



Exploring EFL pre-service teachers' experiences of doing collaborative action research through self-report techniques

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Abstract

Action research is an effective professional development tool that promotes inquiry, reflection, and problem-solving that foments action or change. This study explored EFL pre-service teachers' experiences of doing collaborative action research during their practicum. Forty-nine EFL pre-service teachers enrolled in a practicum course answered two open-ended questions about the challenges and difficulties in doing collaborative action research and the benefits of collaborative action research in professional development. Data was analyzed and reported based on the two questions asked. Findings revealed that action research improved the EFL pre-service teachers' teaching practice, self-directed professional growth, and promoted collaboration and community building. Nevertheless, some EFL pre-service teachers indicated that they lacked action research knowledge. Suggestions are provided for promoting action research engagement within language education contexts.

Keywords: Action research, Collaborative Research, EFL Pre-service Teacher Professional, Development, Language Education

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Introduction

One way to improve teaching and learning in schools is to involve teachers in doing research in their classrooms. Some educational researchers have found action research to be an effective professional development tool that promotes inquiry, reflection, and problem-solving that results in action or change (Levin & Rock, 2003). Action research, as defined by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), requires teachers to engage in a cycle of questioning, planning, acting, observing, reflecting, replanning, and often further questioning. Carson (1990) also identified planning, acting, observing, and reflecting as significant components of teacher action research because this process sets critical, reflective action research apart from ordinary problems.

There are several benefits to using action research, including improving teaching practices and student performance, as well as fostering collegiality. Exposure to action research must be established early in the pre-service years for teachers to be prepared to use action research in their classrooms (Odhiambo, 2010). Action research enables and supports pre-service teachers as they plan lessons, act in their practicum, observe, and reflect on their experiences. The phases and development of action research are often highly personal, causing many involved in its promotion to face challenges related to this individualized nature (Ryan, 2017). Educationalists believe that action research enhances both teacher research literacy and the reflective and analytical capabilities of pre-service teachers (Tuhyna & Kamynin, 2022). Initiating pre-service teachers into an action research approach is not only important from a purist theoretical point of view but also an effective way to prepare them for the complex role they will face in today's world (Kosnik & Beck, 2000).

In recent years, action research has become increasingly popular in second language teaching circles. Language teachers in many countries have heard about action research, through formal study, or in-service teacher education (Burns, 2010). Burns (1999) pointed out that collaborative action research helps English language teachers seek new directions for their professional development because of the processes and steps in collaborative action research, methods for data collection integrated with classroom activities, and ways of analyzing action research data.



Burns (2010) adapted an action research cycle from Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), major authors in this field. She created a model of action research for language teachers which consists of four steps: 1) Planning, in this phase teachers identify a problem or issue and develop a plan of action to bring about improvements in a specific area of the research context, 2) Action, the plan is carefully considered, which involves some deliberate interventions put into the teaching plan over an agreed time, 3) Observation, this phase involves teachers systematically observing the effects of the action and documenting the context, actions, and opinions of those involved. It is a data collection phase where teachers use 'open-eyed' and 'open-minded' tools to collect information about what is happening, and 4) Reflection, at this point, teachers reflect on, evaluate, and describe the effects of the action in order to make sense of what has happened.

A number of studies (Alhebaishi, 2017; Kasula, 2015; Kizilaslan & Leutwyler, 2012; Levin & Rock, 2003; Odhiambo, 2010; Sugiyama et al., 2020; Tuchyna & Kamynin, 2022) examined the results of conducting action research during field experiences and practicums. Tuchyna and Kamynin (2022) studied the features of the process of developing students' research competence while studying for a bachelor's and master's degree. The described model appeared due to the implementation of the new national curriculum in methods of teaching English as a foreign language. Kasula (2015) incorporated action research in TESOL programs. Through the action research methodology, the researchers could improve the classroom environment and bring insight into current research in the field of second language learning by grounding the action research in current theory. Alhebaishi (2017) introduced action research to EFL pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum. The researchers found that conducting action research increased EFL pre-service teachers' awareness of the problem investigated. They learned when and how to use L1 in the classrooms. Sugiyama et al. (2020) investigated how pre-service teachers' experiences of conducting action research in a teacher education program affect their teaching in their individual classroom context and their ability for self-development. The analysis of the data indicated that their action research experience had an impact on their daily teaching, especially on their reflective practices.

The purpose of this paper was to explore EFL pre-service teachers' experiences of doing collaborative action research during their practicum, focusing on the challenges and



difficulties in doing collaborative action research, and the benefits of collaborative action research in professional development.

