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Action Research and Continuous Professional Development

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Abstract

Action research (AR) can be considered an integral part of teachers' continuous professional development (CPD). Also known as practitioner-based research, AR is a kind of scientific investigation which allows teachers to take a critical stance towards their own practice and use the result of self-investigation to improve their classroom teaching practice. The need for AR in the language classroom is felt in many parts of the worlds, especially in countries such as Bangladesh where English language teaching practice has not been successful in spite of the introduction of a number of changes in the curriculum and classroom teaching methods. This paper, therefore, explores the theoretical and practical aspects of AR, its relation with CPD, and the ways in which AR can be employed in the second language programs of Bangladesh.

1 Introduction

Action Research (AR), also known as practitioner-based research, has emerged as a valuable means for teachers' professional development. It is often regarded as a 'practice –changing practice' (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012); as an approach to research, it allows teachers and practitioners to solve problems and generate knowledge (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). Although it gained popularity in the late 1980s, John Dewy wrote about the "researching teacher" in the 1930s (1933, 1938) and stressed the need for teachers' active participation in contributing knowledge to the teaching profession. AR is now seen to hold great value as, in this scientific investigation, teachers act both as researchers, as well as users of information that results from the investigation. In simple terms, AR is a practical way of investigating one's own teaching practice to find out whether it is what the teacher likes it to be. In second language education, AR is more relevant to classroom activities than addressing social problems related with language teaching. At the heart of AR is the notion of a teacher as a self-critical, reflective, inquiring practitioner (Burns, 2010). Since teachers take a critical stance towards their own professional practice, many think that there is a direct link between AR and teachers' professional growth and development (Hine, 2013). A dire need for professional development is felt in many countries like Bangladesh where despite several initiatives by the government in the last few decades, English language teaching practice still lags behind. Although AR is widely practiced in school settings, it can prove to be an effective means for Bangladeshi language teachers and practitioners at any level to carry on their continuing professional development (CPD). This paper, thus, focuses on the theoretical and practical aspects of AR, its relation to CPD, and the ways in which it can be introduced in the second language programs of Bangladesh.

2 What is Action Research?

Burns (2013) analyzed the concept of AR by dividing it into two modes of activity – 'action' and 'research'. In the context of teaching, this action is mostly located in the classrooms, schools or the educational institution itself and involves some sort of interventions into processes that elicit desired improvement or change. The 'research' involves systematic observation and inquiry into one's own practice to find out the rationale for the desired change and improvement. So, AR in teacher education is basically a classroom-based research in which "participants in a given social situation [a language class] are themselves centrally involved in a systematic process of inquiry arising from their own practical concerns" (Burns, 2005, p. 241). The purpose of carrying out AR is not mainly to fulfill a thesis requirement or to publish a journal article but to improve a teacher's own understanding of the teaching learning process (Brown, 2015).

Again, self-reflection is central to AR as action researchers conduct enquiry into their own classroom situation. Thus, one of the major concerns of action researchers is to find out the 'problems' in their teaching situations. Once they identify a problem, they follow systematic techniques of research with the intent of finding out information that will help them to bring changes and, possibly, improvement in their teaching situation: AR attempts to narrow the gap between the ideal (how things can be done most effectively) and the real (how things are done actually) in the social (e.g. in the classroom) situation (Ferrance, 2000). To sum up, Arnold and Norton (2018) pointed out the following features of this enquiry:

- It is practical because it is related to bringing change in practice.

- It is theoretical in the sense that it is based on theory and is capable of generating new insights.
- It is collaborative in nature as more than one practitioner often engage in it.
- It is reflexive as teacher-researchers need to keep their professional practice under review.
- It is contextual in that it keeps in view the influences of the institute and the society.

3 Types of AR

AR can take different forms. It can be carried out by an individual or groups of teachers and practitioners with shared concern. This collaborative nature of AR has been stressed by many writers (e.g. Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Arnold and Norton 2018). In this case teachers usually carry out AR in the context of their own immediate environment. In other words, AR concerns the students of the school and its educational matters. When teachers work individually or collaboratively they may also get support from the administrators, university scholars and experts. Apart from individual, collaborative, and school-wide research activities, AR can also be carried out as area-wise research. This, of course, is far more complex in nature and can address a problem shared by several schools of a particular area. In the following table Ferrance (2000, p. 6) shows the differences among the four types of AR.

