

Action Research of Young College English Teachers

Xiaoqian Duan

English Department, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China
Email:duanxiaoqian@tom.com

Suzhen Ren

Teaching Affairs Office, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China
Email: rensuzhen@hotmail.com

Abstract—Action research allows for immediate action which is more convenient and accessible to young college English teachers who are pressured by the urgency of rapid and successful development in educational field. Practitioners develop skills in observing and evaluating their own teaching methods and begin to unconsciously employ the principles of action research in their professional life. The active participation of teachers will lead to a bright future of professional development and fulfillment.

Index Terms—action research, young, college, English teachers

I. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century is an information era which involves and benefits international business trade, the spread and communication of science and technology and the sharing of resources and education. Accordingly, foreign languages learning especially English learning has become an essential part of education in the world which means that if one is English illiterate, he or she is bound to meet obstacles in social life. Thus, learning English as an international language has become one of the fundamental requirements for Chinese citizens in the new century.

According to statistics, there are over 60,000,000 English learners in public schools in China, most of whom have been learning English since middle school. However, it is not deniable that the English levels of the learners in China are not satisfactory which greatly contradicts with the considerable labor and resources that the country has invested. Due to this, the educators have to reflect on the current teaching concepts and methods so that the educational goals and the educational assessment mechanism can be reset and readjusted to meet the needs of English education in the new century.

The key of educational reform and the improvement of teaching quality lies in the educators' quality which is clearly pointed out in The National Education Reform and Development of Long-Term Planning Programs (2010-2020) that it is to train professional educators with high quality, noble moral, masterly profession, reasonable structure and energetic spirit. Hence, the call for professional educators requires the teachers to accomplish their quality through transforming and readjusting the old methods and skills and enhancing the abilities to reflect on their actions in teaching process to be not only good teachers but good researchers as well so that the professional development of educators will be promising.

II. CURRENT RESEARCH SITUATION OF YOUNG COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHERS

The number of people working in educational field has risen to millions in China. However, people in this circle who are doing research which has led to outcomes are contrastively few. For teachers in Shandong Province especially, the so-called iron bowl--the life-long position in school has been cancelled already. Therefore, whether the teacher is qualified to work in the school or not depends not on his or her expertise but the result of the exams and assessment held regularly for teachers. Hence, it is urgent for young teachers to improve their professional quality by transforming teaching modes and doing research in teaching field so that the phenomena that either the teachers only know how to teach but not how to research or vice versa would not be the problem in Chinese educational field which blocks teachers to develop professionally.

This thesis is based on the Research of Reflective Action and Result Transformation of Young College English Teachers, which is sponsored by Qingdao University of Science and Technology. According to statistics, from the year 2006-2010, totally 156 academic theses were issued by 30 English teachers under the age of 35 in this school, of which theses on teaching research were only 42 pieces counting for 27%, which shows that young college English teachers are not as prolific in teaching research field that will consequently hamper their professional development and fulfillment for teaching research is the most closely related and convenient field for educators to conduct researching activities; and practicing teaching research can function as the joint between educators and researchers.

The result of an interview with 35 young teachers under the age of 35 from Ocean University of China, Qingdao University, Qingdao Agricultural University and Qingdao University of Science and Technology suggested that all the interviewees agreed that teaching research plays a vital role in their career, however, 21 interviewees held that teaching research doesn't hold as high value as other linguistic research suggesting that many young college English teachers haven't realized the significance of teaching research; 18 interviewees complained that their teaching tasks don't allow them time to do teaching research, 13 interviewees claimed that they often think of problems met in teaching process but they don't know how to study and implement relative research in accordance with the problems indicating that many young college English teachers are teaching research conscious, but they are lack of methods and guidance of this circle. And 11 interviewees admitted that they are not able to select and focus on certain topics in teaching field so that their teaching research practice hasn't succeeded.

The result of the interview above indicates that many young college English teachers have realized the vitality of doing teaching research as a reasonable way of their professional development, while admittedly, there are also many obstructions namely, having no time, having no ideas or having no methods hampering their progress in this scope.

III. ACTION RESEARCH

The most convenient way to solve the problem that young college English teachers cannot associate teaching with research organically is to find topics in their teaching environment while they are teaching, which is to research the actions of themselves in which they are naturally interested in a natural setting, briefly, action research in the educational setting.

Action research is a process in which researchers examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research. It is based on the following assumptions:

1. Teachers and principals work best on problems they have identified for themselves.
2. Teachers and principals become more effective when encouraged to examine and assess their own work and then consider ways of working differently
3. Teachers and principals help each other by working collaboratively
4. Working with colleagues helps teachers and principals in their professional development (Watts, 1985, p. 118)

The term 'action research' was firstly created in the USA by Collier (Mike Wallace, 1987) then developed further by Kurt Lewin during the 1940s, a social psychologist and educator to describe work that did not separate the investigation from the action needed to solve the problem" (McFarland & Stansell, 1993, p. 14). In the 1950s, Stephen Corey was among the first to use action research in the educational field. He encouraged teachers and masters to apply action research to transform the management and teaching. Then in the 1970s in Britain, Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) with John Elliott (1976) pointed out clearly in their research that action research is the further development of teaching theories which focuses on the resolution of practical problems. Over the years, the interpretation of action research has developed into different ways. It is now often seen as a tool for professional development, bringing a greater focus on the teacher than before (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995).

