

THE KEY TO THAI STUDENTS' SUCCESS IS BECOMING AN ACTION TEACHER RESEARCHER: BENEFITS, CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

Action research is one of the powerful tools which result in positive learning outcomes of students. It is also a tool for the empowerment of teachers who are overwhelmed in the educational system. Hence, it is essential that teachers become action teacher researchers to bring about both major and minor changes in the educational system. Action research plays a tremendous role not only in bringing changes to a classroom but also, on a wider scale, across the curriculum of the learning community, especially in EFL contexts at the tertiary level.

However, as it seems, action research is often placed in the shadows merely acting as an activity on an academic checklist for official duties, annual performance, or classroom problem fixing.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the benefits of conducting action research in EFL at the tertiary level, the issues derived from the conflicts amongst national higher educational policies, institutional policies, and cultural norms. It then explains what need to be done to help teachers to conduct an action research and become action teacher researchers, especially classroom action research. After reading this article, it is hoped that EFL teachers will be empowered and ready to start their own action research study.

Keywords: Action Teacher Researcher, Benefits, Challenges, Solutions

Introduction

Conducting an action research, involves both internal and external factors. For the internal factors, desires play such an important role in conducting an action research. As Johnson (2009, p. 20) states action research should come from “teachers’ own desire to make sense of their classroom experiences”. Here teachers’ desires involve the factors of time management and incentives. For external factors, action research requires support from an institution or university. In this paper, action research refers to the classroom action research (CAR) which is conducted by particularly teachers who attempt to develop a specific situation within a classroom, which is

different from other research in general that emphasize gaining the new body of knowledge (Watt Todd, 2010, p.1).

In some parts of the world, for teachers to become action researchers is as yet unknown as noted by Burns (2009, pp. 292-294). In her research, there were some evidence showing that most teachers didn't know what action research was. A number of teachers, from country including Thailand, did not even know what action research was, and how to conduct such research or what it involved. Those who knew and had done the research merely regarded it as a means of professional development. However, for those well-supported action researchers, they viewed action research not just as an effective tool for professional development, but also a well-formed mold that helps shape them to become competent teacher researchers—meaning gaining a true identity as researchers throughout the process.

In Thailand, conducting an action research is challenging because of the conflicts amongst national policies, institutional policies, and social norms. The conflicts here refer to the difference in both policy and practice such as, at national level, conducting research studies are a must, but, at university level, teachers are assigned a large amount of responsibilities. Most of the time, research are conducted for the sake of official duties and annual performance evaluation. When compared to other types of research, teachers seem to have less desire to conduct action research in order to arrive at the nature of their classroom problems due to their heavy workload and fewer incentives. If teachers continue to teach traditionally in the same way, without attempting to understand their students and the existing classroom situations or problems, it can possibly result in students' low English proficiency.

In order to help elevate students' English proficiency and academic success, becoming a teacher researcher is one of the ultimate key. The following sections explain the current situations and practices of EFL action research at the tertiary level in Thailand, the benefits and challenges of action research, and solutions to help teachers to become classroom action teacher researchers.

Current situations and practices of EFL and action research in Thailand

Like other nations around the world, Thailand is engaged in a period of educational reform and change. The changes are proposed parallel to those found in many Western nations, and represent perhaps a more radical change given the educational traditions of Thailand. The 1999 National Education Act, for example, emphasized life-long learning and a learner-centered classroom culture. In the same year a number of research papers focused on the English proficiency level of Thai students. In the year 2000, a committee appointed by Office of the Higher Education Commission improved the standards of English language teaching in Thai universities and thus many changes became manifest: now only one set of English scores was considered for students entering university, and each university used these scores to place students according to

their level of proficiency. Once entering university, students should take at least four compulsory English courses. In the near future, every university student must take a National English Proficiency Test before leaving university. In terms of quality assurance, the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) designed a Thai Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (TQF), aiming to improve their learning outcomes and produce quality graduates with a good command of English to serve the ASEAN and the world markets.

