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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

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Professional development through action research design is a method used by educators to improve teaching practices and enhance learning outcomes. It involves a cyclical process of identifying a problem or area for improvement, developing a plan of action, implementing interventions, collecting and analysing data, reflecting on the outcomes, and making adjustments based on findings. The present study defines action research, identifies areas to use it, assesses the key characteristics of it, and advances the steps in conducting and evaluating the design. Professional development through action research helps educators to take an active role in improving their teaching practice and fostering student success. It encourages a reflective and evidence-based approach to professional growth, ultimately leading to more effective teaching and enhanced learning experiences for students.

Keywords: *professional development, action research, action research cycle, reflective teaching, learning outcomes, intervention strategies.*

Within the teaching context, professional development is a significant and mandatory component that leads to the enhancement of the teaching quality, ensures a sense of progress for educators, and supports career advancement. Besides, ongoing teacher development can maintain or even lead to strengthening the existing interest in teaching and learning. By acquiring new knowledge, competences, and strategies, educators' work becomes more effective and manageable, thus increasing their sense of achievement and professional confidence. P. Ur considers that "in some cases, it may even make a crucial difference between job satisfaction on the one hand and burnout on the other" [1, p. 289]. In addition to conventional professional development resources, available within the teaching routine, such as personal reflection, collaborative discussions with colleagues, student feedback, reading professional literature [*Ibidem*, p. 289-293], action research is a pivotal tool empowering practitioners to systematically investigate and improve their own teaching practices and, therefore, enabling them to attain a more comprehensive and reflective understanding of their practice.

According to J. Creswell, the action research design combines features of mixed methods research as it uses data collection based on either quantitative or qualitative methods or both; the difference, however, lies in its narrow scope. Action research tackles a specific, practical issue and finds answers to a problem [2, p. 577]. Thus, drawing on Mills' interpretation, Creswell defines action research designs as "systematic proce-

dures done by teachers (or other individuals in an educational setting) to gather information about, and subsequently improve, the ways their particular educational setting operates, their teaching, and their student learning" [*Ibidem*]. Lin S. Norton concedes that, generally, definitions of action research in the literature refer to the double purpose of action with research conducted by practitioners rather than by outside researchers. Some of the definitions include references to action research being cyclical, collaborative, and constructivist, depending on which school of action research the author adheres to. She insists on the obvious aim of action research, which is to improve some component of the student learning experience, stating that "the fundamental purpose of pedagogical action research is to systematically investigate one's own teaching and learning facilitation practice, with the dual aim of improving that practice and contributing to theoretical knowledge in order to benefit student learning" [3. p. 59]. In the same line of thought, S. Thornbury defines action research as "small-scale classroom research implemented by teachers and directed at improving learning outcomes" [4, p. 139]. The same double nature of action research is emphasised by Heigham and Croker who describe it as an approach that involves both action and research. The former refers to "identifying and exploring an issue, question, dilemma, gap, puzzle, in your context of work – the classroom, the school, or the institution at large" [5, p.114], and the latter - "a systematic approach to collecting information, or data, usually with methods associated with qualitative research" [*Ibidem*, p. 115]. In a broader sense, Carr and Kemmis define action research as "a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants 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" [6, p. 162]. Thus, in addition to the reflective and practical aspects, the quoted definition includes the sociocultural, political, and critical dimensions.

Generalizing from Kember's description, Norton lists the following characteristics of action research [7, p. 54 –55]:

1. Social practice

Attempting to comprehend teaching and learning challenges entails dealing with a wide variety of human factors, such as student attitudes, department politics, the ethos, and the environment of the institution.

2. Aimed towards improvement

What distinguishes action research from other research methods is the intention to make things better than they were before. Educators aim to improve the practice of education by studying issues or problems they face, reflecting about these problems, collecting and analysing data, and implementing changes based on their findings [8, p. 577].

3. Cyclical

According to S. Thornbury, "research is a cycle of inquiry and experimentation in professional practitioners' activity, with researchers constantly trying new ideas to see if they impact learning outcomes" [9, p. 139]. Notwithstanding its spiral sequence of reflection, planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and so on, its interpretive nature and the importance of iterative refinement in subsequent studies should be taken into account [10, p. 55].

4. Systematic enquiry

As Heigham and Croker posit, "action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry conducted by participants in a social situation, such as an educational context, with a view to changing and improving that situation. It can be used to investigate issues or dilemmas in your teaching situation in a systematic way" [11, p. 129].

5. Reflective

Action research involves a systematic collection and analysis of data, distinct from casual reflections or "intuitive thoughts," allowing practitioners to base their actions on current evidence through ongoing reflection and analysis of classroom experiences [*Ibidem*, p. 129].

6. Participative

Action research is participative because it involves active collaboration between educators. It is an opportunity to confer with each other, creating a shared understanding and ownership of the research process and outcomes.

