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“Action Teaching and Action Learning for Quality Education”

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Aims and Scopes

The 4th ICTPD is an international meeting point for professionals and practitioners in education to share, reflect, and exchange ideas as well as experiences in researching and supporting Teacher Professional Development across educational levels. The conference also aims at further expanding its network to include other educational institutions across the world.

The theme of the 4th ICTPD is "Action Teaching and Action Learning for Quality Education". Papers in this proceedings cover action research for learning innovation, pedagogy and learning innovation, ICT and learning innovation, learning of content subjects, cultural aspects in education and learning, quality assurance in teaching and learning, mentoring teachers as learners, and teacher education for 21st century.

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Constraints on Teachers’ Ability to Conduct Classroom Action Research

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Abstract

Classroom action research or CAR is believed to be a feasible and effective way for teachers to enhance the quality of English language teaching and learning despite many hurdles teachers face when carrying it out. This study aims to analyze the constraints on teachers’ ability to conduct classroom action research. A small scale research was carried out and the data source of which were lecturers conducting CAR training for English teachers in an effort to underpin the discussion on the constraints of CAR. Participant-observation and questionnaire were the instruments used to collect the data—the constraints. It is concluded that the constraints on teachers’ ability to conduct CAR include the difficulties in differentiating between problems of ELT in general or research problems in ELT and differentiating between problems or root of problems in ELT; identifying reasons to move from one cycle to the next cycle in CAR, identifying differences between cycles, and identifying data and data sources based on the research problems; predicting possible answers or solutions to research problems; differentiating between the formulation of research problems in ELT in general or of research problems in CAR; predicting possible conclusions based on research problems; identifying reasons to employ a cyclic research process; identifying relevant instruments to collect data; justifying a research problem and outlining a relevant theoretical frame; knowing when to end the cyclic process in CAR; and identifying reasons to have collaborators in CAR.

Key words: research skills, classroom action research, PLPG

Introduction

Classroom action research (CAR) inaugurated a new period of research on teaching. It is believed to be the most effective method to enhance the quality of teaching in many fields of study including English language. So strongly influential CAR is assumed to be that the Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture officially issued the Instruction Number 16 in 2007 on the standards of teacher academic qualifications and competence stipulating that the ability to conduct CAR is one indicator of pedagogic and professional competence for teachers. CAR has been an obligatory course in Teacher Professional Training and Education (PLPG) since 2008—when it was established to enhance the quality of teacher competence and as a requirement for professional teacher license. It is through this programme I realized the fact that CAR, a hypothetically ideal research method for teachers, would not be carried out properly by teachers due to their limited research experience. However, the issue of limited research capability to conduct CAR remained an assumption and thus required scientific verification. This kind of investigation on the constraints to conduct action research was carried out by McKerman (Burns, 1999: 46) in the USA, UK, and Ireland in 1993 and lack of research skill was the fourth frequently ranked constraint of the eleven identified constraints.

Problem and Research Methodology

The problem of the study is “What are the constraints on teachers’ ability to conduct classroom action research?” English Department lecturers of Universitas Negeri Jakarta, including the researcher, with four years experience of training teachers to conduct CAR, are
the data source. Participant-observation and questionnaire were used to collect the required data, the constraints on teachers' ability to conduct CAR. This study is an introspective-and-retrospective in nature as it records and recalls the hurdles the in-training teachers had experienced.

Teachers Generating Mechanism

Republic of Indonesia Law Number 14, 2005 stipulates that teachers are professional educators with the following qualifications: 1) graduates of S-1 or D-4 degree; 2) holders of educator certificates or graduates of Teacher Professional Education (PPG); 3) able to demonstrate pedagogic, personal, social and professional competence. This means teachers have to be university graduates who have experience in research through skripsi or comprehensive paper writing as a requirement to graduate from S-1or D-4 degree programme. The word “professional” in the above definition presupposes a special training, PLPG or PPG, for instance, as the second requirement. The third requirement indicates that the four competences are to be embedded in the curricula of S-1 and/or PLPG and PPG. In short, teachers are generated through formal education of the university level and professional education where they are equipped with pedagogic, personal, social, and professional competences.