As for teaching at the university level, English language curricula have been reformed. As a result, a paradigm shift was evident with an emphasis on autonomous learning, independent work, and innovative and new technology in ELT. Here, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach was selected for all teachers, hoping that this American originated approach would fit into Thai culture and conditions.

High expectations of the learning outcomes appear through western standards of both teachers of English and students. Those standards are decided and set from top down, which is the typical Thai way of doing things, hoping that those fancy western terms, such as autonomous learning and Communicative Language Teaching, would magically fit into the Thai norms and make those students who have learned English for their whole school life become competent in English. It seems far sighted. As suggested by Katz and Snow (2009, p.74), standards, in the current world, should be designed to gear towards competencies that are relevant to both teachers and students. They also point out that even though educational standards are designed to present a coherent vision of effective teaching learning practices, the connection or relevance to the teachers for whom they have been designed become subsided and set up merely for the sake of accountability systems. This is what is happening in Thai education. We seem to have these world-class standards on paper, but forget that at present we can only perform locally.

For action research in Thailand, the 1999 National Education Act also proposed all Thai teachers to develop themselves to be teacher researchers. Many teachers reacted to this and attempted to conduct an action research. Without much knowledge, skills, or support, some teachers have been unable to improve their classroom action research and become teacher researchers. Instead, they have decided to be just a good teacher (Thongthai, 2011). There are also other challenges to get teachers to conduct an action research, mostly because of heavy workloads, time constraints, and a lack of in-depth understanding and skills related to action research. With all the efforts of solving the problems of the Thai education system decided by authorities, based on reports at the annual conference of the Office for National Standards and Quality Assessment (Onesqa) held in 2007, Thai graduates lacked adequate English skills (Jersabek, 2010).

Based on the aforementioned evidence, there are discrepancies between the national educational policy, the cultural norms, institution policy, and curriculum practices. These discrepancies can be seen in curriculum design, teaching pedagogies, and teaching practice

as mentioned above. They create problems such as low learning outcomes of English and obstacles to professional development and reaching standards for teachers. One way for teachers to overcome these difficulties is to become action researchers.

Benefits of Becoming an Action Teacher Researcher

Action research was first started off as a tool for professional development. It is an important tool for teachers, particularly to solve problems through self-study and intervention within the social situations. As Burns and Richards (2009, p.290) note, “The driving purpose for the action research process is to bridge the gap between the ideal (the most effective ways of doing things) and the real (the actual ways of doing things) in the social situation”. Here, the “ideal” represents the researchers who have the systematic knowledge in conducting a research in order to bring the required changes based on findings and outcomes, whereas the “real” represents the teachers who are involved in the practical ongoing social processes within their classrooms.

Thus, action research is a very powerful tool for teachers to not only utilize for solving problems that arise within their classrooms, but also, in a broader sense, to bring about developments and changes to the teaching practices and curriculum reform at the institutional and national levels (Burns and Richards, 2009, p.289-291). One good example of its major influence is the well-known instructional approach called ‘Flipped classroom.’ This approach was researched by a number of scholars and teachers and proved to be effective. The start is simply within the classroom through teaching practices and conducting research studies. Currently, there has been a high growth of classroom implementation of flipped learning which is gaining increasing levels of interest across different fields of study and in many countries.

The terms such as self-reflective, inquiring, and critically motivated practitioner have emerged and grown in the action research of ELT environments. Hence, an action research is a method that actually plays an immensely important role from the ground roots, in which problems and solutions start from teachers’ inquiries and decision making, to the fruitful outcomes of students’ English competencies by continuously “planning, acting, observing and reflecting in progressive cycles of learning from professional practice” (Burton, 2000, p.12-14). This cycle, which sometimes is a very messy one, appears in action research. Also, the cycle involves every aspect of teaching activity—starting from classroom teaching, course development, materials development, and learning achievement—and creates effective outcomes of student’s competencies within a small social community by not having to produce extra work, instead, it enables teachers to become “decision-makers, implementers of purposeful action, and reflective practitioners”. From within this small classroom community of merely a teacher and students, action research can also bring about effective curriculum innovation through collaboration. Based on Burton (2000) working collaboratively among teachers, a successful action research is scaffolding from individual practice to a life-long teacher researcher.

