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Learning from Action Research Projects
Australia & Southeast Asia

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Enhancing English Teachers’ Ability to Conduct Classroom Action Research

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Abstract

Teachers are encouraged to develop their research skills to solve English learning problems. However, for most teachers research is an esoteric realm which tends to be avoided due to its complexity, rigor, and the amount of time required.

This study aimed to identify problems encountered by teachers in designing classroom action research in a multi-site classroom action research and co-researching project. The extent to which multi-site research and co-researching assisted in addressing some of the issues of English learning, and led to the improvement of teachers’ ability to conduct classroom action research, was also investigated.

The findings show that the problems encountered by teachers in designing classroom action research include: identifying researchable problems; formulating a title and the problem; and designing the plan to implement the intervention.

The problems of English learning potentially solved by multi-site classroom action research and co-researching using teachers as researchers, were listening and writing. The study improved teachers’ abilities to conduct classroom action research in the sense that they managed to design and implement a piece of empirical research.

Introduction

Classroom Action Research (CAR) is a compulsory course in Teacher Professional Training and Education (PLPG) at the State University of Jakarta since 2008. It was introduced to enhance the quality of teacher competence and as a requirement for the award of a professional teacher license.

The teachers in PLPG were incompetent to conduct CAR due to the following: an inability to understand the nature of English language teaching (ELT) problems feasible to be researched; difficulty reasoning through the problem, literature review, research methodology, results, and conclusion; and a failure to comprehend the methodological aspects and elements when designing CAR because of research complexity, rigor, and the amount of time required (Iskandar, 2012).

These observations confirm the investigation on the constraints of action research by McKerrow (Burns, 1999, p. 46) in the USA, UK, and Ireland in 1993. These constraints should be addressed with practice (more than a one-day course in PLPG), and action in which
the teachers are involved from scratch in identifying real problems feasible to be studied in CAR, and the writing of the research report. Co-researching and multi-site research are assumed to be effective ways to cope with the hurdles.

Research question and methodology

The research question is: ‘How does using co-researching and multi-site research methodology with English learning problems enhance teachers’ ability to conduct classroom action research (CAR)?’

The study seeks to find the problems encountered by teachers in designing CAR to solve English learning problems, and the extent to which co-researching and multi-site research assist in this process. Discussions were held with twelve junior high school teachers and English Department lecturers using CAR proposals and reports as data sources. Participant observation, focus group discussion (FGD), observation, and document study were used to collect the required data. The study was conducted from May to October 2013 in Jakarta.

Co-researching on multi-sites was used to improve teachers’ ability to conduct classroom research in English learning in twelve junior high schools: four schools in Rawamangun, East Jakarta; four schools in Tanjung Priok, North Jakarta; and four schools in Rawasari, Central Jakarta. Each location experienced three similar issues:

- To what extent do tailor-made listening materials promote English listening proficiency?
- To what extent does improving students’ English pronunciation promote English listening proficiency?
- To what extent does activating schenata promote English listening proficiency?

Co-researching

The co-researching comprises co-identifying, co-formulating, co-designing, co-reflecting, and co-redesigning as illustrated below.
Co-researching

Co-identifying
- Listing English learning problems
- Listing possible causes of the identified problems
- Separating researchable causes from unresearchable ones
- Selecting the main causes to be addressed

Co-formulating
- Stating the title, problem, and purpose of the study

Co-designing
- Designing the plan to implement the treatment to solve the problem

Co-reflecting
- Thinking carefully or evaluating the success of the treatment

Co-redesigning
- Designing the revised plan for treatment when the previous plan is unsuccessfully implemented to solve the problem

Research ability and classroom action 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, pp. 2-3), is characterised by:

- Significant questions.
- The relevance of research to theory.
- Relevant research methodology.
- A coherent chain of reasoning between research question, literature review, methodology, results, and conclusion.
- Replicability and generalisability.
- Scrutiny and critique through open dissemination.

Problems encountered by teachers designing classroom action research

Problems encountered by teachers in designing classroom action research to solve English learning problems include an inadequate capacity:

- To differentiate between problems of ELT in general or research problems in ELT.
- To differentiate between problems or root of problems in ELT.
- To identify the reasons to select a problem of CAR.
- To differentiate between the formulation of research problems in ELT in general or of research problems in CAR.
- To identify the relevant theory in the literature review.
- To identify data and data source based on the research problems.
- Capacity to predict relevant instruments to collect data.
- To predict possible answers or solutions to research problems.
- To predict possible conclusions based on research problems.
- To identify reasons to have a cyclic process in CAR.
- To identify reasons to move from one cycle to the next cycle in CAR.
- To identify differences between one cycle and other cycles.
- To identify reasons to end the cyclic process in CAR.
- To identify reasons to have collaborators in CAR.

