EFL students’ responses to action research

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ABSTRACT

The present study set out to investigate EFL students’ responses to action research and the idea of a teacher being a researcher. The participants of the study were 130 Master students learning English as a foreign language at Batna University. The data was collected from the participants by means of a questionnaire. Furthermore, field notes, students’ research studies, and informal interviews were used as further data collection instruments. First of all, common research areas that our students were interested in were identified. Then, their reactions towards the stages followed in classroom research are determined. Next, their responses towards the idea of a teacher being a researcher and their feelings related to taking part in research studies when they actually started teaching were dealt with. Finally, students’ further comments and suggestions related to classroom research were reported.

Key words: Classroom-research, action research, ELT.

INTRODUCTION

For more than 30 years, the importance of teachers’ carrying out research has been emphasised. As pointed out by many researchers (Stenhouse, 1975; Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1982; Goswami and Stillman, 1987; Nunan, 1993; Crookes, 1993; Burns, 2005), there are a number of personal and professional benefits in foreign language teachers’ carrying out research. With regard to professional development, teachers are critical and responsive: they learn to think systematically; they practice working collaboratively with their students and other teachers; and they increase their self-awareness and personal insights. With regard to professional benefits, they learn to be reflective, evaluative and critical in their teaching; their teaching is transformed; they become more effective teachers; they become rich resources; and they start to better evaluate existing research. Furthermore, the uniqueness of each classroom setting naturally requires teachers to study their work by themselves rather than by somebody else.

In the recent years, it has been increasingly commonplace to read about the idea of a teacher being a researcher in the field of English language Teaching (ELT) all over the world. It is also gaining greater popularity in EFL setting in Algeria. Researchers such as Atay (2007) investigated whether primary teachers in Turkey could be researchers or not by designing a research-oriented in-service program for the professional development of participating teachers. The training program lasted for six weeks and consisted of two phases. In the first phase, the participants are provided with the relevant theoretical information on research and in the second phase, they did their own research in their own context. Data were collected by means of field notes and journals reveal that the program was successful. Teachers declared that their experience in becoming a teacher had changed their ways of teaching and approaching the students. Another researcher, Turer (2007), indicated the importance of quality in education and stated action research as a way of developing teachers both personally and professionally. He suggested that if we offer MA students courses on action research and if we encourage them to write their thesis by using action research, the graduates might guide teachers working at
primary and high schools by mentoring so that we could increase quality in education.

It is a fact that foreign language teachers in Algeria are hesitant to undertake classroom research. In order to help teachers gain an overview of different approaches to educational research and various research processes, students in the EFL department of Batna University are now offered applications of classroom-based research in their methodology courses. Within the new curriculum of Education, the "Methodology" course is given for this purpose. Since these are significant attempts in familiarizing foreign language teachers to action research, in the present study we aim at investigating teachers’ responses to action research and the concept of "teacher as researcher". We also would like to determine their interested research areas, their comments related to different stages of classroom research, their reaction towards collaborative group working in classroom research and their further comments and suggestions.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and setting

The participants of the study were 130 EFL Master Students at Batna University, Algeria. All the participants took ELT Methodology Course as part of their curriculum. ELT Methodology is offered with 2 hours of theoretical and 2 hours of practical sessions in a week. The course emphasises application of classroom-based research, teacher trainees were given brief information about types of research, research methods, data collection instruments, research questions and designs and developing a research design. The practical sessions were supported with sample research studies examined in detail and teacher trainees were also encouraged to conduct their own classroom research studies in groups during the term. The trainees were asked to form their own research groups of 3 to 5 students. Totally, 51 research on their own selected classroom research area.

By following the action research procedures provided by Cohen et al. (2000), trainees step by step performed their own research studies as follows:

Stage 1: Identifying, evaluating, and formulating of a problem perceived as critical in teaching.
Stage 2: Consulting with other interested parties such as lectures, teachers, other teacher trainees to clarify the objectives and assumptions of the study.
Stage 3: Reviewing of the literature to find out what can be learnt from similar studies.
Stage 4: Modifying or redefining the initial statement of the problem.
Stage 5: Specifying the research design.
Stage 6: Clarifying how the project will be evaluated.

Stage 7: Implementing the project.
Stage 8: Analyzing the data, drawing inferences, and evaluating the project.

Each group was given weekly feedback about their performance in research process by the instructor, who is at the same time the researcher of the present study. Finally, each group was required to submit its research paper at the end of the term and share it with the whole class in practice sessions. Each presentation took about 20 min with a brief summary of their study followed by question and discussion session.