Table 1: Types of Action Research

	Individual teacher research	Collaborative action research	School-wide action research	District-wide action research
Focus	Single classroom issue	Single classroom or several classrooms with a common issue	School issue, problem, or area of collective interest	District issue: Organizational structures
Possible support needed	Coach/mentor Access to technology Assistance with data organization and analysis	Substitute teachers Release time Close link with administrators	School commitment Leadership Communication External partners	District Commitment Facilitator Recorder Communication External partners
Potential impact	Curriculum Instruction Assessment	Curriculum Instruction Assessment Policy	Potential to impact school restructuring and change Policy Parent involvement Evaluation of programs	Allocation of resources Professional development activities Organizational structures Policy
Side effects	Practice informed by data Information not Always shared	Improved collegiality Formation of partnerships	Improved collegiality, collaboration, and communication Team building Disagreements on process	Improved collegiality, collaboration, and communication Team building Disagreements on process Shared vision

3.1 Different Models of AR

There are a number of guidelines and models available to teachers wishing to perform AR. Among these the spiraling cyclical process (Lewin, 1952; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), the research cycle (Calhoun, 1994; Wells, 1994) and the helix (Stringer, 2004) are worth mentioning. But one well-known model is by Kemmis and McTaggart (1998:10) which has the following four important phases:

Table 2: The Stages of AR

Stages	Activities by the researcher
Planning	Development of a plan of action after identifying a problem or issue in order to make improvement in a particular area of research context.
Action	Implementation of the plan (in case of teaching, some deliberate intervention into the teaching situation).
Observation	Systematic observation of the critically informed action in the context where it takes place.
Reflection	Reflection, evaluation and description of the effects of the action. Possibly taking decision to undertake further cycles of AR to improve the situation further or to share information with others.

Adapted from Kemmis and McTaggart, 1998

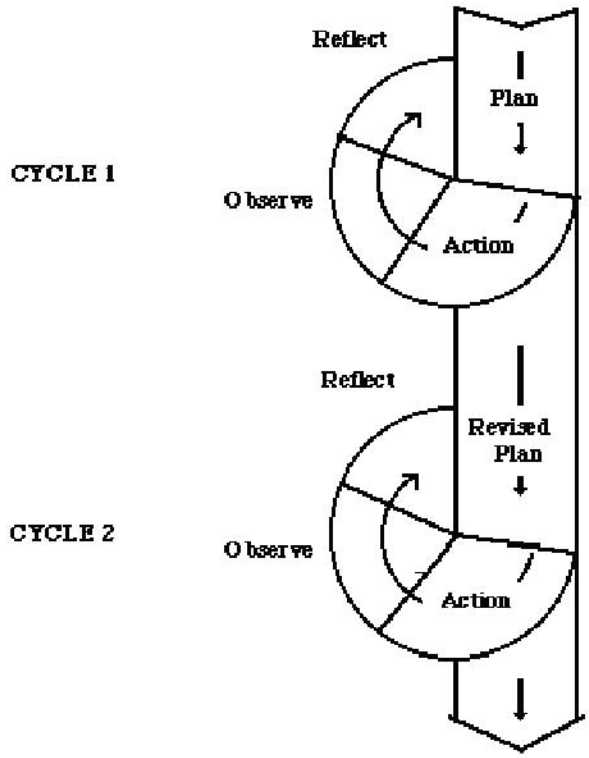

Figure 1: Cyclical AR Model based on Kemmis and McTaggart (1988)

However, this model has often been criticized as lacking in flexibility; for instance McNiff (1998) thinks that it is 'prescriptive' and opts for an approach that is more flexible, providing opportunities for action researchers to be creative. According to Burns (1999, p. 35) "AR processes involve many interwoven aspects – exploring, identifying, planning, collecting information, analyzing, reflecting, hypothesizing and speculating, intervening, observing, reporting, writing presenting." Many subsequent models, thus, provided a more detailed description of the different phases; such as the one given by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000).

Table 3: The Stages of AR

Stages	The Processes of AR
Stage 1	It involves the identification, evaluation and formulation of a problem that is deemed as critical to their everyday teaching. This problem may involve the classroom practice as well as curriculum innovation in the school system.
Stage 2	To focus the problem more clearly and to find out the cause of the problem , researchers consult with teachers, other researchers , and administrators
Stage 3	A revision of the existing studies is made by the researchers to elicit knowledge from the comparable studies.
Stage 4	Initial statement of the problem, may be redefined or modified based on researchers' readings.
Stage 5	Specification of research design, choice of materials and procedures are made.
Stage 6	Clarification on the evaluation of the project is made by the researcher.
Stage 7	The project is implemented as researchers undertake the data collection process.
Stage 8	Analysis of data, inference and evaluation of the project are carried out.