Challenges of Conducting Action Research in Thailand

According Pine (2009, p.236), action research is complex because teacher researchers are not just bound to the commitment of conducting a research but also need to bring about changes which requires “time, patience, communication, sound planning, and implementation skills”. Moreover, heavy workloads, professional isolation, and lack of resources are proved to be detrimental to conducting an action research (Hadley, 1997; Hine, 2013; Norasmah & Chia, 2016).

Similar to the aforementioned challenges, the problems teachers are facing can be explained as a wider scale of points namely as conflicts amongst the national educational policies, institutional policies, and cultural norms, which are discussed as follows.

1. National Educational Policies VS Cultural Norms

Cultural mismatches between global reforms and local norms are apparent with respect to the actual process of educational reform. System leaders at the Ministry of Education have traditionally made all of the major educational decisions in Thailand, whereas those practices require a bottom up system starting within the classroom itself. Ironically, when it comes to change or reform in education, as some theorists have suggested (e.g., Stacey, Fullen, Burton, Johnsom, Golembek and etc.), teachers are the ones who know about what they teach and how to teach, and should definitely take part in the renewal process; however, what has happened here in Thai education is that teaching practice and curriculum are designed for teachers from the top-down (Burton, Daroon, Raimaturapong and Siripong, 2008).

Since the national educational policy commenced, university teachers have faced increasing burdens to reach national standards. One characteristic of the national standards, which is in line with the Thailand Qualification Framework (TQF) and the ASEAN blueprint for life-long learning, is that teachers become teacher researchers. It seems an ambitious goal as a lot of English teachers teaching foundation courses, in particular, hardly find time to even prepare lessons or creates any extra activities for their classes. Back-to-back classroom teaching schedules are often assigned to teachers and extra teaching loads are always assigned to them. Besides teaching, many other administrative responsibilities are given to teachers in terms of quality assurance, which is part of the new reform. In order for a university to pass the quality assurance (Self-Assessment Report (SAR) both internal and external) teachers have to reach the required standards to undertake research studies in both classroom research and knowledge-based research. In addition, they have to write, present, and publish academic papers in order to receive professional promotions and academic titles. On top of this, many teachers have to help run projects to generate income for both academic and community services. This conflict between the national educational policy and cultural norms seems to be detrimental to conducting action research. As Burton and others stated heavy workloads “prevented many teachers from becoming

involved in processes such as action research, and EFL teachers were reluctant to reduce teaching hours in favor of research of any kind” (Burton et al., 2008, p.9).

2. National Educational Policies VS Institutional Policies

Not only are Thai teachers time poor but also financially poor. There are two groups of teachers who conduct research. The first group, teachers prefer doing research because they want to be recognized professionally promoted, and to those who want to generate more income. Thus, they choose to do basic types of research and/or applied research because both of these can be published through referred scholarly or applied journals (Burns, 2009, p.291). The second group, teachers have to conduct research because they are forced to do so by their institution. Thus, they have no other choices but to do classroom action research because it is smaller than other types of research.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, it can be explained that teachers do conduct research, but they only conduct other types of research because there are more stimulating. Actually, stimulants are one of the important keys in promoting action research to teachers. This argument can be supported by Sahasewiyon (2004, p.502)’s research results which revealed that the administrators’ acceptance and admiration, financial rewards, promotions, plaques and certificates are factors affecting local curriculum development through action research of the teachers.

The national educational policy encourages teachers to do research. However, action research is not explicitly and particularly promoted, but quite the opposite, in fact. Basic and applied researches are stated explicitly in the SAR and for teachers to hold an academic title, they must have this research. As for the institutional policy, many universities support teachers who can get grants from external organizations. By following this route, they are apt to receive better promotion by the end of the year. This reveals that there is a lacking of the full support and value for conducting an action research.

