

The impact of action research on teachers' continuous professional development

Emily Edwards

Introduction

Language teacher continuous professional development (CPD) is an area of research and practice that is currently receiving significant attention, as academics, teacher trainers and managers strive to improve the models of CPD used in ELT contexts around the world. In line with current perspectives of CPD that consider teacher learning as a “dynamic social activity that is situated in physical and social contexts” (Johnson, 2009: 1), action research is viewed as a useful CPD option since it is integrated into the activity of teaching. The growing interest in action research as a model of CPD was evident at the recent IATEFL 2015 conference, where more than ten talks were explicitly based on an action research approach used to address a teacher's particular classroom issue. In addition, there were six talks (including mine) discussing the implementation, value or impact of teachers doing action research, as well as a considerable emphasis on CPD approaches in general.

As part of the move towards research-based approaches to teacher CPD, Cambridge English Language Assessment has been funding national action research programs in Australia since 2010 (organised by peak body English Australia) and in the UK since 2014 (organised by English UK). Each program runs for nine months annually, and involves a series of workshops facilitated by experts in teacher-research, culminating in a conference presentation and then publication of teachers' action research reports. Around six action research projects are accepted per year in each country, with teachers working either individually or in pairs. To participate, teachers must work for an English Australia or English UK-affiliated college, and submit a short research proposal as an expression of interest.

While these programs reflect current theoretical perspectives on CPD, little is actually known about the specific impacts that this kind of informal, practice-based collaborative program can have on the participating teachers. Studies such as Wyatt (2011), involving pre-service teachers on a Bachelor's program,

and Atay (2008), involving in-service teachers on a training program, hint at the benefits of action research, such as the development of research skills and teachers feeling empowered to make changes. Research into other contexts is needed, and especially studies investigating whether benefits can be sustained over time, thereby contributing to continuous development.

The study reported on here explores the impact of the English Australia Action Research program on the English language teachers who have taken part in this program since 2010. This is the first of a series of studies within a larger research project that uses different lenses (longitudinal, cross-sectional, teacher and manager perspectives) to better understand the full impact of this action research program. This report, based on my IATEFL 2015 presentation, focuses in detail on the research design of the first study, and then briefly summarises the preliminary findings, as well as some implications for further research.

Research design

The main research question that guided this study was: What sustained impacts does participating in an action research program have on English language teachers' professional development? A qualitative case study design was used, employing multiple data sources to generate a rich, detailed account of the teachers' experiences (Richards, 2003). The research participants were teachers who had previously completed the annual nine-month English Australia Action Research program between 2010 and 2013. The sampling method used was 'homogeneous' (Dörnyei, 2007) or 'purposeful' (Richards, 2003), since this cohort of teachers were targeted in order to understand more about the experiences of this specific group. From a total of 32 potential participants, 16 teachers volunteered to participate in the study, representing all four years of the program. All of these teachers taught in English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) colleges in Australian cities.

Three main sources of data were collected and triangulated: teachers' action research reports, an online survey, and semi-structured interviews. First, an analysis of 17 action research reports published by the 2010, 2011 and 2012 program participants in *Cambridge Research Notes* (issues 44, 48 and 53) was conducted. The reports were written at the end of each program and all conclude with reflections about the impact, benefits and challenges experienced. A simple content analysis of these sections, consisting of several readings, highlighting the relevant sections, and then a frequency count of the most common themes, resulted in a list of ten specific impacts. The impacts were categorised according to three levels, the teacher, the classroom and the school, and are shown in Table 1. These ten themes signified the immediate impacts of the action research program, as perceived by the teachers.

Table 1: Themes identified in the teachers' published action research reports

Specific immediate impacts of action research (themes)	Level of impact	Number of reports (out of 17) this theme was identified in
1) Improvements in teaching methods and strategies	Individual teacher	10
2) Improvements in knowledge and use of research skills		8
3) Development in critical awareness as a teacher		8
4) Improvements in knowledge/theory about teaching		6
5) Increase in teacher motivation		2
6) Better understanding of students' needs	Classroom (teacher-students)	8
7) Improvements in students' learning		5
8) Improvements in school's materials/syllabuses	School	7
9) Benefits from collaboration		5
10) Initiating other teachers' professional development		2

Table 2: Survey format

Section of survey		Number of questions	Types of questions
Part A	Background to action research project	3	Multiple choice and short answer
	Impact of action research program (relating to ten themes identified in <i>Research Notes</i> reports)	10	Multiple choice (using a Likert scale for agreement with each statement) and long answer after each one ("Please add detail")
	Impact of action research program (relating to whether the impact has been sustained and how)	7	Multiple choice (yes/no), and a long answer after each one ("Please add detail")
Part B	Participant profile questions	7	Multiple choice and short answer

The next stage of the data collection process aimed to investigate whether these immediate impacts were sustained over several years, and whether other impacts were also significant. An online survey was designed to incorporate the ten themes so that the teachers could retrospectively evaluate whether they had personally experienced these impacts, and to what extent, and then provide more detail about each one. The structure of the survey is shown in Table 2.

Once the 16 participants had completed the online survey anonymously, they could contact the researcher to take part in a semi-structured interview of 30 to 40 minutes, and ten teachers volunteered and gave informed consent. The purpose of the interviews was to allow participants to expand on their experiences and provide more details about how the impacts had been sustained in their contexts. The interview questions

were structured around six topics as follows: 1) Background, 2) Reaction to survey, 3) Impact at individual teacher level, 4) Impact on students, 5) Impact at school level, 6) More detail about how the impacts have been sustained over time.

