
ACTION RESEARCH: ANSWERING THE NEVER-ENDING QUESTION OF EFFECTIVENESS IN TEACHING

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Abstract: This paper aims to identify different issues and factors which might establish higher efficiency in the teaching process. It relates to the aspect of self-criticism and student-involvement in the learning process and emphasizes student-centered teaching and self-reflection. The term action research itself refers to *various techniques and procedures that teachers might use or implement in order to improve their methods of teaching, their theories and/or approaches.*

According to Richards and Farrell (2005), action research refers to teacher-conducted classroom research that seeks to clarify and resolve practical teaching issues and problems. The terms refer to two dimensions of this kind of activity: the word *research* in “action research” refers to a systematic approach to carrying out investigations and collecting information that is designed to illuminate an issue or a problem and to improve classroom practice. The word *action* refers to taking practical action to resolve classroom problems.” (2005, pg. 171)

Accordingly, the key questions of the case study are: 1. *How am I teaching and am I effective?* 2. *How can I receive input regarding my teaching methodology?* 3. *Can I actually change my personal theory and how can my students help me change?* Participants in the case study are 50 third year students of IBU, of three different fields of study: English language teaching, Psychology and Psychological counseling and guidance. All three departments attend the common course entitled Educational methodology, which I teach. Participants were asked to provide personal assumptions regarding: the course (the content), the methodology of teaching (techniques, approaches etc.), the materials (coursebook and additional resources) and the teacher (attitude, proficiency, knowledge etc.) by filling in a questionnaire of 20 statements (5 per each area, which will be added in the Appendix). On a scale of strongly agree-neutral-strongly disagree, students were asked to rank each specific statement according to their overall impressions. They were also advised to add additional remarks and suggestions as well. The main aim of gathering such data and information is receiving input on issues which teachers encounter on a daily basis. Furthermore, student-involvement in decision-making and providing suggestions are crucial in teaching nowadays. The results, together with additional theory and practice will be further elaborated in the paper. Future recommendations and implications will also be provided as well.

Keywords: self-reflection, student-involvement, action research, input, implications, student-centered etc.

INTRODUCTION

These people might not have changed the world, but they have changed their worlds. Is that not the same thing?
Kemmis and McTaggart, (2005, pg. 600)

The term *action research* refers to various techniques and procedures that teachers might use or implement in order to improve their methods of teaching, their theories and/or approaches. The basis of this research consists of evaluation and self-criticism and is usually conducted due to several reasons: the matter of self-improvement, the matter of self-change in teaching, because we wish to invest time and effort in our teaching methodology and because we might feel as if something is not going as planned. As teachers, we are aware of situations where the plan does not reach our expectations and the material does not suite our learners for the fact. Maintaining and setting a balance among course requirements, materials, students’ interest and our own theory of teaching, can at times “collapse” and make us feel unworthy. In order to test our efficiency and in order to be up-to-date with current changes in teaching, we can implement action research. Kemmis and McTaggart (1989) describe action research as: “a form of ‘self-reflective enquiry’ undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out.” (1989, pg. 2) According to Richards and Farrell (2005), action research refers to teacher-conducted classroom research that seeks to clarify and resolve practical teaching issues and problems. The terms refer to two dimensions of this kind of activity: the word *research* in “action research” refers to a systematic approach to carrying out investigations and collecting information that is designed to illuminate an issue or a problem and to improve classroom practice. The word *action* refers to taking practical action to resolve classroom problems.” (2005, pg. 171)

Harmer (2007) states:

“action research is the name given to a series of procedures teachers can engage in, perhaps because they wish to improve aspects of their teaching, or, alternatively, because they wish to evaluate the success and/or appropriacy of certain activities and procedures. Teachers sometimes embark on action research because there is a problem that is worrying them and they want to try to decide what to do about it. In all of these cases they gather data to enable them to make decisions about what they or their students do in class.” (2007, pg. 414)

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND DISCUSSION

The paper aims to present ways of implementing action research on a daily basis and also aims at presenting the outcomes of such research. It therefore attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How am I teaching and am I effective?
2. How can I receive input regarding my teaching methodology?
3. Can I actually change my personal theory and how can my students help me change?