Financial rewards are also one of the major concerns. Normally, doing an action research is rewarded at less than half of what basic or applied types of research would offer and the time allotment to complete the task is much less. Most universities allow teachers to do action research within one semester with only a limited time extension. This time allotment is, in fact, inadequate when compared to the average time frame of no less than 6 months to complete such research (Simonsen, 2009). Consequently, many Thai teachers hesitate to conduct action research.

3. Institutional Policy VS Cultural Norms

Another impact which results from conflicts between institutional policy and cultural norms is the lack of action research supports. Many of the teacher participants stated that they did not feel confident to do action research because they thought they were just teachers, not researchers, and it was too complicated to do research. In Thailand, collaborative research is

permitted and supported by many universities just for the sake of making research studies happened. However, many teachers seem to want to do research alone because of cultural norms. In Thailand, it is often seen that we like to work as a group; however, in practice, there are only one or two in the group would be responsible for all of the tasks required. Senior teachers in the group are normally appointed to be in a higher position in charge of the group, but practically do less work, while younger teachers with lower positions take more responsibilities and are sometimes given everything to do. Collaborative action research under the Thai concept of collaboration can become an issue and discourage many teachers from taking part.

Other types of somewhat false support offered by many universities come in the forms of seminars, workshops and training. They are initiated and provided in order to help teachers gain more knowledge in classroom action research and other types of research. However, very often, those productive activities are more or less projected as checklists, so these can be counted towards the university quality assurance (QA). Here, the policy itself is very beneficial, but it does not seem to achieve its end practically or productively. Nor do they seem to encourage action research skills for teachers.

What Needs to Happen to Help Thai EFL Teachers to do Action Research?: Solutions to Conducting Action Research

After having investigated the challenges of conducting action research in higher education in Thailand, basically it was found that teachers greater concern is with time, incentives, and support from their workplace.

1. Conducting a practical and empowering action research skills workshop

Perhaps what teachers' need is for their institution to help them gain better understanding in conducting a classroom action research what it actually involves, and what the important key elements are, especially for reflection and inquiry skills. Self-reflection and inquiry are two important keys which help teachers to generate a more productive and lasting impact on the action research and its results. This solution helps with the concern of time and workload. This article argues that time is not problematic, but the actual issue is deep within the teachers themselves. The perception of teaching and researching, for a large number of teachers, are two different things at two different times. What needs to happen to diminish this thought process is to rethink how teachers use their time doing research as part of teaching in the classroom.

Perhaps, conducting practical and empowering workshops or training using empowerment strategies might be helpful, so that teachers are empowered and interested in changing their mindset towards conducting an action research. It is a proactive workshop or training. Practical and empowering workshops or training refers to workshops or training that are 'interactive, holistic, cooperative, learner-centered, and experiential' (Lundquist, 1990). Lundquist's (1990) framework can perhaps be adopted because it seems practical and emphasizes

individual strengths and competencies. The framework includes (1) an additive approach which can be implemented by adding things that help to change teachers' attitudes, (2) collaborative involvement which can be implemented by encouraging teachers to have greater control of their performance and find sources for collaboration with more knowledgeable persons, (3) reciprocal, interactive pedagogy which can be implemented by teachers going through the process of learning about themselves and sharing what they know, and (4) advocacy-oriented assessment which can be implemented by reflecting on their own beliefs and the knowledge they have gained and assessing their progress and abilities.

For action research skills, the secret to help shape this thinking is inquiry. The ability to generate researchable questions for action research is crucial (Freeman, 1998). By conducting action research, as stated by Burton (2000), teachers do not gain extra work because doing action research is problem solving inside their classrooms, which they already do every day.