Method

1. Participants

The participants in this study were 49 EFL pre-service teachers enrolled in a practicum course. Ages ranged from 21-24, with twenty-eight being female and twenty-one being male. Prior to the teaching practicum, all the participants have completed courses in research in education and principles of second language teaching. All of them were placed in their cooperating schools to complete their practicum in the final year of their program under the supervision of a schoolteacher and their instructor.

2. Data collection and analysis

Pre-service teachers formulated a plan of action prior to the practicum, implemented their plans, collected data, and reported them during their practicum. As they moved into the analysis phase, the instructor monitored their work carefully and closely, if this appeared advisable. At the end of the practicum, they were asked to complete two open-ended questions. The participants' answers were analyzed and reported according to the two questions.

Findings

The researchers present the questions asked from the open-ended questions and discuss the answers given by the EFL pre-service teachers.

1. What are the challenges and difficulties in doing research?

All the EFL pre-service teachers were aware of the difficulties of phase two of data collection. They all agreed that this phase was the most difficult because in this phase, they had to design the intervention plans carefully based on data collected in the first phase. Some of them wrote:



It was quite hard for me to develop the lesson plans due to the unpredictability of this phase.

I think the second phase is tough, fortunately, I recorded a video during the first phase that helped me create activities that could solve the problem which occurred at the first phase.

I struggled to find ways to solve the problems for some time, then I tried getting feedback by interviewing students after class. Finally, I could create the action plan and new way of teaching.

I had a hard time creating the lesson plans for the second cycle. Luckily, my two colleagues helped me a lot. We worked collaboratively during reflection step.

Teachers wishing to conduct research within their classrooms, however, often face a range of problems, particularly due to a lack of expertise or skills in research, which has a secondary effect, causing further problems. Research designed and conducted by teachers new to research is likely to have problems defining the focus or problem and collecting and analyzing data.

In this study, some EFL pre-service teachers indicated that they lacked knowledge of action research. They encountered problems during the data collection intended to provide evidence of the intervention. They also experienced challenges in analyzing and interpreting both qualitative and quantitative data in relation to the previously collected data. The following are some answers to this question.

Experienced doing action research, I realize that I am new to action research. I think I need to learn more about action research methods.

I don't know much about how to collect and analyze data in each cycle. I know that action research is important for teacher profession. I think I may want or need more explicit examples of how action research looks.



I promise! Next time before I begin doing action research, I have to make sure that I understand everything about action research. I don't want to get lose any more.

All EFL pre-service teachers realized that the main goal of conducting action research was to change or modify some of the teaching practices in order to increase the effectiveness of student learning. They found that although action research equipped them with research skills, enhanced their understanding of classroom complexity, and enabled them to solve problems resulting from teaching practices, action research processes were time-consuming. Thus, it is difficult for them to conduct action research in addition to the demands of their practicum.

Some of them wrote:

I spent three months to create three cycles. I attempted to change the culture of learning however, I have not been successful in achieving the target, especially increasing students' speaking skills. I think I need more time.

I conducted three cycles to improve students' listening, almost all of my students did not improve. I think I need sufficient time to devote to listening practice in the classroom.

My action research lasted three months and I found that some of my students' reading still not getting improved. I need one or two years to find out ways in making learning more effective. Change cannot happen overnight!

2. What are the benefits of action research in teaching?

For this question, the researchers collected and analyzed the data. The themes that emerged from the analysis include improving teaching practices, fostering empowerment and professional development, and building stronger collaboration and community building.



2.1 Improvement of Teaching Practices

All pre-service teachers indicated that action research allowed them to systematically investigate their own teaching methods and student learning that could lead to improving instructional strategies and better student outcomes. They realized that action research is a valuable tool for improving their teaching practices. It involved a cycle of inquiry, where they identified a problem, planned a strategy, acted upon it, observed the results, and reflected on the effectiveness of their actions. This process could lead to a better understanding of how students learn language that could help to make informed decisions to enhance teaching approaches, adapt strategies to meet the specific needs of students, and foster more effective learning. The following are pre-service teachers' responses to this question.

Action research helps me know about the students' needs and how I can do the best to meet them. As a future teacher, I bet I would use this research method to improve my teaching.

Experienced in doing action research, I think my problem-solving skills have improved a lot. During cycle one I observed that my students were getting bored. They did not want to participate in listening class. I used competitive games to motivate them. I found that games could be making the lessons more fun and engaging so it feels less like a lesson and more like an activity.