Data Collection Tools and Analysis

A number of 130 teacher trainees were randomly selected and were given a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of five open-ended questions. In the first question, participants were asked to evaluate the eight stages they experienced when doing their classroom research. They stated their reactions towards each stage and mentioned the difficulties they faced with each stage and expressed their ideas accordingly. For the second question, they concentrated on group work and listed possible advantages and disadvantages of group work by mentioning their reactions towards group work experience in the study. In the third question they were asked to evaluate “Teacher as Researcher” concept by also explaining their own comments whether they would take part in action research groups when they become English language teachers or not. In the fourth question, they were asked to focus on theoretical and practical sessions of ELT Methodology lessons and wrote about the adequacies and inadequacies of the lesson. The final question concentrated on trainees’ further comments and suggestions related to the lesson. Furthermore, the researcher’s field notes, trainees’ collaborative action research studies prepared as a requirement of the course, and informal conversational interviews held with the trainees were also used as data collection instruments. The findings of the study were discussed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After forming the groups, each research group selected its own research area. The analysis of the data revealed that the most selected research areas of teacher trainees were motivation, learner attitude towards ELT, and teaching pronunciation. The distribution of the trainees in all research areas were summarized Table 1.

When conducting their research, all the groups used questionnaires as data collection instrument because it was practical as they were required to complete their studies in a limited time. Some of the groups preferred data
samples articles, teacher trainees familiarized themselves with classroom research. According to results, 74 teacher trainees (57%) pointed out that they find reviewing the literature as the most difficult stage in the process. They added that it took a long to find and read related articles in their selected research area and that it was a demanding process. Similarly, writing the research paper was evaluated as the second most difficult stage in the process by 65 teacher trainees (50%). The other 50% of the participants, on the other hand, stated that after all it was not so complicated to form the final research paper since everything was in their hand. They even added that they strongly felt the feeling of achievement after completing the whole paper. They felt quite confident and comfortable with what they had produced at the end. The rest of the stages were considered as less demanding by the participants and they said they completed them with ease. For instance, only 59 participants (45%) indicated that

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analysing the data was a difficult process since it was complicated and took rather a long time. Furthermore, since they had never analysed data before, they were quite unfamiliar with it and thus had some hesitations. Likewise, the majority of the participants indicated that they found a research area that they would like to work with as a group in quite a short time. Only 52 participants (40%) stated they had difficulties in finding a research area that all the group members fond of studying. Collecting the data was also evaluated as quite an easy stage. Only 39 participants (30%) had difficulties when collecting data from their participant groups. However, the rest of the participants declared that it was even an enjoyable stage that they had great pleasure when collecting data from students at different levels and studying at different schools. They really admired getting in contact with English language teachers or university lecturers to collect their part. The results also indicated that only 33 participants (25%) had difficulties when deciding the design of their research studies. They believed that the sample articles they studied during the lesson and the theoretical classes helped them from their own research designs. The rest of participants considered it as quite an easy stage. Presenting their studies to the whole class was also the other stage evaluated. The majority of the participants considered it as an enjoyable stage. Since they were accustomed to making presentations they did not have any major difficulties. They declared that it was a great pleasure to inform the rest of the class-mates about their own research. Also, learning from others was an effective sharing on their part. They learnt about other possible research areas, alternative data collection instruments and research experience of other groups. Some even indicated that they felt themselves extremely powerful when presenting. Only 18 participants (14%) considered it as difficult and they even admitted that it was something that depended on their personality and they excited a lot when talking in front of the whole class.

Within the results, we also focused, on teacher trainees’ comments towards working as a group. The major disadvantage declared by 77 participants (59%) was finding appropriate time to all group members to come together to do group work study. Since each student had his/her own weekly schedule, this sometimes caused problems among learners. However, since teacher trainees formed their own groups by themselves and since they chose the group members they wanted to work with by themselves such difficulties were minimized. The other group related problems were summarised as follows: some less responsible teacher trainees in the group, dealing with teacher trainees who did not prefer working in group, unable to giving each member an equal amount of work, difficulties in concentrating when all group members were together and doing their group work studies, and quarrels caused by different ideas in the group. Besides the disadvantages, teacher trainees noted more advantages such as: generating different, fruitful ideas in the group, sharing the workload, saving time, learning from each other, meeting new friends, learning how to do group work, learning to show respect to other people and their ideas, and sensing the feeling of sharing. Teacher trainees also added that they found working as a group as quite enjoyable and it was also important with regard to their personal development in terms of socialising and developing their communicative skills.

One of the most crucial questions with in this research was to determine teacher trainees’ views on “Teacher as Researcher” concept. It was found out that 106 teacher trainees (82%) mentioned that they wanted to take part in action research projects when they become English Language Teachers. They indicated the following reasons: it was important with regard to a teacher’s self-development and increasing his/her confidence; it was an important factor in professional development; it was widening a teacher’s horizons; and it was also one of their missions to do research. The rest 13 teacher trainees (10%) declared that they did not want to take part in such projects and the other 11 teacher trainees (8%) were undecided since being a teacher itself was highly demanding. The following quotations were taken from teacher trainees to reflect their views:

“I Believe that such projects are very important. Teachers able to achieve escaping from their traditional image and they be researchers. I certainly want to take part in such research studies. I believe that with such studies I will be helpful to both myself and my colleagues a lot”.

