

The use of simple yet effective action research in the EFL language classroom

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In recent times, action research has become a popular research method in the English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) world (Burns, 2010). However, the image of action research can be seen as a very time intensive and laborious experience. Not all action research, however, has to be long or arduous in order for it to be effective. Using simple action research based principles in the EFL classroom can help assess student needs and enable better understanding of students both on an individual and group level, therefore influencing class preparation (Nunan, 1989; Wallace, 1998). Additionally, it can help accumulate a wealth of data that can be used for further research.

For those unfamiliar with the term, action research is 'simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.162). Burns (2010) describes it as a self-reflective, critical exploration into one's own teaching. The four steps involved are Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect. It cannot be overstated that using these four principles, even simplistically in a class, can have a profound effect in acquiring valuable knowledge about the students enabling the teacher to change or enhance certain aspects of the class. For example, it can help the educator understand what type of students the teacher is dealing with and accord-

ingly tailor the class or certain activities in a way so the students can get the most out of the class. In addition to action research being a very useful resource for enabling teachers to reflect on their classroom and teaching environment it also enables students to reflect on their learning.

Both authors of this paper like to find out about their students by using a simple questionnaire (appendix 1) in the first class, mid semester and then in the final class. However, at times they use questionnaires more than three times in a semester. They like to have the questionnaires prepared both in Japanese and English but for higher level classes, an English-only version usually suffices. The use of these questionnaires can help understand such factors as; student attitudes towards English and the class, what motivates them in order to maximise student output in class, what type of personalities the teacher is dealing with, and potential problems or factors the teacher should be aware of. For example, knowing some information about the students can help with understanding their study habits in class. With regards to homework and attendance, students who live alone and work to support themselves or students who are in clubs may not be as active or present as often as students who do not have these pressures. Therefore, the use of questionnaires can not only help the teacher understand the situation of the students but the needs of the class as a whole. This can assist the teacher when preparing for the following academic year as well.

In addition to these questionnaires, students write in a learning journal every week on the class in English about what they learned and expand on what they thought of the class (appendix 2). This helps them reflect on their own progress while also being a valuable source of data as the teacher can follow their progress and read their attitudes and thoughts on the lesson they have just completed. The use and collection of learning journals can also be a valuable data resource for future research. The two data collection methods outlined are only a guide and the questions have changed over the years. It has been found that expanding on these and thinking about what the teacher would like to know about each class has helped with teaching greatly.

For teachers who have never experienced or conducted action research, there are some prudent rules they can use that will assist.

Edwards and Willis (2005) suggest ten tips for simple research.

1. Keep it small and simple.
2. Keep it relevant, to both you and your learners.
3. Have a clear aim (a specific question you want to answer, a clearly identified problem you want to solve, or a hypothesis that you want to test).
4. Talk: discuss what you are doing with colleagues, sound out ideas with someone who has already done some classroom research.
5. Read, especially reports of previous research into your topic.
6. Write: keep notes; write down all your ideas and observations; keep a diary or journal.
7. Listen to your learners; ask for their views and include these as part of your data.
8. Be honest. It is rare for research to go exactly to plan: methods may not work and results are often not what you expected, but don't be afraid to say so. You and others can learn from your mistakes and surprises. Even the unexpected is valuable.
9. Remember there is no 'right answer': research involves interpretation of facts, so two people with the same information could arrive at two different conclusions.

10. Share your findings with others: tell colleagues, give talks, publish (Edwards & Willis, p.259).

Here is some recommended reading which will help you to learn more about simple action research.

- Burns, A. (2010). *Doing Action Research in Language Teaching*. Routledge.
- Edwards, C. & Willis, J. (2005). *Teachers exploring tasks in English Language Teaching*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wallace, M. (1998). *Action research for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Even starting very small can bear fruit when researching your students and class environment. It can lead to discovering information vital to the dynamics of a classroom, which is why using simple action research can be very beneficial for professional growth as a teacher.

References

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Appendix 1-Student Questionnaires

1st class questionnaire

- 1) What are your interests/ hobbies?
- 2) Are you in a club in this university? If yes, which club are you in?
- 3) What was your favorite class in high school?
- 4) Did you like English class in high school? / Do you like English?
- 5) Have you been to another country? If yes, where and for how long?
- 6) Do you live alone or with your family?
- 7) What do you hope to achieve from this class?

Mid semester questionnaire

- 1) Are you happy / satisfied with this class? (Please explain)
- 2) Are you learning a lot of English words and phrases?
- 3) Are you trying hard in class?
- 4) Are you happy / satisfied with your teacher?
- 5) Look at your journal. What was the most difficult lesson so far?
- 6) What do you want to change about this class?

Final class questionnaire

- 1) What are the good points and bad points of this class? (Please explain)
- 2) Look at your journal.
 - a) Which lessons were the most fun? (For example, week 3, shopping abroad....)
 - b) Which lessons were the most difficult?
 - c) Which lessons were the easiest?
 - d) Which lessons were the most boring?
- 3) Has your motivation for learning English increased or decreased?
- 4) Any advice or other comments?

Appendix 2-Learning Journals

CLASS JOURNAL Name: Date:

Today's task: _____

Pre- Task (What words, grammar, phrases you will need for this lesson)

Task notes (Words, phrases, what did you talk about?)

What new words and phrases/grammar did you learn today?