My students would like to speak but they felt they lacked confidence in speaking. I have found that cooperative learning emerged as one of the main factors to promote students' confidence in speaking English. I used snowball discussion, talking chips and a three-step interview. Some students showed their brave feeling to join the activities because they were with their friends, however, some of them still felt shy to speak. They needed more time to practice.

My action research consisted of three cycles. I used story telling pictures to improve students' speaking skills. During the reflection of the first cycle, I



found that my students could not speak fluently. They pause frequently when they speak, they often stumbled for words. I observed that they felt frustrated, anxious and discouraged. Some lost their motivation to learn English with me. I tried to solve this problem by training speaking strategies such as use body language, make eye contact, using pause fillers. I also provided more time to practice. Unfortunately, almost all of my students could not tell story fluently. I put a lot of effort into my teaching practice but my students' speaking skills did not improve as I expected. It's difficult for EFL students to improve their speaking skills.

2.2 Empowerment and Professional Development

All EFL pre-service teachers indicated that engaging in action research fostered a sense of ownership over their professional growth. Action research process allowed them to become reflective practitioners and active participants, which could enhance their confidence and competence. They also agreed that action research was a tool that enabled them to improve their teaching practices and make their work more professional. Some of them wrote the following in response to this question.

From doing action research, I become an active producer of knowledge, I mean, I could create activities in order to solve the problems in each cycle.

I think I have changed my teaching styles a lot since I have been involved in action research.

Action research allowed me to show myself the importance and value of my knowledge as a teacher.

Action research increases my personal learning includes the development of systematic work and higher order questioning, analyzing data and generating evidence. I have also become aware of the benefits of belonging to a collaborative network of action researchers who have contributed to my professional and personal knowledge.



2.3 Collaboration and Community Building

Almost all EFL pre-service teachers felt that the collaborative learning experience was highly rewarding. They shared and supported each other, which could lead to a more innovative teaching environment. Some of them mentioned that their questioning and analytical skills improved as a result of carrying out action research. Some of them wrote:

My research participants and myself asked ourselves: 'What is happening here?' Through such questioning, interpreting what happened in the classroom and reflection I know that my practice has improved.

Having my colleagues observed my classroom and gave constructive feedback helped me to have a chance to learn from others' experiences.

The collaborative learning experience is very rewarding. The knowledge we created was based on the collaborative effort of all the participants.

Collaboration was very beneficial and I gained a new sense of the effort and commitment required to develop and maintain a relationship.

Engaging in collaborative action research, I have learned more about myself as a teacher, my students, my role and responsibilities as teachers.

During reflection phase, I learned to communicate more effectively, and also learned how to give feedback and suggestions.

Collaborative action research improved my relationship with my students and created a positive classroom atmosphere because I listened to my students' voice. After action phase, we tried to share knowledge and learn ways of improving learning. After action phase, we tried to share knowledge and learn ways of improving learning. Now I understand that the relationship is not between one being all-knowing and the other all receiving.



Discussion and Implications

The aim of this study is to explore pre-service teachers' experiences of action research during their practicum. Forty-nine EFL pre-service teachers responded to two open-ended questions, including: 1) What are the challenges and difficulties in doing research? and 2) What are the benefits of action research in teaching? The results established from this research revealed that the EFL pre-service teachers had problems collecting data in phase two. They also lacked knowledge of action research. In addition, they realized that action research processes were time-consuming; thus, it was difficult for them to conduct action research due to the time limitations of their practicum. In terms of the benefits of action research in teaching, action research improved the EFL pre-service teachers' teaching practice, self-directed professional growth, and promoted collaboration and community building. This result is confirmed by several studies, which all agree that action research affected teachers' professional development as well as improved their teaching practice (Aga, 2024; Kasula, 2015; Martell, 2014; Saeb et al., 2021; Sugiyama et al., 2020). McKernan (2007) pointed out that teachers confronted their fears because of their lack of research knowledge. In this study, some EFL pre-service teachers indicated that they lacked action research knowledge. This result aligns with Shanmugam and Lee's (2017) findings that teachers' lack of research skills leads to misconceptions on the meaning of action research. Moreover, the lack of such skills reduced their confidence and discouraged them from conducting action research. The findings hold implications for the field of language education. Keeping in mind the fact that the current pre-service teacher curriculum should be developed based on the research findings. The responsibility should be shouldered by teacher educators. Action research should receive serious attention in the research courses in the teacher training programs so that prospective teachers are adequately equipped with specialized knowledge and practical skills to confidently engage in doing action research in their contexts.



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