Action research can be a worthwhile pursuit for educators for a number of reasons especially the young teachers. First is obviously the familiar environment and students to the teachers which helps to conduct the studies smoothly. And the issues of the research are convenient to collect in the classroom, school or district. Academic research is often seen as disconnected from the daily lives of educators. By implementing action research, it can be very helpful for teachers to transform the knowledge of their research into something useful to their teaching and students.

Second, action research advocates collaboration and cooperation across departments, grade levels, and schools. Teachers are often the sole leading part in a room of students, and have little or no time for professional interactions with others. Action research allows teachers opportunities to talk with others about teaching skills and strategies in pairs or teams. By exchanging their thoughts with others, teachers must reflect on their own teaching styles and strategies. Through these communications with colleagues they build stronger confidence and relationships. Team work brings individuals together for a shared purpose. Educators involved in action research become more flexible in their thinking and more open to new ideas (Pine, 1981).

Third, action research projects influence thinking skills, sense of efficacy, willingness to share and communicate, and attitudes toward the process of change. Through action research, teachers learn about themselves, their students, their colleagues, and can determine ways to continually improve.

Fourth, opportunities for teachers to evaluate themselves in schools are often few, and action research can serve as a chance to think about one's own teaching in a structured manner. Teachers can reflect on what effect their teaching is having on their students, how they could work better with other methods, and what mistakes have been committed in the teaching process.

In short, action research is conducted by teachers by connecting their daily work with academic research and accordingly benefits their development in profession.

In carrying out action research, Eileen Ferrance (2000) summarized the steps into the phases as follows from which young college English teachers could gain a clear concept to put it into practice:

Identify a problem area: think big and start small. It is important to start with small doable matters that the young college English teachers meet in their daily teaching, for instance, how to help improve the students' pronunciation,

how to encourage the students to express themselves boldly or how to help students get rid of the influence of their dialects. Careful planning will help avoid aimless starts and frustrations.

Gather data: The collection of data is an important step in deciding what action needs to be taken. Multiple sources of data are used to better understand the scope of happenings in the classroom or school. Teachers can collect first-hand data by writing diaries, taking videos, recording audio tapes, keeping field notes. And questionnaire, interview, class observation, photographic information are also useful resources of data gathering. With the aid of multimedia, young college English teachers can collect data more conveniently and flexibly.

Interpret data: Depending on the research focus, the data would be analyzed in different ways. Some of the data are quantifiable and can be analyzed without the use of statistics or technical assistance. Other data, such as opinions, attitudes, or checklists, may be summarized in table form including table, chart diagram and so on. Data that are not quantifiable can be reviewed holistically and important elements or themes can be noted.

Act on evidence: Basing on the information from the data collection and review of current literature, work out an action plan which guides you to research in the proper scope. During the process, the teachers may have to make changes of the total plan. It is important that only one variable be altered. As with any experiment, if several changes are made at once, it will be difficult to determine which action is responsible for the outcome. While the new technique is being implemented, continue to document and collect data on performance.

Evaluate results: Assess the effects of the intervention to determine if improvement has occurred. If there is improvement, teachers should ask themselves that do the data clearly provide the supporting evidence? If no, what changes can be made to the actions to elicit better results? Besides, it is necessary to identify additional questions raised by the data and plan for additional improvements, revisions, and next steps (Eileen Ferrance, 2000, p.11). Here Eileen Ferrance mainly focused on the preparation and the process of action research paying little attention to writing report as the outcomes of the research, which is another indispensable part of action research as a whole. As is illustrated previously, a problem many young English teachers meet in their work is that they don't know how to study and change the teaching problems into relative research. While if the research is a systematic exploration process of an issue, then the process and the outcomes should be brought into open (Stenhouse, 1985:9). As to action research, the outcomes of the research are to be publicized. Teachers exchange the reports of the research to welcome the comments as well as the doubts from the public, only through this way, could the action doers be called researchers. By writing the report, teachers can strengthen their understanding of teaching theories; reflect more deeply on their teaching effects, as a result, stronger professional skills, academic research abilities as well as confidence are built up and obtained.

IV. CONCLUSION

Action research will not offer all the approaches to our practice in teaching research. But it motivates immediate action which is more convenient and accessible to young college English teachers who are pressured by the urgency of rapid and professional development in educational field. Practitioners develop skills in observing and evaluating their own teaching methods and begin to unconsciously employ the conceptions of action research in their professional life. The active participation of teachers will lead to a bright future of sustainable professional development and fulfillment.

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Xiaoqian Duan was born in 1980, Qingdao, Shandong Province, China. She graduated from Ocean University of China in 2003 with the Master's Degree of Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics.

She is now teaching English as a lecturer in Foreign Languages School of Qingdao University of Science and Technology.

Suzhen Ren was born in 1960, Qingdao, Shandong Province, China. She graduated from Shandong Normal University with the Bachelor's Degree of English.

She is now a professor working at Teaching Affairs Office of Qingdao University of Science and Technology.