

Action research in the ELL Classroom

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Action research: It's Not Merely for Researchers Anymore

As a junior studying sociology at the University of California at San Diego in the late 1970's, my trusted professor, Dr. Jack Douglas, introduced the notion of *action research* to a handful of students one beautiful spring day. Since this form of ethnographic research was relevant within the area of Social Deviance (and the local nudist beach adjacent to our school), our collective ears perked up. Eventually, we learned that action research was not for the puerile of heart, but for those serious scholars who wanted to investigate social constructs of everyday life.

As a TESOL professor in a small state school in New Mexico, I still use action research in the classroom. Unlike dear old Jack who used a naturalistic approach (studying his subjects sans clothes), I recommend my students study the relevance of second language education with proper attire and rigorous technique while investigating how children/young adults acquire English as a second language.

#### Usefulness of Action Research

The majority of our TESOL students are already in the field as public educators. Requiring these men and women to perform action research is the perfect way to move hard

working practitioners into the frightening world of research. Since I teach in a two-year program, we require students, typically as a small group, to complete an action research project as a final project. When I hear the occasional whisper from the back row, "What's the relevance of research in the classroom?" I chime in and say, "It's part of your everyday life anyway, so why not quantify the classroom achievements and show other professionals how smart you and your students truly are?" True, when I use the word *quantify*, I turn off a few others who may hate research. Regardless, when I add that the importance of any action research project rests in how we actually may solve literacy concerns prevalent in K-12 classes, most of my TESOL students straighten up and listen more intently.

#### Action Research in the Classroom: Posing the Question

The most difficult part of any research project is asking the right or proper question as determined by the particular population studied. For all of my classes, I stress the importance of posing the research question that addresses their general area of interest. In one cohort, five TESOL students asked the following question: Can 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade ELL students' confidence in oral English be improved by use of certain reading/comprehension linguistic strategies?"

This action research group (Johnson, Terry, Gerberding, Hulett & Perry, 2006) believed that children who were actively involved in their own learning enhanced their reception and retention of concepts in English. Thus, the research practitioners believed that by introducing specific types of material to children and using teaching strategies conducive to second language learning the results would be significant statistically (quantitatively) and be applicable to classroom teachers everywhere.

#### Data Collection

Inspired to use both quantitative and qualitative data, the researchers used pre- and post surveys and self-surveys while also inventorying self-confidence levels of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade second language students. The Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM) was also adapted for their research. Teacher observation and anecdotal note taking were collected as well. Most importantly, the TESOL researchers recorded daily usage of specific linguistic strategies (use of a tape recorder, collaborative groups, poster boards, readings of student work, acting out stories, reading buddies, producing multicultural books, theater performance and large and small group work) to quantify their results.

### Analyzing the Data

Confident that the data used would be appropriate for the project, the researchers then evaluated the responses in areas of speaking, reading and self-concept about personal English abilities for the students based on grade level. The group believed that by triangulating the data in such a manner, the level of confidence in their results would be appropriate for any action research project. Since the group members worked well together, I found their approach to data design and collection was both reliable and professional.

### Key Findings

Several linguistic strategies worked quite well in this study. Subjects studied by the researchers exhibited more confidence and better speaking ability in English to a statistically significant level. Overall, the results were promising and lit the way for other teachers to speakers of second languages to employ similar techniques in their classrooms.

### Future of Action Research?

Fortunately, I fancy myself a sociologist at heart because it is my former training in action research that prepared me to be the type of instructor I am today in the field of teacher education. Research papers, literature

reviews and tests are several traditional ways of determining whether students learn class material, but it is the use of research in the classroom that eventually shows whether or not a teacher fully understands his/her role as a research practitioner in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And isn't that what we need to produce in our public schools: teachers who look beyond their role as babysitters and become active professionals who attend conferences, share their scholarly work, and eventually lead the way to changing the way second language studies are perceived?

## References

Johnson, B., Terry, K., Gerberding, M., Hullett, C. and Perry, F. (2006). *Can 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Grade ELL Students' confidence in oral English be improved by use of certain reading comprehension linguistic strategies?* Unpublished course paper for TESOL Certificate Program, Eastern New Mexico University.