2. Improving educational policies: 'Less preparation time for quality assurance; more quality time for teaching and action research'

As for the government part in dealing with the aforementioned issues in conducting action research, the existing policies for higher education institutions, such as quality assurance and all the assessments should be improved or reconsider the ways in which they are executed to maintain educational standards. A 'Less preparation time for quality assurance; more quality time for teaching and action research' policy should be put forth. With this policy, one cannot argue, but foresee a great opportunity for teachers to spend more time in the classroom which means they have more time to prepare, implement, evaluate and reflect. Action research will be conducted automatically. As promising as it sounds, it as yet seems challenging for teachers to want to do action research. Even though teachers will have more time to spend with students and conduct research, there is no guarantee that all of them would actually do action research because it seems to offer fewer incentives than other types of research.

3. Reasonable incentives

An institution or university should support teachers in terms of rewards or incentives. Even though action research is considered to be a low-cost investment method for producing fruitful learning outcomes in education, teachers would still be more appreciative if they could gain reasonable incentives as in other types of research. These could be in terms of either financial reward, academic promotion, or even both. The policy for academic promotion should be negotiated. For those successful action research which bring productive outcomes to students' learning achievements and the teaching community should be, considered and highly supported. This success could be claimed by teachers as Burton (2008, p.16) notes, "teachers are very willing to commit to demanding new processes when the work is professionally rewarding." Even though action research seems minimal, it surely impacts lasting and remarkable outcomes in the classroom and educational community.

4. Collaborative action research networking

Collaborative action research has been proposed and promoted by many scholars (Donato, 2012; Pine, 2009; Puengpipattrakul, 2011). However, in regard to Thai cultural norms where hierarchy, age and gender are deep rooted in doing things, conducting a collaborative action research could be challenging. Teachers who are younger will end up doing almost everything because, in Thai culture norms, older people and people with more power are to be highly respected by the younger ones. Thus, it is quite difficult in terms of management when doing a collaborative action research between Thai teachers. This can definitely lead to discouragement in conducting an action research. Therefore, the selection of a compatible pair or a facilitator is crucial. As Sahasewiyon (2004, p.500) suggests that a facilitator should be respectful and he or she has to “work towards creating a friendly environment” and try to cultivate and encourage basic inquiry skills in the teachers. Here, the office of research unit within a university can plan this supportive system based on Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development theory as part of the collaborative action research. Rather than having teachers work collaboratively in a group among themselves with no guidance, the research unit could support step-by-step in conducting an action research, which cannot get from a research advisor who happens to be selected from a big pool of external environment. Through scaffolding and guiding techniques from a knowledgeable facilitator, a one-on-one or a small group consultation would provide optimal assistance and outcomes. In Thailand, we tend to praise and respect those who are more knowledgeable than us.

Working through interaction with more capable peers in order to bring teachers actual individual development level to their level of potential can also be a means of implementation through research networking. Puengpipattrakul (2011) suggested action research collaborative networking across countries. One cannot argue but envisage benefits that both Thai and foreign teachers would gain from collaboratively conducting an action research together. This can also lead to other academic growth and opportunities.

Conclusion

After exploring and investigating evidence from various sources, it seems apparent that the discrepancies among national educational policies, institutional policies and cultural norms heavily impact teachers from doing action research, which also result in students’ English competency. The issues of time, incentives and action research support have been touched upon. If teachers are prepared with a good source of knowledge and feel empowered, students will be able to improve their English skills.

This article has suggested that action research has a number of personal professional benefits for EFL teachers. Most importantly, it has a great impact on students’ learning achievements. Nevertheless, the discussion here does not merely aim to express how important

and successful action research is; rather it aims to shed light upon how to make it happen among teachers in the teaching circle. This article shows that what is difficult about learning to do action research is not so much the complexity of procedural and methodological aspects of action research itself, but the fact that teachers have to quickly master several skills and actions at the same time. Through the assistance of more compatible and capable peers, or in this case action researchers within a community, support from an institute or university, and the policy makers themselves, action research will certainly become well-known, well-conducted, and wholly-beneficial.

What is left open for further thoughts is the exploration of what might be the required characteristics or criteria of the more capable peers or researchers who are compatible to and can work in collaboration with EFL teachers in the Thai cultural context. Furthermore, investigating and generating a suitable and workable model or strategy in conducting a collaborative action research using a more capable peer as a facilitator is suggested.

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