) a rigorous examination of the idea is made (the tentative solution is consulted with other experts in the field or with literatures); and (5) action and testing of the hypothesis to see if the planned solution to the problem actually does what is expected (the finalized solution is tried and tested, this is the trial and error phase resolving challenges in English teaching—this stage can happen in many cycles until the problem is resolved). Similar to Dutertre's [9] execution of her action research, she went through at least four cycles. As Dewey concept shows reflective thinking

in adjusts the phases to the start, a kind of feedback loop, until the problem at hand is resolved.

Following the ideas of Dewey, Schon introduces the concept of Knowing-In-Action (KIA). KIA happens every time knowledge occurs due to internal or external environmental situations. Heflich and Iran-Nijad [8] explains it this way: when we see a face we recognize who that face is but we can't explain how the process occurs. Schon explained that reflection happens when "there is a surprise, when something interrupts the flow of the KIA that guides our everyday activity." This is similar to Dewey's beginning of reflection triggered by uncertainty and doubt. Schon explained that this interruption in the KIA, or the surprise or doubt, that which can be resolved by reflection in two ways: Reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-in-action happens when one looks back in the KIA and thinks why the surprise has occurred. It occurs when after some considerable distance is established with the KIA, one thinks critically and 'evaluatively'. Reflection-in-action happens on the spot when the surprise occurs. It is almost always intuitive. Action research uses both reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action but gives weight to the utility of the former due to its carefulness in documenting and delivering set solutions to problems at hand.

Heflich and Iran-Nijad [8] opines that reflection is an alternative to the failing rigid radical-scientific approach that is permeating the present educational system. Kompf and Bond [7] on the other hand criticize the overuse of reflection beyond its conceptual definitions and limit it as a philosophy similar to hypothesis testing. Kompf and Bond [7], however, mentioned the theory of Jean Piaget to support the concepts proliferated by Dewey and Schon on reflection.

Piaget's terminology explains the process of reflection [7]. According to him, the existence of a schema is found in all people. It is the "fundamental unit of organization derived from experience and produces a unified pattern of behavior" [7]. When new information is at hand, adaptation happens. Kompf and Bond [7] explain that "Adaptation is facilitated by the complementary process of assimilation and accommodation. They added that, "assimilation integrates environmental influences into an already-existing physical or cognitive structure thereby extending existing schemata. Accommodation alters physical or cognitive structures having to do with new patterns of behavior." Reflection involves the schema's transformation either by assimilation or accommodation.

On the administration of a solution for the problem at hand, in delivering action research, this research takes on the theory of humanism, particularly that of Carl Rogers. Rogers (as mentioned in [7]) "advocated . . . "whole person" learning, which promoted cognitive and affective learning simultaneously. . . ." According to most experts the inclusion of both cognition and emotion, the inclusion of both interests and challenge motivates students [10]. Ginsberg [7] furthers, "Teachers facilitate this type of learning with what Rogers . . . termed "realness". . . or being genuinely you in the relationship with learners. The notions of positive regard for the students, a holistic view of them, and engaging in constructive relationships with them are all integral to the concepts of humanistic education." The constructive relationship with the students in English as conceptualized in this research is found not just in

classroom teaching or facilitating, but also on the conversations pertaining to the resolution of problems. Action research will be openly administered and comments and opinions of the students shall be taken into account to develop interventions and to measure the success of these interventions. The review of literature shows that this unconditional positive regard or caring is identified as one of the most important characteristics of an effective teacher [11].

10.4   Synthesis

The review of the related literature outlines the challenges or problems that face English teachers. Two of the most important and prevailing problems in our age are (1) the English proficiency or linguistic competence of the teacher and (2) the specific needs of the students. The need for English proficiency and linguistic competence seems to be a by-product of the increase of ESL students because of the influx of the internet where the language medium is mostly English. The specific needs of the students refer to their cultural and situational specific needs ranging from their religion, social class, country, personality and/or even their motivation for studying English. This review featured six cases of action research. All of which intervened to help students learn English by letting the teacher adjust his curriculum, teaching style or even his over-all approach to the student. One researcher even asked teachers to act as *defacto* students. Action research is a viable solution to the challenges at hand. It is not a new concept in English teaching but a lot of teachers avoid it because they don't see the practicality of research in general [4]. However, action research is practical. It is flexible and its theoretical base, as mentioned here, is compatible with the busy academic life of the teacher. The theoretical foundations from which this study will be built upon will be the theories on reflection according to Dewey, Schon and Piaget (as mentioned by [7, 8]. The outcome of the action research relies heavily on humanistic theory, particularly that of Rogers and Maslow, who articulated the importance of positive regard, warm feelings and a caring approach—which needs to be communicated to the student to support him in this cycle of teaching and learning and research—for the student to develop the language skills needed for him to succeed.

The literature review leads to the following aims of the study:

1. Identify the challenges faced by teachers of students in an English language preparatory course.
2. Develop interventions leading to solutions, to the problems, through teacher collaborations.
3. Spotlight the effectiveness of these solutions in helping teachers.

10.5   Descriptive Research Notes

The goal of this review is to identify ways teachers can improve in the classroom. The research of literature including: on-line publications, archival websites, books and other publications will be used to gather and sort information. Surveying the literature indicated that the various challenges and needs are found in many TEFL/TESL settings regardless of country or demographic status. Thus, the next course of action was to identify how the authors resolved the challenges indicated in the literature. As these are all preliminary findings, additional literature will be added as the specific problems of the study are identified and developed.

This review will show teachers' preferences related to action research and the use of professional reflection. The literature review shows that solutions exist for the challenges facing teachers, professional reflection is the place they can start. The information gathered here-in is based on internet and library searches that used *effective teaching* of ESL/EFL students, *challenges*, *professional reflection* and *action research* as key words. During the course of the review the settings of the search engine were set to PDF files only, as online research is commonly found in PDF format. The purpose of this practice is to find documents found in online English journals (TESL- Electronic Journal and others). Notes are kept on scratch paper emphasizing key words and useful quotes—anything that is related to helping teachers to improve their classroom teaching. The current literature review, still a work in progress, has produced the statement of the problem along with reflection statements. The overarching purpose of this work is to explore how action research can be implemented in the local setting. This will be achieved through identification of the most pressing and common challenges that teachers encounter, accompanied by suggestions for how action research can be a catalyst of change for the good of ESL/EFL teachers and the success of their students.

10.6   Benefits of this Research

Singapore government is moving towards making Singapore an education hub by 2020. As such, this research is of extremely high relevance as it is focused on English Language learners at tertiary levels, which comprise mostly of foreign students studying English Language in Singapore. The benefits are at three levels: (a) individual teaching level, (b) institutional level, and (c) national level. The research findings, which would bring to light the problems faced by teachers and students would help educators, education administrators and the relevant authorities look into the problems and find relevant solutions thereby making the education landscape more appealing and relevant to future students, their parents and educators.

10.7   Action Plan

At the time of writing the action plan is not yet finalized. Approval from the Research Supervisor and face validation of the instruments cited here are needed before finalization. However, the action plan will focus on interventions, for English classroom teaching, improving students' oral and/or written communication skills. The study plans to report only one action plan. However if the action plan proves to be successful it shall be administered again (with modifications from feedback) to initiate a continuous and systemic part of English education in the institution.

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