ACTION RESEARCH FOR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE – BUT WHOSE ACTION ? (THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT)

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ABSTRACT

Lewin's original concept of Action Research, reviewed in Kemmis and Mc Taggart lays emphasis on the "ownership of the Research by the teachers in a way supported by Stenhouse. There are powerful reasons for adopting Action Research as a means of realizing the research element of a postgraduate degree of "Specialization" as fitting both the level aimed at and the underlying philosophy of Reflective Practice. However, the control of the development of the programme by "approving" a preliminary design project leads to a dialogue in which the Teacher Trainers can be seen to be "privileged". It is suggested that this degree of change is justified by efficiency where the research experience is to serve as "consciousness-raising".

There are many reasons why in service courses like the courses of INSET promoted by the COFE project (COFE ? 1993) should make use of an approach based on Reflective Practice. That this approach leads naturally to conducting the research element of a University qualification on the lines of Action Research might seem to follow logically from the points made about such research by Wallace (1991). However, the inclusion of a process of Action Research within a University degree leads to changes which may sit uncomfortably with some of the commitments of the original promoters of Action Research such as Lewin (1946), Stenhouse (1975) and Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1983 etc.) In this paper I shall describe the realization of an Action Research programme, within the degree of Specialization in education with emphasis on the Teaching of English at the University of Tolima, and try to show how the original commitments are affected and attempt to justify such changes.

Wallace's useful championship of Reflective Practice (Wallace 1991) makes a distinction between "Received Knowledge" and "Experiential Knowledge" based on Schön's work (Schön 1983, 1987). There would probably be pretty general acceptance that the real problem for courses of in-service education of English language teachers is to translate theory, whether educational or derived from applied linguistics, into what can be understood by the teachers as directly affecting their practice. Too many teacher development seminars pass with the beneficiaries tucking away another sheaf of notes into a cupboard never again to see the light of day and quickly forgotten. The development of an investigative approach and a competence as "teacher researchers" as envisaged by Stenhouse (1975 p 143 ff) would go a long way towards promoting a concern for the development of professional practice which is the Goal that Wallace (op. Cit.) envisages for Reflective Practice.

Within the Colombian context, another factor influencing the choice of Action

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Research for a degree of Specialization is that it seems particularly appropriate to the level of the degree as defined by the Ley 30. In the programmes of Postgraduate degrees promoted by the University of Tolima, the approach taken to research in the emphasis on English is one that respects the objectives of the Specialization in "perfecting the participants' professional practice". (Ley 30/92 Artic. 11) Thus, the team responsible for developing the degree took the view that it was no part of the purpose of the specialization to develop specialist educational researchers which might more appropriately be tackled at the level of the Master's degree. However, it was part of the objectives of the degree to acquaint participants with what research is, particularly the classroom research which has featured widely in the recent literature on language teaching methodology. (See, for example, Allwright and Bailey (1991), Chaudron (1988), Colombian Framework for English, Working Document 3 (COFE ? 1993). This can be represented schematically as appears below :

1.2 Levels of Research

Level	Traditional Research	Action Research
Undergraduate "Thesis" or dissertation Trabajo de Grado	Definition of Research Problem Critical Review of pertinent literature (Reporting)	Analysis Situation Search for pertinent Literature
Specialisation		Proposal solution, Observation & 2nd Cycle of Analysis Reporting
Masters	Design of Research Plan Gathering and analysis of data Reporting	
Ph D	Review of literature is exhaustive Conclusions are a contribution to knowledge	

The objectives for the program of Action Research can then be quoted from the Action Research guide which was published as part of the Units of the Specialization (Cousin & Arias, 1996).

1.1 Aim (Objetivo General)

To acquaint participants with the methods and practice of Action Research with a view to their adopting an investigative approach to their future development as classroom

teachers within the general approach of Reflective Practice.