“I support “Teacher as Researcher” concept. It will enable achieving difficulties we have experienced so far. I support teachers’ taking part in such projects. I believe something needs to be done to encourage more teachers to take part in such studies”.

“I want to be a researcher teacher. I believe such studies are important in order to be aware of developments and dynamism in education”.

“Although the research process is a demanding one, I want to join such projects”.

“Being a “teacher as a researcher” requires a teacher’s not only being a person to teach but having certain characteristics such as trying to solve problems, searching new methods, and enriching the teaching and learning environment. I want to be such a teacher because a teaching rule may not be applicable to every student. With the changing profiles of our learners, we need to identify new strategies”.

“A teacher must be a researcher. He/she needs to be alert about the innovations and changes. He/she must be aware of the problems in class and know how to overcome the problems. I want to take part in research projects when I
become a teacher”.

“I certainly want to do research. But I am not sure how and what I can be helpful for. After all researching will be an important factor in my student’s development. For this reason, I try to do my best”.

“Every teacher needs to be a researcher. We will have different cultural backgrounds, levels etc. We need to observe them in order to be helpful to our learners. I want to take part in such research studies because we can solve our problems by this way”.

“I want to join research projects. People need me. I must give something to them. Instead of using what I have in my hand, I must cook and find the most delicious”.

“I believe being teachers as a researcher is very important. There may be many issues, which will be helpful to teachers and students, that have not been discovered yet but waiting to be discovered. I want to join such projects so that I can reach many undiscovered or ignored issues”.

“If a teacher is qualified, learners will be motivated in class. For this reason, it is a must to be a qualified and a researcher teacher. I was not used to think like this before coming to this department but I think so now. I certainly want to take part in such research projects”.

“Studies that are done to know more about learners will be helpful in solving the problems. It is one of the best ways of solving problems in class. Furthermore, if they are done by teachers, who know the class the most, they will be much more effective. I want to join such projects in order to create a more effective teaching and learning environment”.

“I believe that a teacher is the person who best knows the class. I think a teacher’s diagnosing a problem in class and conducting a research accordingly will be much more effective than a researcher’s doing so. After all, a teacher is involved in the process. I want to take part in research studies. I think this might be the greatest pleasure for a teacher”.

The response of some undecided teacher trainees:

“Actually, I believe that taking part in research projects will be helpful to us. However, I have doubts whether I would take part or not in such research projects. Because in our circumstances the strategies of the school I work for will be a determiner in my joining the projects or not”.

“I want to take part. But, to tell the truth, it is a very demanding and a tiring process. For this reason, I do not want to join. Perhaps I might help my colleagues”.

“It is quite good to research. It facilitates teaching and learning. But, I guess it is difficult. It will take time. I do not think I will do it”.

Some negative comments:

“I think it is against the definition of “teacher” in our country. Because crowded classes and low qualities in teaching and learning will make teachers’ doing research impossible. I believe that only university lecturers may take part in such research studies”.

“Because I am lazy and because I do not like doing research a lot, it is not suitable for me. I do not want to take part”.

Conclusion

It is well emphasised in the literature that action research studies in language teaching are particularly essential. As suggested by Burns (2005), cooperative action research studies encourage teachers to share a common problem and come together to find a solution to the problem. Action research studies have a great contribution in strengthening the voices of language teachers and potentially more empowering for change. Thus, one of the key issues in classroom research is to encourage teachers to become their own classroom researchers. Because of the unique characteristic of each classroom setting, each teacher is supposed to be the best researcher of his/her class. Such researching opportunities are also important for teachers’ own professional self-development and renewal.

In the present study we investigated the EFL teacher trainees’ responses towards action research. The results indicated that our trainees support the idea of “Teacher as a Researcher” and they further stated that they wanted to take part in such projects when they become English Language Teachers. In order to ensure that the prospective teachers will include “research” into their repertoire of skills, we need to take the necessary precautions. Besides providing teacher trainees’ with research skill, we also need to design in-service training programs for both experienced and novice English Language Teachers and school administrators working at different-schools in different parts of Algeria. We believe it will also be beneficial to support our newly graduates when they actually start teaching in order to have a smooth transition from being a teacher trainee to a first year teacher. By this way, our first year teachers will easily overcome the stress of first year teaching and will be encouraged to take part in research projects. Such research projects will be of great importance to other teacher groups with suggestions of how to start researching. Finally, the role of administrators and supporting policies provided will be a crucial factor in determining the effectiveness of teachers being researchers.
REFERENCES


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