Collaborative action research: an effective way to promote EFL teacher development

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Abstract

This paper mainly reports an in-service teacher development project in China which aimed to support the implementation of national English curriculum and meanwhile promote professional development of EFL teachers through university-school collaborative action research.

Key words: collaborative action research, EFL, teacher development

1. Introduction

There has been a sweeping reform current in basic education across China since 2004. It regards students' holistic development as the ultimate goal of basic education. Great changes, thus, happened in English teaching as English is an important school subject in China. New English curriculum standards were issued and new textbooks were published accordingly, which demanded EFL teachers to shift their focus from only imparting knowledge to guiding students to learn how to learn. Welcoming the idea of the reform the English teachers found it hard to take teaching actions to realize the ideas in their own classrooms (Wang, 2007). When Beijing was involved in the educational reform many English teachers there also faced the same development plateau.

Therefore, an in-service EFL teacher development project co-launched Beijing Normal university and Educational Committee of Haidian District, Beijing. The project aimed to support the implementation of national English curriculum and meanwhile promote professional development of EFL teachers through university-school collaborative action research. It was initiated upon the underpinnings as follows: a) for the national curriculum reform to succeed, it must be adequately implemented at the school level, which highly relies on active involvement of school teachers in situating the curriculum; b) as a systematic, reflective process action research enables school teachers to investigate both local contextual factors and their own teaching action, empowering them to embrace curriculum reform in their professional development; c) the work of research, however, fall outside school teachers' usual experience and so they need to be supported by university academics to offer professional help, instead of being left alone to sustain the responsibility. According to these underlying conceptions, the project was designed and carried out. Starting at the fall semester of 2007, it has lasted for about 2 years and concluded with an action research conference at May, 2009. It involved forty English teachers from ten senior high school in Beijing, including both model schools and the ones labeled as 'weak'. The teachers carried out action researches in their own classroom, either individually or with peer teachers, under the guidance of one from the ten teacher educators in Beijing Normal University. The author of this paper is one of the ten, responsible for two particular teachers on the two-year collaboration agenda. As a university participant of the project, I had a great stake in instructing their respective researches and offered substantial assistance in carrying out the particular to supplement the regular project sessions, but never imposed my ideas or methods upon their studies. As the underpinning philosophy of this project suggests, my work centered upon how to facilitate the teachers to transform from passive reform receiver into curriculum developers at school level and in so doing, build their reflective teaching experience. The whole process unfolded itself and turned out that it achieved what the project sought to.

2. A roadmap of the teacher's action research

The project was designed and practiced according to such a action research process as is shown in the following graph.

During the research cycle, first of all the teacher finds a problem in her teaching, a unsatisfying situation that keeps troubling her teaching. Then the teacher will talk about her understanding about the problem with others, such as her students or colleagues, to deepen and widen her thinking about it. If necessary the teacher needs to investigate the problem by scientific means, take questionnaires and interviews for instance. Based on the data from investigation, she is able to make an informed decision on a teaching plan that can solve the teaching problem. While carrying it out, the teacher will keep observing and checking whether the expected changes result from the new teaching measures in the plan and see if she has to remake her plan. What follows is to reflect on the result of her work, analyzing her success and weakness. To write up her research report will be the final step in this cycle of action. However, it does not conclude her efforts of bringing about changes to her teaching. Obtaining new beliefs and principles in teaching, she notices different problems and feel urged to change them. Then a new turn of action research will begin.

2.1 The teacher educator's roles

  Above graph depicts how an action research cycle is going but this project accommodated items more than it. The school English teachers were the principal part of the research, instead of the sole part. Working together, the school English teachers and teacher educators played respective roles, each taking their own responsibilities meanwhile communicating and cooperating with one another, as the following table shows

	School teachers' role	Teacher educators' role
Step 1 disclose a problem	Problem discoverer	Listener / specialist
Step 2 Communicate and investigate	investigator	Technique adviser
Step 3 Make a plan and carry out the plan	Plan maker	Theory adviser
Step 4 Monitor the plan	monitor	Technique adviser
Step 5 Analyze and assess the result	Analyzer and assessor	Listener / specialist
Step 6 Write up the research report	author	Reader and reviewer