Adapted from Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000

This research process may be continued if in the final stage of analysis and reflection, researchers decide to implement another cycle. Again, the model suggested by some recent practitioners (e.g Coughlan and Brannick 2014) are more simple in nature and include, (1) planning, (2) taking action, (3) evaluating the action and (4) further planning. Arnold and Norton (2018) summarize the steps commonly found in different models:

Step-1 Identify issues or challenges in practice
Step-2 Review possible interventions and select a course of action
Step-3 Implement action
Step-4 Collect data to evaluate action
Step-5 Reflect on learning

3.2 The Process of AR in the Classroom

Teachers may take up individual or collaborative projects regarding the effectiveness of their classroom practice. They may have different questions to investigate but they need to limit their inquiries into meaningful questions that are possible to address amidst their regular routine work. Ferrance (2000) points out several criteria that teachers should consider before deciding to investigate a problem. According to her (p.10) the questions should

- be a higher order question and not a yes/no question
- be stated in common language avoiding jargon.
- be concise
- be meaningful
- not already have an answer.

Teachers need to collect data before deciding on what action research to take and for this they can use such means of collecting data as interviews, videotapes, case studies, audio tapes, questionnaires, checklists, surveys, diaries and so on. But one problem that Burns (2010) pointed out is that these types of AR usually remain localized and unpublished. In this regard, the universities can individually or collaboratively publish a journal especially focusing on AR projects conducted by different practitioners of the country.

Brown (2015) suggests two ways for undertaking classroom research. First, he advises teachers to consult a resource book for conducting classroom research by teachers and secondly to follow some simple but practical and effective steps, as described below.

Step-1 converting teachers' or practitioners' 'ideas' into specific questions.
Step-2 defining the elements of the questions through some measurable means.
Step-3 determination of the process in which the questions can be answered.
Step-4 appropriate interpretation of results.

In step 1 the ideas refer to the ideas teachers are likely to come up with to tackle the problems they encounter while teaching. These ideas need to be converted into questions that they can answer. However, teachers need to make sure that the questions are not too broad. They should be specific enough for teachers to investigate and come up with an answer. In Step 3 the need for selecting appropriate research methodologies that may involve data collection is emphasized. The fourth step is important as Brown cautions against the caveats that their research might fail to address.

Brown further emphasized that teachers should not make sweeping generalizations of their findings and should adopt quantitative measurement, albeit in simple terms. If their research involves collecting qualitative data, they should analyze them using logical reasoning. Any study taken up by individual teachers is likely to have some limitations as they are carried out in a specific context. The findings of one researcher may not be applicable in other contexts. Brown (2015) suggests teacher-researchers to report their findings to others and ask colleagues to replicate the studies to see if they come up with the same conclusion.

To exemplify what Brown suggested, a narrative account of an action research I undertook in one of my classes and the outcome of it is presented below.

> I was taking a remedial course of 30 first year students of the university where I teach. The course included writing descriptive paragraphs. In their prior education experience, these students normally relied heavily on memorization. When they were asked to brainstorm in the prewriting stage, they could hardly come up with the proper ideas. Their paragraphs would contain barely seven to eight sentences. I related this to other teachers who were taking classes of similar groups and they also stated the same kind of situation. I decided to keep a record of their present performance. I asked them to write individually a paragraph on the topic "A Village in Bangladesh" and graded them on 10 marks in which 6 was given for content, 2 for grammatical accuracy and 2 for cohesion. Then, I added their individual scores and divided with 30 to get the average score. It confirmed my observation that students were very weak in generating ideas as they performed poorly in the content section.
>
> After further thought I decided to engage them in cooperative learning as I thought that it will help them to generate ideas when they would engage in discussion together. Moreover, the stronger students will scaffold the weaker ones in the brainstorm process: 30 students were divided into 6 groups and asked to brainstorm together about ten topics for descriptive paragraphs in 10 sessions and write those paragraphs with their combined effort. After these 10 sessions, the students were again asked to write their paragraphs individually on the topic "A Children's Park." Their paragraphs were again marked on a scale of ten and the average score was calculated. When compared with the first average score, the second one showed considerable improvement.
>
> I related my findings to my colleagues and asked three of them to replicate the same study. They agreed and their results showed, in varied degrees some improvement in the writing performance of the students.

4 AR and CPD (in L2 Teaching Context)

Teacher education and training have increasingly been emphasized given the fact that the scenario of education is changing with the restructuring of the curriculum, changes in educational policies, use of technology in the classroom, increasing pressure on the teacher to remain updated with recent changes in methodologies and so on. After all, teachers remain at the center of any attempt to reform or improve the education system (Sohel and Banks, 2010). Thus, professional development is a must for teachers and there is a growing emphasis on teachers' professional development in different parts of the world including Bangladesh where the author teaches. The concept of CPD is of great value to teachers as they learn to teach throughout their professional career. In the handbook "Going Forward; Continuing Professional Development for English Language Teachers in the UK" (2012), Harding (2009) suggests that CPD is:

- continuous as professionals need to search for ways to cope with new challenges and improve their performance
- the responsibility of every teacher who finds out not only his/her own needs but also ways to meet those needs.
- should be evaluative rather than descriptive in order to make the teacher understand the impact of the activity
- an integral and not an extra component of professional life.