Research Ability and Classroom Action Research

Teachers, by law, are professional individuals in the field of education. In relation to research, Yinger and Hendricks-Lee (1995 in Loughran, 1999: 218) believed that to become a professional is to become an inquirer, I believe the word inquirer here means researcher. To become a researcher, one needs adequate knowledge of and skill in carrying out quality research. Quality research, according to the National Research Council of the United States as quoted by Shavelson and Towne (2002 in McMillan and Wergin, 2010: 2-3), is characterized by: “a) significant questions; b) the relevance of research to theory; c) relevant research methodology; d) a coherent chain of reasoning between research question, literature review, methodology, results, and conclusion; e) replicability and generalizability; f) scrutiny and critique through open dissemination.” The principles are pivotal bases to delineate the indicators of research ability in general and the indicators are then specifically adapted in terms of CAR.

In Indonesia CAR is to be integrated into teacher professional development not only because it is believed to be effective but also because it is explicitly stipulated in the minister's instruction. Conducting CAR during the training is intended to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning process (a part of pedagogic competence) and to enhance professionalism (a part of professional competence). Beside the abovementioned legal basis, action research or collaborative research is considered to be a breakthrough in quantitative and qualitative paradigms in English language teaching (ELT) research. Hinkel (2005: 175-256) writes that action research (CAR) is possibly one of the most frequently used methods in ELT; the others are ethnography and ethnographic research, case study, quantitative research, classroom research. Singh (2006: 261) argues that action research (AR) is an objective oriented method aiming to improve and modify the current practices of a classroom in which the researcher, teacher or practitioner, study an ELT problem and attempt to find the solution to the problem. McThert's (in Singh, 2006:263) elucidates that AR is conducted by
individuals or groups to transform and improve and is characterized by: addressing practical problems in education; searching for practical solutions; conducted by a practitioner on his own problems; focusing on a breakthrough in current practices; and it is personal research. This argument meets the direction of a post-method era emphasizing the process of teaching and learning and how an individual teacher contributes to the success of ELT (Richards and Renandya, 2002:5). Nunan’s (1992) and Burns’s (1999) assertion on AR, in McKay (2008: 29-30), can be interpreted as an investigation carried out collaboratively by practitioners addressing their problems in order to change or to improve through evaluation and reflection. This understanding of AR is developed by Kemmis (2010: 12-20) who redefines it as critical participatory action research in the sense that it is to achieve ‘effective-historical consciousness’, it provides critical reflection individually and collectively, it opens ‘communicative space’, it intervenes to change the reality, it addresses current issues, and it eliminates inconducive elements and conditions.

The other key feature of AR is cycle. Richards and Farrel (2005: 171) define AR as a classroom research with the cyclic activities of problem or issue identification, data collection on the problem, strategy designing, strategy trying out, and effect analysis. The common model of the cyclic process in AR originates from Kemmis and McTaggart’s (1988) model of planning-acting-reflecting-observing-replanning-acting-observing-reflecting again and so on; a model that they themselves reinforced in 2005 (in Denos, et al., 2009) and acknowledged by Burns (2010: 7-8) that a cycle may continue and recur. Henning et al. (2009) put this cycle in a more general process of planning, collecting data, analyzing, and reflecting. The above assertions confirm the idea that AR is a cyclic process ending when the improvement achieved.

The characteristics of quality research and of CAR are modified to develop research ability to conduct CAR. They are the ability to: 1) differentiate between problems of ELT in general or research problems in ELT; 2) differentiate between problems or root of problems in ELT; 3) justify a research problem; 4) differentiate between the formulation of research problems in ELT in general or of research problems in CAR; 5) outline a relevant theoretical frame; 6) identify data and data sources based on the research problems; 7) identify relevant instruments to collect data; 8) predict possible answers or solutions to research problems; 9) predict possible conclusions based on research problems; 10) identify reasons to employ a cyclic research process; 11) identify reasons to move from one cycle to the next cycle in CAR; 12) identify differences between cycles; 13) knowing when to end the cyclic process in CAR; 14) identify reasons to have collaborators in CAR.