Among the six steps during the research process, the teacher educator from Beijing Normal University keeps working with the school teacher to assist her to accomplish the research. From the very beginning, while discovering the teaching problem the teacher may feel the troubled teaching situation but she may not state it clear enough. It is when the teacher educator attentively listens to the teacher's disturbed feelings and then using her own knowledge on EFL teaching give professional suggestions on the issue in order to help the teacher ensure what the problem is. In this step the teacher educator works as the teacher's patient l listener and English specialist whom the teacher can conveniently turn to for theoretical help . As the research progresses to the second step, the teacher needs technical support. Usually the school teacher will endeavor to find how her students feel or what they know about the teaching problem by means of a questionnaire or group interview. Neither of them can be done if one received no special training before. A basic school teacher in China is not readily equipped with the technique. That's when the teacher educator plays her important role as she has been trained how to use the scientific means. But here what is worth noticing is that the teacher educator never takes the place of the teacher in investigating. Contrastively, she guides the teacher to do it by the side. She advises the teacher in what order to list the questions when designing a questionnaire and corrects the mistakes when analyzing questionnaire data, for example. Being the questionnaire designer and data analyzer, the teacher remains always the main part when doing the research. The same thing happens again in step 4 because the teacher needs scientific data to show her the effectiveness of her new teaching process. The teacher educator's professional knowledge will play a part again in step 3. On the basis of collected data in step 2, the school teacher is about to make a plan in order to bring systematic change to her teaching. It will be better if the plan is an integration of the teacher's own experiences, feedbacks of the students, and theories in EFL studies. In this case the teacher educator is a convenient source of theoretical knowledge in EFL, which can quickly makes up for the teacher's limited exposure to such theories. It does not mean that the teacher educator offers any ready-made knowledge to the teacher. It means that the teacher easily gets guidance about where she can find the EFL knowledge, for example from which book she can read the related theories and studies. When the research comes to step 5, the teacher will receive helpful assistance from the teacher educator again. Step 5 suggests the research is approaching the end. The teacher starts to look back at her research. Naturally there are a good many things to reconsider, to generalize and to talk to someone with. The teacher educator, as a companion through the whole research tour no doubt works as the best friend that like to listen to the teacher and the closest EFL specialist to consult with about the teaching issues. She will also help to complete the research report at the last stage. Due to the mutual understanding and intimate friendship between the two parts, the teacher educator is the report's first reader and more importantly the reviewer. Short of training on academic writing, the school teacher is not familiar with research report writing. The teacher educator once again guides and suggests the teacher to describe and state the whole process neatly, to display the data in tables or graphs clearly, and to conform to academic writing rules such as avoiding plagiarism. Still the teacher educator does not substitute the teacher to write.

2.2 The teacher's developmental process

The above few roles are not only the teacher educator's part to play in the collaboration, but the important features of the project. Then I will show how the school teachers develop their professional thinking and skills during this project under the help of the teacher educator with my cooperation with two EFL teachers for example.

2.2.1 Setting off from where "I don't know"

At the outset of the action researches, both lectures on project sessions and my personal contact with the two in private placed emphasis upon the teacher's mentality. It means when they were contemplating their teaching problems, they were kept reminding of not jumping to judgmental beliefs on students as many teachers are accustomed to, for example "I m often behind my schedule of vocabulary teaching for the reason that my students do not spend as much time on it as they are supposed to." What the project encouraged was the way of thinking "I know the problem but I don't know what the key reason is for that. It can be me, can be the schedule itself, the textbook, and the students." Both the teachers I worked with accepted that such state of mind "I do not know" paves to road for them to look into the manifacet reason and look for solutions for the very problem. It was where they realized that professional decisions can't solely rely on personal beliefs or experience.

During my interview, one of the two teachers observed that "I used to care mainly about the textbook because I thought the students' task was to sit there, listen to me and recite the new words going home. So I spent so much time on text preparation. Now I pay more attention on my students, on what extent they are able to accept and digest the new words they are learning." The other teacher focused on English reading skills. She usually asked her students to do many reading exercises in summer and winter vacation, only to find it in vain. Hardly did her

students finish the homework, which in turn made her angry. But her anger vanished after she started the action research. She recalled her change in mind like this, "I was agitated at that time because these students looked so lazy in my eyes. However, once I picked up a new way to look at, once I began to analyze the whole thing, I noticed that their laziness lied in the low motivation. Reading should be fun but my test-oriented exercises ruined their interest to read. Besides it, such training does not improve their ability to answer test questions so much as their reading habit. I will not take it for granted any more." At the end of the action research project, she reported that "For me a new model of teaching is coming into being: taking the students as the main body." She went on reporting her change of thinking in her research paper, "What the action research influences me the most lies in thinking upon teaching. My habitual way started from my years of experience and the stereotype about students' learning. When they failed to get ideal scores in tests, in my eyes it was the students to blame because they did not work hard enough. In the two years of research, I have developed and updated the mentality. I realized the role of my teaching strategies. If I could teach flexibly my students would be attracted to English learning and work more efficiently. In one word, I begin to think more rationally and critically." The two teachers started to reflect on themselves from the beginning the research. They entered the cycle in a reflective state.