In the handbook it is also emphasized that CPD is essential for both novice and highly experienced teachers as in every stage of the teaching career there are many opportunities for further development. As stated earlier, AR is considered to have direct connection with the professional development of teachers (Tomlinson, 1995). It can have potential benefits on teachers' professional development in a number of ways:

- AR reduces the gap between research and actual classroom practice. It is assumed that teachers and practitioners can more effectively solve the problems they have identified for themselves (Watts, 1985, p.118). Academic research provides insight into the teaching learning process making us aware of the various factors that affect learning, gives us a generalized idea on how learning takes place but they may not address a teacher's immediate need. AR, in contrast, is usually based on teachers' immediate needs.
- Since AR addresses the immediate needs of teachers, it stimulates their teaching practice that not only brings positive change but also raises

their awareness on the complexity of their work. (Burns, 2010)

- Again AR helps teachers to get involved with the research process which very often they dread to undertake. According to McKay (1999) when teachers get involved in the action research process, they get the experience in forming research questions and find out the methods that best answer these questions. They also realize the challenges of data analysis, and drawing conclusions.
- In the AR process teachers become sensitive to the varied practical problems that crop up during the research process (McKay, 1999).
- AR also empowers teachers as they themselves take the responsibility to inquire into their daily classroom practices and take initiatives to improve classroom teaching (Baird and Davies, 1999).
- This empowerment can give teachers autonomy which is very essential in teaching. Since it is widely accepted that no two classrooms are alike, it is the teacher who has the strong responsibility to find out what suits his or her learners' needs, albeit in a well-informed and systemic manner that AR is based on.
- AR promotes the belief that the teachers themselves are the most immediate and reliable source of knowledge and are the most informed decision makers.
- AR fosters critical reflection and thinking in teachers. Farrel (2007) makes a distinction between reflective teaching and AR by stating that the outcome of reflective teaching can be non-observable behavioral changes in the classroom (e.g. increase in the awareness about classroom practices), whereas the outcome of AR usually brings actual and observable changes in the actions. However, he maintains that AR can facilitate reflective teaching. As AR concerns practical action it can be taken as part of a continuum of turning into a thinking and theorizing professional.

Apart from these potential benefits, examples of actual action research that resulted in positive changes in the teaching situation are numerous in English Language Teaching situation. Perret (2003) in her study in Australia showed that teachers experienced an increase in reflection during the four-month AR project and also after it. This project involved ESL students in the state of NSW who developed a better understanding of the language and also on their understanding of how to learn the language. Rahmani Doqaruni in Iran (2014) in a quantitative AR found that the process led teachers to become more autonomous. In fact, reports on the success of AR projects in numerous educational institutes are proliferating. In a report by WCER (Wisconsin Center for Education Research) in August 2014 it was stated that Zeichner conducted a meta-analysis of studies of teacher-research activities in the USA and found that many teachers turned more learner-centered after conducting AR. It also helped teachers to develop an improved perspective toward teaching and learning as they took a questioning stance in their practice which also led to changes in their professional identities.

5 Ways to Carry Out Second Language Classroom AR in Bangladesh

The AR picture is not the same everywhere. According to Borg (2006) AR is well developed in Australia and North America because teachers there are well supported professionally, whereas in many other countries the conditions for teacher research are not supportive. In many cases AR can have little or no effect, especially in cases where teachers are not willing to take the risk. Teachers' attitude to AR can also turn to be a determining factor for its success. Carr and Kemmis (1986) mention some teachers who think that AR provides 'a deficit model' of CPD as the focus is on what is missing rather than what is there. Knowing how to carry out the research can also prove to be a determining factor as Foster (1999), while reviewing AR studies, found many of them lacking in clarity, validity and relevance.

Thus, AR can turn successful under specific conditions. In many parts of the world, the concept itself is unknown to many teachers, as in the case of Bangladesh. Harun and Amin (2013) conducted a small scale survey research on forty English teachers of Dhaka city, the capital of Bangladesh, and found that around 60% of them did not know the term action research. However, 90% admitted that that they reflected on their classes although none of them knew how to reflect systematically. Although this survey involved only a few teachers, it can be assumed that many teachers are unfamiliar with the term itself, let alone knowing how to carry out the research. But strong emphasis has been made by the educators and policy makers to introduce AR in the education system of the country (e.g. Harun and Amin, 2013; Hasan, 2012) as it is believed that AR can foster CPD in teachers and lead to positive changes in the ELT situation of the country.