7. Determined by the practitioners

In action research, practitioners determine the research topic based on their own needs and experiences, often collaborating with outside researchers, with a view to addressing issues or dilemmas in student learning to improve their attainment.

The scope of action research in education is wide, covering a varied range of areas. However, typically, four general fields of interest often serve as a focal point. Drawing on Fisher's list, the following examples of topics for action research in each area can be suggested [12]:

- **Teaching and making changes in the teaching practice**
  - ✓ Exploring various methods and approaches for teaching pronunciation, comparing their effectiveness in helping students improve their productive competence.
  - ✓ Developing students' noticing skills in grammar instruction: investigating strategies for fostering students' ability to notice grammatical patterns and rules through inductive teaching methods, and assessing how this approach influences the development of their grammar competences and language learning.
  - ✓ Teaching vocabulary: Scott Thornbury distils a list of topics for action research in the realm of vocabulary teaching, including investigating different vocabulary presentation techniques correlated with predominant learning styles to determine the most effective methods for your learners; exploring the effectiveness of various mnemonic techniques on vocabulary retention; examining how different principles of selecting words for presentation might impact vocabulary learning; and investigating the effect of extensive reading on vocabulary acquisition [13, p. 140].
- **Learners and how they learn**
  - ✓ Learning styles: exploring the effectiveness of tailoring activities and techniques to align with the predominant learning style or type of intelligence.
  - ✓ Learner motivation: determining what kinds of activities motivate my learners most effectively in a writing class or speaking class.

- ✓ Assessment for learning: examining how incorporating assessment practices that focus on providing feedback and facilitating student reflection, rather than just grading, enhances students' understanding and acquisition of the material.
- ✓ Differentiation as an inclusive practice: exploring how the process of adapting instruction to cater for the diverse learning needs of underperforming students, including differentiation by content, tasks, and responses, can improve their engagement with the curriculum and ultimately their performance.

• **Interaction with the current curriculum and with curriculum innovation**

- ✓ Strategies to align EFL teaching methods with the mandated curriculum to promote student engagement: exploring ways, *i.e.*, teaching methods, materials, and instructional strategies, to make the school mandated curriculum more relevant and interesting to students and improve their performance.
- ✓ Curriculum innovation in EFL teaching: investigating teachers' active collaborative role in curriculum improvement and adaptation through innovative teaching approaches or supplementary materials to enhance language learning outcomes.

• **Teaching beliefs and philosophies and their connections with daily practice**

- ✓ Teacher expertise. Determining the balance between learner-centeredness and teacher-centeredness in the classroom for an effective teaching practice.
- ✓ Correlation between different teaching philosophies and student outcomes: determining the impact of different teaching philosophies, such as constructivism, or humanism, on student attainment, academic performance, motivation, and emotional development.

Conducting action research is another important component of the approach under study. Authors generally agree on a cycle of steps or stages that include:

1. Identifying the problem or a focus area of the teaching practice that needs improvement [14, p. 115]. In Moroni's account, this stage involves the diagnosis of a problem [15], *i.e.,* what is to be investigated and the purposes of the action research, for example, to answer a research question, test a hypothesis, or improve practice.
2. Planning an intervention to address the problem involves considering the components of the intervention, identifying the data required and methods for gathering it, and determining the data-collecting instruments.
3. Action: Implementing the intervention, which involves selecting participants, and determining the intervention's time, duration, and content.
4. Assessing the intervention, which involves analyzing and interpreting data to determine if the objectives of solving the problem were met.
5. Critical reflection and communication of learning: reflecting on the experience and lessons learned and sharing the findings by determining how to best disseminate them [16, p. 449].

Synthesizing several strands and steps of action research discussed in his book *Research Methods in Education*, L. Cohen details a comprehensive eight-step process of action research [*Ibidem*, p. 450 –451]:

Step 1 involves the identification, evaluation, and formulation of a critical problem with the aim of improving one's own practice. It also develops explanations and hypotheses by connecting them to a broader theoretical framework.

Step 2 involves preliminary discussions and negotiations among interested parties, leading to a draft proposal with clearly defined research questions where researchers acting as consultants use their expertise to refine the problem and suggest approaches, a crucial phase for ensuring the project's success. Olha Kunt suggests the following examples of research questions aimed at improving the teaching practice [17]: *Why are some of my students....? How can I help my students to improve their...? What are my students' difficulties in...? How can I engage my students more into...? What can be done to solve... problem in my classroom?*

Step 3 may involve a review of the research literature to learn from similar studies, including their goals, methods, and challenges encountered.

Step 4 may involve reviewing the initial problem statement into a testable hypothesis or guiding objectives, making underlying assumptions explicit (e.g., to implement curriculum changes, the attitudes, values, skills, and objectives of the teachers must be altered), and sometimes excluding specific objectives to avoid limiting the process.