2.2.2 Adjusting and adapting

When the action researches reached the phase of investigating the problem(step 2) and later collecting data about the effect of action plan(step 4), the two teachers were confronted with unfamiliar techniques, for instance, of conducting surveys and focused interviews. I had spent many hours on face-to-face meetings with them, instructing how to design a questionnaire and how to raise questions to prompt and sustain conversation in an interview. A good many follow-up e-mails, text messages, and phone calls between us took place, drafting the questionnaires and interview guides. The two teachers were fast learners. Both of them wrote their own questionnaire quickly even though they never did it before because they grasped the major points of questionnaire making after reading a few model questionnaires. Their questionnaires were far from perfect but good enough for a beginner in scientific research on such a small scale as one class. There was also my personal visits to the school to help conduct the group interview, including offering the sample analysis of qualitative data collected. The two teachers learned while doing it, and turned out to be more and more skilled in these research methods and techniques. One of them was very creative. She used written interview to take the place of oral interview as usual. Her rationale went as the following: for one thing the interviewed students would think longer and deeper than in an oral interview; for another the poor-learning students would not necessarily experience the same peer pressure answering the questions as in oral group interview; last but not least, the written talking on the paper between teacher and students served as a good document that saves the effort of transcription. It turned out to be a smart action. Increasing the interviewed students' trust on the teacher because they instantly felt the teacher's goodwill, the teacher got rich quality data from the written interview which were all from the students' heart bottoms.

After collection, both expected data and unpleasant data emerged, but both teachers well accepted the students' complaints about their teaching. They reexamined their assumptions on students' needs, made new pedagogical objectives, and integrated the constructive comments from their students into their teaching. As they decided the action plans and put them into practice, they listened attentively to their students' needs and reactions, brainstormed various ways of addressing the problem with peer teachers, and developed awareness of their own ideas. As the researches went on, they changed themselves, challenging their own routine of thinking and more and more standing on the side of the students. The active adjustment and adaptation resulted in a brand new way of vocabulary teaching for one teacher, namely "banding new words (while teaching)", which was not only well received in her own class for its efficiency and effectiveness but was spread to the parallel classes and grades; for the other, she developed a total set of ways for formative assessment on her students' performance within each unit. Both the students and the parents welcomed its arrival.

2.2.3 Presentation and publication

When the action researches were in progress, I talked the two teachers into noting down the researches. One of the teachers documented her action research by means of summaries when she finished each step; the other developed the habit of teaching journals while researching. The summaries and journals were of various lengths according to the two teachers' timetable. When they were less engaged they wrote a long one in detail; they condensed their ideas and practices in brief if their agenda did not allow them to do a lengthy one. Therefore, the action researches were well documented so that at the last phase of the project, both teachers managed to write up the research reports based on the daily records of the research. Later both reports were presented in quite a few academic conferences on action research.

Within all the forty school teachers, 22 of them presented their action research reports. In the academic conference that the project director organized, twenty of them made official presentations to the audience, either as forum speakers or keynote speakers. My partner teacher, the one addressing vocabulary teaching, made the first presentation in the keynote ones. For some of the teachers, the conference presentations took one more step forward into publication. My partner teacher sought my academic support on it and we refined the report together, contributed it to a quality academic journal in basic EFL education. It was published in June, 2009.

Before the teacher published her report, she wrote five drafts to meet the need of the journal. The changes across these five times of writing can be seen from the table below:

	pages	Report length	Length of analytic words	Ratio of analytic words	Amount of tables and graphs	Amount of references
First draft	5	4775	1337	28%	0	1
Second draft	8	8312	3553	43%	0	1
Third draft	8	8594	3993	46%	1	3
Fifth draft	13	9998	3988	40%	2	5
Final draft	13	10308	5028	51%	2	5

First of all, the length of the report obviously climbed up one draft by another. Some of the new written words described the factual process of the research, some others analyzed the process and put up the author's points of view on English vocabulary teaching. For example, in the second draft, she deeply analyzed the four reasons that resulted in the problem in vocabulary teaching, which therefore shows the necessity of taking a new teaching approach and at the same time avoids baseless research hypotheses. The second significant change shows from the addition of tables and graphs in her report. The teacher gradually learned to describe the research process not only with words but with one table and one graph. They were used to display the fundamental data collected during the research. The orderly data clearly suggested a systematic process of teaching inquiry. References of related theories and studies are another important difference. The first draft saw quotation; contrastively the final draft quoted 5 references, including studies both home and abroad. The five referred works range from studies on vocabulary teaching, action research theories to qualitative research methods. Reviewing her own research, she also reviewed related studies to enrich her cognition. In so doing, quoted work evolved from an ornament of her report to a necessary tool to dig deeper and wider in her teaching kingdom. That is the reason why her research report goes far beyond a teacher's experiences generalization, which popularize among China's EFL teachers nowadays. The generalized experiences of teaching introduce a teaching event and end up with the event description, with no material to show factual changes of teaching. The introduction put up merely some superficial actions and personal teacher's perceptions, without a pointed theme to present. Contrast to it, the teacher's action research report bases itself on specific teaching process, theorizes the teacher's English teaching principles and discloses the generating mechanism of the teacher's experience. And therefore the report makes both a theoretical and pragmatic reading.