A matter of discussion is the issue of “how often” and “if ever” we self-reflect on the teaching/learning process and as so, make needed changes accordingly. In my lectures of educational methodology, a key issue is the question “is teaching equivalent to learning?” and if so, how can it be measured? My students usually reply that this is dependent on the teacher and that successful learning only takes place when the teacher creates a learning atmosphere in the class. They relate a percentage of 70/30 (teacher/student) knowledge and learning. My reply surprises them. I imply that their answer would mean that all I have said to them during class has been learnt, and that they are fully and actively engaged in the lesson to the extent where they are not even thinking of their break. They smile knowing that they cannot be 100% active and involved and that of course, they think of other things as well. When I continue making a different balance, a 90%/10% or even 5% of learning that actually takes place, they see my point. This comparison relates to the first question I have posed above: “*How am I teaching and am I effective?*” The realistic point of view would be accepting the fact that only 5% of learning actually takes place in class and that achieving a higher percentage would really mean having teaching experience and a very good group of learners. However, to not be discouraging, I highly recommend anonymous feedback from the learners on the manner of teaching with additional insights on what should be changed (if needed). The whole procedure of events follows a pre-planned strategy or cycle which consists of identifying the issue(s) we wish to further investigate. The issue(s) might be investigating learners’ interests and what they find motivating to investigating our manner of teaching and the materials we are using. Accordingly, we formulate questions which would gather our data, analyze the same results and decide on how to implement the changes according to the obtained results. Therefore, the first and foremost concern would be *identifying the problem or the question of relevance*. During my years of teaching experience, I have conducted different types of action research, be it an anonymous response and feedback from my learners regarding a course or the material, to identifying the importance of a certain course and implementing it in my teaching. This reflection is not time-consuming nor is it something that we cannot manage to do. It takes only 10-15minutes of our time and can be conducted whenever needed i.e. when we wish to ask for feedback, when we sense that students are not getting the most of our lectures or when they seem dissatisfied. Accordingly, it can be implemented at the beginning of the course, during the middle or even at the end of a semester. I prefer conducting it on all three levels. The results and feedback provide me with insights on many aspects. Additionally, it proves to my learners that I am concerned about the two-way aspect of teaching/learning and that they are at the center of my concern. Developing student-centered learning is the basis to overall success nowadays and involving them in the decision-making procedure proves to be quite stimulating as well. Students are motivated and eager to give suggestions and to give feedback. Apart from this, students learn to consider “criticism” as normal and with positive effects rather than being intimidated by the same. Another focus would now be the question of “*How can I receive input regarding my teaching methodology?*” This is a never-ending issue and concern of teachers everywhere. The responsibility of teaching in today’s world of higher accountability in education and its’ demands, are at times above our circumstances and even training. Innovative methodology and instructional technology and the new trends in teaching have created a certain burden and a feeling of unworthiness among teachers. The E-system of blogs, online forums, online teaching and classes, interactive white-boards, technology in teaching etc. require not only circumstances but expertise as well. The learning process has also changed. All of a sudden, games have taken over frontal lecturing and teaching and students are imposing that they wish to partake in fun activities only and that they no longer wish to read or partake in literature courses for the matter. (This is a true story of every other Literature teacher in the region, including my former colleagues and colleagues). Therefore, the pressure of receiving feedback on the matter of our teaching methodology is quite high. However, in order to set some grounds and in order to get an overall impression from our learners, implementing a form of self-evaluation is more than needed. Usually, we tend to ask for expertise and advice from our colleagues or teachers which are teaching in the same field as us;

asking from a colleague to observe a lesson of ours and even attending a colleague’s class for observation can have an impact on our methodology and theory of teaching. Also, internal evaluation and assessment from peers, including the institution can also help. Comments from students and staff can help in the implementation of the needed changes. At International Balkan University, Skopje, all teachers and staff are internally evaluated twice a year i.e. each semester (Fall and Spring). The results of the evaluation are presented to staff individually, along with students’ comments and feedback. This procedure provides teachers, students and the institution with approximate results: it provides teachers and staff with feedback regarding their teaching methodology on the individual basis; provides the institution with information regarding appointed staff and their overall success and lastly, includes students in the process of teacher and course evaluation. The three-effect feedback is only one form of evaluation that can be implemented in the process. A last concern in this area is *“Can I actually change my personal theory and how can my students help me change?”* Even during our studies when we are in the stages of becoming teachers, we learn and are taught that there is no best method nor approach and that each and every teacher has a different perspective and theory of teaching; we are taught that we might have similar approaches, but that they can never be the same. I tell the same thing to my students on a daily basis and imply the theory of *authenticity* i.e. being a different teacher. I wish to have a double-effect with this: 1). to teach them that each teacher is different and this means that their approach might be different as well (and that this is part of methodology); and 2). to make them aware of the issue of comparison i.e. to allow them to choose what to keep and what not in terms of the methodology they prefer. I also imply that teachers’ theories can change by time. This may result due to institutional expectations and policies; the course matter itself and due to a specific group of learners (not every plan works for all). Whatever the case and cause be, a good teacher is one who is confident in his/her choice of methodology, materials and personal theory.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

Participants in the case study are 50 third year students of IBU, of three different fields of study: English language teaching, Psychology and Psychological counseling and guidance. All three departments attend the common course entitled Educational methodology, which I teach. Participants were asked to provide personal assumptions regarding: the course (the content), the methodology of teaching (techniques, approaches etc.), the materials (coursebook and additional resources) and the teacher (attitude, proficiency, knowledge etc.) by filling in a questionnaire of 20 statements (5 per each area, see Appendix). On a scale of strongly agree-neutral-strongly disagree, students were asked to rank each specific statement according to their overall impressions. They were also advised to add additional remarks and suggestions as well.