Data from the surveys and interviews was collated and analysed both separately and then using a cross-analysis procedure. One aspect of the survey analysis involved identifying how strong the overall agreement was amongst the 16 teachers about each of the ten themes from the action research reports. After that, two rounds of coding were conducted on the long answers teachers provided to explain each impact, and four main themes emerged from this analysis that showed deeper insight into the teachers' experiences than had been understood from the initial ten themes. A cross-four new themes from the survey data and incorporating

comments from the interviews into existing themes, or adapting the themes as necessary.

Findings

Themes from survey

In general, the answers teachers provided in the Likert scale survey questions correlated with the initial immediate impacts identified in the action research reports (Table 1). Fourteen or more of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with experiencing impacts 1, 2, 3 and 4 (at the individual teacher level) and 6 (at the classroom level) over the years since their action research projects. The survey results showed less agreement about impacts at the school level, suggesting that such impacts are probably context-dependent: it depends whether and when syllabus renewal happens, how much collaboration usually occurs, and whether there are opportunities available for sharing the action research results. However, the impacts of the action research program on individual teacher development came through strongly, and were then analysed more deeply in the cross-analysis.

Themes from cross-analysis

The cross analysis resulted in the four following themes emerging about what the teachers perceived to be the main sustained impacts on them as a result of taking part in the action research program:

- 1) More confident about teaching
- 2) More connected to their students
- 3) More engaged with and in research
- 4) More recognised and valued

These themes, while similar in some ways to the 'immediate impact' themes, also show different impacts: that the teachers were still doing research and reading research articles several years on, and that they felt recognised and valued by managers and teachers at their and other institutions. Some teachers had commenced a research degree, while others were using the action research framework to explore other classroom issues. Also, 13 of the 16 teachers interviewed had published at least one more article apart from the one required for the program, and many had presented at workshops and conferences.

To illustrate the four themes, a selection of comments from the surveys and interviews are provided here, which are representative of the whole group. Firstly, the teachers felt more confident about their teaching and their ability to explore and classroom issues:

My confidence in my teaching has also improved, as we were able to show that our actions had a tangible and positive effect on our students.
(Survey: Teacher 1)

I feel better equipped to go about solving problems and issues in a much more systematic way.
(Survey: Teacher 2)

In terms of the second theme, teachers commented on the student perspective they had gained, and how they now understand and communicate better with their students:

The student feedback gave me an insight into their needs. My feedback to students has improved tremendously since the AR project.
(Survey: Teacher 3)

By interviewing the learners and getting them to do surveys, I actually got a better understanding of how learners approach [action research topic] [...] Now I've got this sort of student perspective.
(Interview: Teacher A)

There were also many comments about how the teachers are now engaged in writing and further research, such as this one:

I'm doing all sorts of writing, in the [national journal] [...] and then I've written recently in [a professional teaching magazine], so yeah, and all that's born I suppose from the interests that started in action research.
(Interview: Teacher B)

Finally, this is one of many comments that show how some of the teachers feel more recognised and valued as a result of taking part in action research:

During the year, I really felt like my profile at work really grew [...] people were paying attention to what I was doing, were interested in what I was doing, so in that respect I sort of earned a profile of sorts. (Interview: Teacher C)

Conclusion

The findings suggest that participation in the English Australia Action Research program had significant sustained impacts on the teachers' professional development, that they were able to make lasting improvements to their teaching as well as extend their research engagement and be recognised for their research, developing their 'profile' or status within their schools. Therefore, for these teachers, doing action research certainly fed into the process of continuous professional development, leading on to new projects and opportunities. While these results are encouraging, there are still many aspects of the action research impact that need to be better understood. The impacts on individual teachers are clear, but whether and how schools may benefit more widely from a teacher's action research project remains unclear. It will also be important to explore the factors that help the impacts of action research to be sustained. The next stages of this research project aim to explore some of these issues through a longitudinal study of teachers' development and also interviews with managers about their perspectives on the use of action research within the CPD framework.

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“Why exploratory practice?” A collaborative report

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Introduction

Judith: On 6 May 2015, the Centre for Language Education Research (CLER), University of Leeds, hosted a one-day Seminar: “*Why Exploratory Practice?*”

There were 45+ participants from all over the world. Some were local to Leeds, others came from Birmingham, London, York, while others flew in from Belgium and Brazil. Participants adjusted their busy schedules to attend for an hour between lessons, or the whole day. There was a vibrant atmosphere as discussions ranged over recent developments in the Exploratory Practice (EP) group in Rio de Janeiro, as well as in EP in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and EP as a form of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). The day ended with an open floor, in which questions such as how to convey the enjoyment we get from EP, while also remaining self-critical and self-aware, were discussed.



Photo 1: From left to right: Judith Hanks, Ines Miller, Yasmin Dar, Clarissa Xavier Ewald and Jess Poole

The following report exemplifies EP: different participants share their experiences for all to read and discuss. The day was also videoed, and clips will shortly be available on the Exploratory Practice Facebook page, and the University of Leeds website.

“Posters from Rio de Janeiro: an inductive Exploratory Practice experience”

Inés: As representatives of the EP Group in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, we brought illustrative posters to the Seminar and invited participants to work inductively to infer what exploratory teachers *and* learners from different contexts in Rio do to enrich their understandings of what happens in their classrooms.

Participants with different backgrounds worked in groups to imagine what might have happened in the contexts where the posters were produced. They tried to guess *who* was involved and *why* the activity was implemented. This discussion generated opportunities for participants to analyze how regular pedagogic activities are adapted as Potentially Exploitable