Both presentation on the conference and publication in the journal represent a recognizable step in teacher professional development as they not only build their self-confidence, but also signify the moments when teachers theorized their researching and reflective practices.

3.The significance of the collaborative work

The project has been over but both my partner teachers have conceived of a new action plan for classroom activities on their own, and one of them even began to relay what she has learned to colleague English teachers across all grades in her school. Looking back the two years of cooperation, I see how she, and other teachers in the project, felt at a loss about action research theory, how they made increasing sense of curriculum reform ideas while struggling to carry out reform in their own classroom, and how we took collective responsibilities for every step of it. The collaborative action research project serves as a beginning for the continuing journey of teacher professional development.

3.1 Facilitating the teacher's development

Taking a deeper look at what has happened, one can easily understand that action research is by no means a research paradigm merely. More importantly, it works as a way of reflection. Carr and Kemmis （1982 in Nunan，1990:63) hold that action research does not desperately stick to the habitual way of thinking to change "others". An action researcher changes oneself in the first place, changing her cognition about others and her practices. Such researches enable the researcher and her team to reform the society by their efforts (Ahar etc, 2002).

The research team can include the teacher and her peers, or the teacher and the school director, or else include the teacher and the academic researcher. I think the collaboration between these two parts is able to make full use of both strength so as to ensure the research quality and result. In this project, the professional academic researcher working as a team member is proved to be an enforcing power to further and deepen the teacher's research and therefore contribute to turning the teacher to the researcher. The project also proves that psychologically speaking the action research process is also where the teacher learns for the reason that such research cannot be conducted solely on the basis of the teacher's intuition and personal experience. It cannot be done without knowledge in pedagogy or educational science. It asks for both the teacher's educational alertness and fundamental techniques in research methodology. The reality in China, however, does not offer such an ideal teacher. The basic education teacher is limited in terms of researching capability. Thus their knowledge, skills and strategies for research badly need supplementing   to meet the challenge introduced in their career development. When the teacher becomes a learner, the teacher educator as her teammate functions as a mediator, providing the teacher with a mediated learning experience (Lantolf, 2006) and presenting the new knowledge in a way of promoting teacher learning. Moreover, the teacher educator does not passively accustom their teaching to the teacher 's cognitive ability. Instead, the educator offers assistance and guidance within the zone of proximate development(Vygosky, 1978), which effectively helps heighten the teacher's learning level. What should be clarified is that learning is not only personal construction of knowledge, but an active interaction between individual learner and social environment. It means that in the collaboration team the "learner" refers to the teacher educator as well. Leading the teacher on the road of research, the teacher educator is led too, on her way to enrich her understanding on teacher education. When the two parts interact they supply one another what they do not know, enlarging one another's knowledge structure.

3.2 Promoting teacher autonomy

Taking active part in action research, the teacher systematically observes and constantly reflects on her own teaching. She raises questions on her own teaching, takes actions to solve it, and goes on raising and solving new problems. Her teaching develops in a continuous spiral. It is reasonable to say that action research promotes teaching, and therefore is widely used as a way to promote teacher autonomy. In terms of teacher education, teachers used to be an agent practicing what they are asked to do in their teaching; now teachers are encouraged to turn an autonomous learner and practitioner. Kumaravadivelu（2001）argues that a teacher is an autonomous individual who constructs their contextual teaching knowledge in everyday classroom. Benson(2005:182) believes that action research is especially useful for developing teacher autonomy because teacher learning actually happens in the research process. If the teacher develops the habit of improving her teaching by means of research, it will enhance the teacher's consciousness to change themselves from passively receive their job tasks to work consciously autonomously until she enjoys total freedom in teaching (Shen, 2006).

4. conclusion

All in all, action research studies a concrete teaching problem in a concrete teaching context. As a teacher's research, it combines pedagogical theory and teaching practice, improves teaching quality, and promote the teacher's ability to make pedagogical decisions(Wang, 2002). At the same time, the teacher also experiences self-doubting and self-criticizing, which are important elements in a teacher's reflection on her habitual pedagogical practice. It both leads the teacher to step into a beigh cycle of bettering her teaching and helps the teacher feel the very pleasure and dignity while keeping creating and updating herself in the teaching career. In collaborative action research between the teacher and teacher educator, they never worked like an island. Negotiating and cooperating, they were autonomously developing and growing.

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