There are a number of ways in which AR can possibly be introduced in the education system of Bangladesh. As suggested by Burns (2009) AR can be a required component in the formal undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Universities in different parts of the world include AR in their graduate and post graduate programs in Education; for example, the University of

Notre Dame in Australia (Fremantle) includes a core unit in AR methodology as a component of its eight-unit Master of Education degree. Some practitioners claim (e.g. Hine, 2013) that students who took a course on AR developed skills and knowledge that are important for teacher education and the teaching profession. Thus the higher learning institutes of Bangladesh which offer courses in Education should consider placing AR within their post-graduation program.

Projects of AR can be initiated to bring changes in institutional curriculum and CPD. These programs can be initiated with the government grants or educational funding provided in order to help teachers and researchers work together. In Bangladesh, since the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching Approach in the 1990s, different government and non-government organizations have taken a number of initiatives to provide in-service teacher training programs (e.g. UNICEF funded Primary Education Development Project and English Language Teaching Improvement Project funded by Department of International Development). More recently English in Action, a nine year (2007-2017) education project has been initiated by the government of Bangladesh and funded by the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID). These projects again are collaborating with such bodies as BBC World Service Trust, British Council, to provide teachers with the innovations that are taking place in language teaching. Different projects of AR can be initiated with the assistance of these agencies and institutes in Bangladesh. Educators can follow the examples of different projects from countries like USA where AR is practiced extensively by the teachers. For example we can take the project IDEA (Institute for the Development of Educators of Adults) of Texas, USA (Baird and Davis, 1999). This was a program of alternative staff development in which a limited number of teachers were selected from across the state every year. The teachers were involved in activities that resulted in a continuous cycle of study, reflection and action. Later the benefits that the teachers received were presented in conferences, local staff development programs, and also in state-wise video broadcasts.

Again teachers of an institute or organization can get involved in AR and contribute to areas that are important for them. In this case, Burns (2010b) thinks that teachers can benefit themselves from collaboration and dialogues with others in order to increase their skills in research and also to develop their understanding of institutional curriculum change. In the context of Bangladesh, teachers of the tertiary level may find it quite convenient to work within the institution as the universities; especially the private universities of the country provide teachers with adequate facilities to carry on research. Again, teachers of certain universities can collaboratively carry on AR on issues common to the institutes.

6 The Challenges of Introducing AR in the Educational System of Bangladesh

AR no doubt proved to be beneficial in many parts of the world but how far it can be carried out in a developing country like Bangladesh remains a big question. The factors that are likely to impede teacher research include heavy workload, lack of resources, lack of support from school administrators, and lack of teachers' skill to carry out AR. In a report by Podder (2014) it is stated that when teachers of primary and secondary levels at a teachers' training college in one of the districts of Bangladesh were introduced the idea of CPD through taking up such measures as action research, they reported heavy workload, time constraint, problems of large classes, low salary structure, unsupportive authority, and low social status of teachers, although they appreciated the ideas of self-development. Moreover, teachers of Bangladesh are not tolerant of criticisms of their performance be it self- criticism or criticisms by others. The cultural heritage of the country which values the old system also discourages teachers to be open to new ideas.

7 Conclusion

As the above discussion shows, integration of AR in the education system of Bangladesh will depend on the fulfillment of certain conditions. Proper investment by the government and collaboration with supportive institutes will largely determine the success of AR in the country. According to Zeichner (2003) high quality teachers' research is ensured only when teacher researchers are given the autonomy to develop their own projects, allowed a considerable period of time, provided with a supportive group environment, given intellectual challenge and stimulation and also routines that foster the development of a community of researchers. In a traditional society like that of Bangladesh, creating a culture of inquiry that values the voices and knowledge of the teacher-researchers may seem daunting but not impossible to achieve. The recent emphasis on the improvement of the ELT situation by the government testifies to this position. Change can be introduced if the government, teachers, educators and other concerned take immediate, strong measures.

Therefore, prospects of AR in the education system of Bangladesh will remain doubtful unless the government takes effective steps to remove the existing problems of

the educational institutes and find proper ways to change the belief system of the teachers. For individual teachers, AR can prove to be an effective and attractive means of becoming critical and reflective practitioners who can voice their opinions, improve their ideas of teaching, take a positive stance towards new knowledge and most importantly become better professionals.

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