Step 5 is concerned with the choice of research procedures: sampling, administration, choice of materials, methods of teaching and learning, allocation of resources and tasks, etc. Cohen admits to including a wide range of research designs within the scope of action research, amongst which

- an initial and end-of-intervention survey;
- an experimental or quasi-experimental design (e.g., where some students/teachers are involved in the intervention and some are not, or where pre- and post-testing of students/teachers is undertaken);
- participant and non-participant observation;
- interviews;
- case studies;
- questionnaire data [18, p. 450].

Step 6 is concerned with determining the subsequent continuous evaluation procedures.

Step 7 consists of the implementation of the intervention itself (over varying periods of time). It includes the conditions and data collection methods; task monitoring and feedback to the research team, and data classification and analysis.

Step 8 involves the interpretation of the data; reporting the findings, and evaluation of the project. There might be a general summing-up directed at reviewing the project outcomes, making recommendations, and deciding on the dissemination of the results.

In Cohen's view, the eight-step process does not follow a strict sequence. The stages may recur in a different order, and every stage is accompanied by reflection and self-reflection, ensuring reflexivity, which "requires a self-conscious awareness of the effects that the participants-as-practitioners-and researchers are having on the research process, how their values, attitudes, perceptions, opinions, actions, feelings, etc. are feeding into the situation being studied" [*Ibidem*, p. 453].

Observation is an important method of data collection for action research, which involves focusing the practitioner's attention on things they are interested in investigating, and omitting the less relevant. Heigham and Croker present four main observation areas: (a) the setting, i.e., context, spaces, and locations; (b) the system, i.e., routines and procedures; (c) people, i.e., roles, relationships, and responses; and (d) the behaviors, i.e., timing, activities, and events [19, p. 119]. In addition, they present different forms of observation: other-observation, self-observation, and peer observation.

Interview is a type of non-observational qualitative technique used in action research to find out information related to participants' backgrounds, self-reported actions, opinions, thoughts, beliefs, or interpretations [*Ibidem*, 120]. The three main types of interviews generally applied in action research are open-ended interviews (conversational-type, unstructured, and individualised), semi-structured interviews (organised with a set of questions covered according to how the interviewee responds), and structured interviews (with an identical sequence of questions for each interviewee) [*Ibidem*, p. 121].

Interpreting data is an important stage of action research as the results can lead to possible changes in various areas of the teaching practice, depending on the practitioner's initial goal. The stage requires a rigorous, informed approach because the researcher can be faced with a large amount of data that needs processing. Heigham and Croker offer the following strategies of data analysis [*Ibidem*, p. 122-123]: *identifying patterns and themes* used for the analysis of open-ended written data such as journal writing; *coding verbal data* from recorded interviews aiming to identify key categories which can be further coded into subcategories, e.g. students' satisfaction categorised into satisfaction with time for speaking and satisfaction with place for speaking; *narrating the observations* in one of the four ways: chronological, selective, particular, and conceptual; *quantifying the data* - e.g. counting the number of times particular behaviours, incidents, or utterances occur, accompanied by descriptions or commentaries, or quantification of closed-response items in questionnaires containing closed (yes/no/maybe), rank-ordered (list in order of preference), or interval (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) scales.

Having presented and analysed the data, the practitioner can move on to conclusions and findings. At this stage, according to Heigham and Croker, it is crucial to interpret the *essence* of the meaning of the research, which might consist of developing personal theories about its meaning in the classroom or for the teaching, thus invoking deeper questioning or critical understanding. This is also the stage where action researchers may consider contributing to the professional field by publicizing their findings [*Ibidem*, p. 124]. Cohen *et al.* present a list of mandatory elements to be included in the action research report [20, p. 452-453]: articulating the research issue and its significance for improving the teaching practice; justifying the selected methodology and intervention, explaining why it was chosen over other alternatives, and describing how it was based on a thorough understanding of the situation; detailing the data collection process, the setting, participants, and outlining how data was processed and analysed; discussing the monitoring and review of the intervention; addressing reflexivity; establishing the standards and criteria

for success and explaining their derivation; summarizing how conclusions were reached and validated; reporting on the implications of the research; and describing the changes implemented in the teaching practice as a result of the findings.

In conclusion, action research is an important approach for professional development, empowering educators to systematically investigate and enhance their teaching practices and leading to improved teaching quality, greater job satisfaction, and increased professional confidence. Following an informed procedure of stages that includes identifying the problem, planning and implementing the correct intervention, and critically reflecting on the outcomes, practitioners can effectively address specific classroom challenges. The cyclical and collaborative nature of action research, involving reflective and systematic inquiry, contributes to a deeper understanding of pedagogical practices. In addition to enhancing their teaching efficacy, educators can also contribute to the broader educational community by sharing insights and strategies that promote student learning. Thus, the dual aim of refining practice and advancing theoretical knowledge emphasizes the transformative potential of action research in achieving meaningful educational progress.

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