In the beginning of the FGD, most 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. Very few participants could transform the problems into a CAR research problem even though they had been exposed to the discussion of CAR, the proposal and the reports. It is possible that they are not able to identify feasible research problems due to their lack of exposure to research in general. Most don’t recognise data, instruments, variable or focus, let alone methodological and technical aspects of CAR. There is, however, another factor that is probably pertinent to a person’s understanding of a problem’s appropriateness to be researched and is complained about by all instructors, low proficiency in English.

Issues in English learning can be potentially solved through co-researching and multi-site classroom action research

The issues are grouped on the basis of four language skills.

In **Listening**, the problems include:
- discriminating sounds
- distinguishing word stress and intonation
- understanding the meaning of a word
- understanding the meaning of a sentence
- distinguishing boundaries between words
- identifying names of person/ country/ language
- recognising word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.)
- understanding the grammar: tense, pluralisation, elliptical forms
- distinguishing literal and implied meanings
- recognising main topics
- getting the main idea
- getting supporting details
- inferring meaning
- deducing causes and effects

In **Speaking**, the problems include:
- pronouncing words including reduced forms of words/contraction
- using word stress and sentence intonation
- using word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.)
- using tense, agreement, plural forms, numbers
- using strategic devices-pauses, fillers, self-corrections

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• backtracking-to enhance the clarity of the message
• speaking fluently

In **Reading**, the problems constitute:

• understanding word meaning in context (including idiomatic meaning)
• distinguishing literal and implied meanings
• identifying subjects and verbs in sentences
• getting the meaning of a sentence
• getting the main idea
• understanding generic structure of texts
• inferring

In **Writing**, the problems range from:

• using grammatical sentences (tense, agreement, pluralisation), word class, word order
• using punctuation
• using cohesive devices
• achieving unity and coherency
• developing ideas, to
• writing a good paragraph

Out of the four groups of issues identified, Listening seems to be the one with potential to be solved through co-researching and multi-site classroom action research by teachers as researchers.

The problem of low proficiency of Listening may occur because of:

1. Inaccessible input, gaps between listening materials and students’ listening proficiency.
2. Deficiencies in phonology, inaccurate pronunciation of intelligible English.
3. Lack of knowledge of issues to be listened for.
Multi-site research issues in English learning

Co-identifying: low proficiency of listening

- Cause 1: inaccessible input; gap between listening materials and students' listening proficiency.
- Cause 2: deficiencies in phonology; inaccurate pronunciation of intelligible English
- Cause 3: uniformedness of texts to be listened for.

Co-formulating

- using tailor-made listening materials to promote listening proficiency (title, problem, purpose)
- improving students' pronunciation to promote listening proficiency (title, problem, purpose)
  (feature detection and metrical segmentation of segmental and suprasegmental)
- activating schemata to promote listening proficiency (title, problem, purpose)

Underlying principle: accessible input
Underlying principle: bottom up processing
Underlying principle: top down processing

Co-designing

- how tailor-made listening materials are developed to promote listening proficiency?
- how students' pronunciation is developed to promote listening proficiency?
- how activating schemata is developed to promote listening proficiency?

Co-reflecting

- a group of 4 researchers at 4 different sites/schools
- a group of 4 researchers at 4 different sites/schools
- a group of 4 researchers at 4 different sites/schools

Co-redesigning

- Plan 2 of cycle 2
- Plan 2 of cycle 2
- Plan 2 of cycle 2
Conclusion

The study generated the following findings.

First, the problems encountered by teachers in designing classroom action research to solve English learning problems are inadequate research experience, and lack of skills ranging from identifying feasible research problems to technicalities in conducting CAR.

Second, the problems of English learning potentially solved through co-researching and multi-site classroom action research using teachers as researchers, are identifiable as the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, it is indicated that listening is considered the most intricate and problematic one.

It can be concluded that co-researching and multi-site research can improve a teacher’s ability to conduct classroom action research in English learning. The teachers design and carry out classroom action research together with their colleagues to cope with real problems they encounter in their classrooms.

References