OBTAINED RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results presented below, which are divided into 4 sections: the course, the course book, the teacher and the methodology, assert that the overall impression of the students regarding the detailed description is positive more than negative. Regarding the course, the overall impression implies that students find it interesting and not difficult to understand, they agree that many resources are used and disagree that the course is complicated. Regarding the course book and materials, they disagree that the level is difficult to understand and agree that it is effective, however they seem to imply it has too much information, which would normally suggest for a new updated book and materials. Regarding the teacher, the provided feedback suggests that the teacher has good qualities and expertise in teaching and that they are satisfied. The last section regarding the methodology similarly asserts that the methodology which is used is effective and at the same time motivating.

Table1. A display of results

The course:	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	TOTAL
Is interesting for me.	7	19	5	2	1	48
Is difficult to understand.		1	11	33	3	48
Has a variety of resources.	1	31	12	3	1	48
Is not interesting.	1	4	5	25	13	48

Is complicated.		3	10	26	9	48
The coursebook:						
Is difficult.	1	1	3	40	3	48
Is effective.	5	33	9	1		48
Has too much information.	6	29	7	5	1	48
Provides only detailed info.	2	27	7	11	1	48
Needs to be changed.	3	6	10	29		48
The teacher:						
Is prepared	39	8	1			48
Is not prepared			1	10	37	48
Has sufficient content knowledge.	11	36	1			48
Is kind and supporting.	14	30	4			48
Is authoritative.	8	29	9	2		48
The methodology:						
The approaches used are very effective.	3	41	4			48
The tasks are engaging.	2	37	7	2		48
The teaching is motivating.	6	36	5	1		48
The teaching is boring.		1	5	30	12	48
The strategies used are irrelevant.		9	5	27	7	48

CONCLUSION

The case study was implemented on the basis of discovering the main assumptions that students had regarding the course as a whole i.e. with all of the consisting elements. The total number of participants was 50, out of which, 2 student responses (questionnaires) were taken as irrelevant, due to questions not being answered as requested and due to the inconsistency in responses, by which, only 48 student responses were examined. The majority of the students replied that the course, the teacher and the methodology were appropriate, however, they asserted that the course book was difficult and provided too much information. This provided feedback regarding the materials and resources, which need to be updated and changed. The feedback also provided insights on the research questions that were previously posed. Regarding the first question on the manner of teaching and the effectiveness, the feedback was positive, asserting that “no change was needed.” Regarding the aspect of receiving input regarding the teaching methodology, the case study provided a simple manner of receiving input that can be implemented on a daily basis. The personal theory of teaching can of course be changed with the help of student feedback. In this respect, students are not only involved in the process of decision-making, but are also taught how to critically examine classroom instruction and how to apply observation when needed in their future. They are witnesses of the process of “learning by doing” and “improving by reflecting.”

[Action researchers] regard their research practices as constructed and open to reconstruction. They do not regard the research process as the application of fixed and preformed research techniques to the particular ‘applied’ problem with which they are concerned. On the contrary, they regard their research practices as a matter of

borrowing, constructing, and reconstructing research methods and techniques to throw light on the nature, processes, and consequences of the particular object they are studying . . . transforming themselves as researchers, transforming their research practices, and transforming the practice settings of their research. (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005, pg. 575)

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Limitations of the case study might be: the number of participants and the tool which was used. Also, the feedback might not be honest and the responses might not be sufficient. However, action research is more than needed in our everyday teaching lives. We should keep in mind the characteristics of action research and implement it whenever possible. Accordingly, Richards and Farell (2005) provide the following characteristics as a reminder of the basis of action research:

- Its' primary goal is to improve teaching and learning in schools and classrooms and it is conducted during the process of regular classroom teaching.
- It is usually small-scale and is intended to help resolve problems rather than simply be research for its own sake.
- It can be carried out by an individual teacher or in collaboration with other teachers. (2005, pg. 171)

With this concluded, further research in the field is more than needed. I highly recommend action research as a tool of evaluating and testing one's efficiency in teaching.

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APPENDICES

The course:	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	TOTAL
Is interesting for me.						
Is difficult to understand.						
Has a variety of resources.						
Is not interesting.						
Is complicated.						
The coursebook:						
Is difficult.						
Is effective.						
Has too much information.						
Provides only detailed info.						
Needs to be changed.						
The teacher:						
Is prepared						
Is not prepared						
Has sufficient content knowledge.						
Is kind and supporting.						
Is authoritative.						
The methodology:						
The approaches used are very effective.						
The tasks are engaging.						
The teaching is motivating.						
The teaching is boring.						
The strategies used are irrelevant.						