Constraints on Teachers’ Ability to Conduct Classroom Action Research

Participant-observation of the CAR session in PLPG carried out by the researcher as the instructor proved that the participants/teachers lacked the research skills required to conduct CAR. This limited their effort to achieve the target of the training, a valid CAR proposal. There were three main constraints on teachers’ ability to conduct CAR observed during the training. The first constraint was understanding the nature of English language teaching (ELT) problems feasible to be researched. The in-training teachers were hardly able to differentiate problems in ELT from the difficulties, let alone to deduce the root of the problems from the problems or symptoms. The second constraint dealt with maintaining the chain of reasoning of problem, literature review, research methodology, result, and conclusion. Most teachers perceive these elements as separate and thus fail to detect the
interrelatedness. The third constraint was the failure comprehend the methodological aspects and elements when designing CAR. For most teachers, research is an esoteric realm which tends to be avoided due to its complexity, rigorousness, and the amount of time required. Consequently, CAR is completely novel for many teachers in these trainings. Such novelty can increase psychological barriers which can contribute to their failure in obtaining the certificate.

The analysis of the data collected from ten instructors confirmed the abovementioned three main constraints deduced from participant-observation. Of the first categorized constraints on the nature of English language teaching (ELT) problems feasible to be researched, 95 percent of instructors believed that teachers are not able to differentiate between problems of ELT in general or research problems in ELT; 95 percent of instructors agreed that participants are not able to differentiate between problems or root of problems in ELT; 60 percent stated that teachers cannot identify the reasons to select a problem of CAR; and 80 percent stated that teachers are not able to differentiate between the formulation of research problems in ELT in general or of research problems in CAR. Of the second categorized constraints on maintaining the chain of reasoning of problem, literature review, research methodology, result, and conclusion, 60 percent of instructors stated that teachers are not able to identify the relevant theory in literature review; 90 percent stated that teachers cannot identify data and data source based on the research problems; 65 percent stated that teachers are not able to predict relevant instruments to collect data; 85 percent agreed that participants cannot predict possible answers or solutions to research problems; 75 percent believed that teachers are not able to predict possible conclusions based on research problems. Of the third categorized constraints on the comprehension of the methodological aspects and elements and plan the design of CAR, 70 percent of instructors believed that teachers cannot identify reasons to have a cyclic process in CAR; 90 percent believed that participants are not able to identify reasons to move from a cycle to the next cycle in CAR; 90 percent stated that teachers cannot identify differences between one cycle and other cycles; 40 percent believed that teachers cannot identify reasons to end the cyclic process in CAR; only 20 percent believed that the participants cannot identify reasons to have collaborators in CAR.

Important notes in the questionnaire from the instructors revealed the substantial problems underlying the constraints. The instructors noted that most of the training participants do not know what a research problem is, how it differs from a problem in ELT, and how to formulate a research problem from symptoms, difficulties, or problems they encounter in the classrooms. In one session of the training in an effort to train the participants to identify a research problem, when asked about the problems they encountered in ELT class, they said that they didn’t know how to teach listening and most students complained about how difficult listening class was. Then they came up with these research problems: How to teach listening?; How to improve students’ listening skill?; and What is the best way to teach listening? No participant could transform the problems into a CAR research problem though they had been exposed to the discussion of CAR, the proposal and the reports. It’s plausible that they are not able to identify feasible research problems due to their very little exposure to research in general; most don’t even recognize data, instrument, variable or focus, let alone methodological and technical aspects of CAR. This is in line with their very limited knowledge of English language teaching and learning realm; state-of-the-art ELT methodology. There is, however, another factor that is probably pertinent to the understanding of the problems feasible to be researched and is complained bout by all instructors—low proficiency of English.
Conclusion

It can be inferred that teachers are ill prepared to conduct CAR and lack the ability to: differentiate between problems of ELT in general or research problems in ELT and differentiate between problems or root of problems in ELT (95 percent of instructors affirmed this); identify reasons to move from one cycle to the next cycle in CAR, identify differences between cycles, and identify data and data sources based on the research problems (90 percent of instructors affirmed this); predict possible answers or solutions to research problems (85 percent of instructors confirmed this); differentiate between the formulation of research problems in ELT in general or of research problems in CAR (80 percent of instructors confirmed this); predict possible conclusions based on research problems (75 percent of instructors affirmed this); identify reasons to employ a cyclic research process (70 percent of instructors supported this); identify relevant instruments to collect data (65 percent of instructors acknowledged this); justify a research problem and outline a relevant theoretical frame (60 percent of instructors recognized this); knowing when to end the cyclic process in CAR (40 percent of instructors supported this); identify reasons to have collaborators in CAR (20 percent of instructors accepted this).

Reference