1.2   Objectives (Objetivos Específicos)
At the end of this element of their course, the participants will be able to:

1.2.1 Define and delimit a research question.

1.2.2 Place a research question within a critical review of pertinent literature (marco teórico).

1.2.3 Determine and justify appropriate research as well as their own practical possibilities.

1.2.4 Maintain a "research diary" or other record of the development of their investigations within the classroom.

1.2.5 Draft a report of their studies and present it to an educated audience (e.g. of their peers).

The approach to research thus far, then, does not seem controversial and could probably be supported by those, such as Stenhouse (op. cit.) or Elliott (1991) who search for the "empowerment" of teachers. However, a glance at these studies or that of Kemmis & Mc Taggart (1983 etc.) does suggest that there are perhaps certain differences. For example, it would appear, particularly in Kemmis & Mc Taggart, that what informs their concept of Action Research is a situation where groups of teachers, whether formally acknowledged by a work institution such as a school or not, undertake a process of self-development. In Elliott, (op. cit.) the changes were part of a research project, the Ford Teaching Project, but a great deal of emphasis is placed on the role of the university staff as change agents, who particularly tried not to "take over" the running of the research within the individual schools. It can be seen as part of

the ideals of Action Research, perhaps stemming from the social engineering concepts of Lewin which gave the concept its birth, that the teachers themselves should be in charge of their research, and a great deal of the objectives of the research are concerned with changing the way teachers think about themselves and the organizations within which they work. (Kemmis & McTaggart 1992 pp 12 ff).

An idea of the emphasis that they place on the work can perhaps be gathered from their suggestions for keeping a research diary. They say (1992 pp 66 ff).

> "Keeping a diary is useful because it imposes a daily discipline in which you have to think about what you have been doing in the project ..."

The diary should contain 4 kinds of reflections all related to the subject of your investigation :

1. Notes and reflections on changes in the use of language and on the development of a more coherent discourse concerned with your subject of study; you have to consider not only your own language and discourse but also that of others, the way in which they are related to the language and discourse of your place of work and your context (including relevant educational literature).

2. Notes and reflections on changes in your activities in your sphere of action and development of educational practices described and justified in a more coherent way ; ... not only your own ... but of others ...

3. Notes and reflections on changes in social relations between people involved in the same activity, and incipient changes in the formal

organizational structure ... not only in relation to yourself but also to others...

4. Notes and reflections on the way in which the group participates in the process of Action Research itself, the way in which it uses the language/discourse, the activities/ practices and the social relations and forms of organization of action research not only in what affects your personal involvement in action research but also in what affects others, the way action research relates to other activities and processes in your place of work and outside it (for example, does the collaborative process of action research contrast with non-collaborative relations of your place of work, hierarchical, beaurocratic, coercive or competitive ?)"

From the above we would gather that it is very much part of their understanding that the teachers should become independent professionals who develop their own awareness including their interpretation of the process of Action Research !

However, in the experience of setting up the programme of Action Research within a degree as in the university of Tolima, while the team responsible have tried to maintain the essential spirit of this approach, and indeed consider it part of the "perfecting the participants' professional practice" called for in the Ley 30, certain aspects seem inevitably to change. One of these concerns the time available. Whereas the Action Research of Kemmis & McTaggart seems to be developed against a background of flexible timing, in the University of Tolima, in order to complete the degree within a compass of time that would respect the

objective of acquainting participants with research but one which would also be economically attractive, it was decided to complete the whole process of the research within the 40 weeks scheduled of the Module of Emphasis and Research.

To do this would obviously involve a tight degree of control but this was felt to be preferable to sending participants off to "research" in their workplace, with the variable degree of supervision which often results in candidates finally failing to complete their projects even within the space of two years allowable by the University regulations. It was therefore planned that participants would have to approve a research project in which they would spell out their professional problem to be researched, and how they would go about it down to practical problems of how they could meet and analyse the progress of their research in the groups which they were invited, indeed pressed, to form. The schematic representation of the contents of this project can then be presented as follows (the numbering is from Cousin & Arias (1996)) :

4. Phase 1 - Design of the Project and Approval of the Proposal.

4.1 The proposal should contain the following :

4.1.1 A brief statement of the "Research Question". The question itself should be a single sentence but you will probably want to say why you think it is important in not more than a page.

4.1.2 A theoretical framework (marco teórico) for this question. The theoretical background on the basis of which you will clarify what exactly it is that you want to investigate in your teaching. From this discussion should emerge:

4.1.2.1 A proposal for making a change to solve the problem or improve the deficiency in teaching you have identified.

4.1.2.2 A theoretical proposal as to how you will observe (investigate) the effects of your proposed intervention in the class.

4.1.3 (A particular requirement of this degree in view of the short time scale we are working with) - a practical proposal of how you will carry out your research in the conditions of the schools.

The inclusion within this project of a call for a "Theoretical Framework" may also affect the nature of the undertaking and the relations involved. Though the references in Kemmis & McTaggart above to "language" and "discourse" can be taken to be referring to some such process of adopting and learning to use the technical language of applied linguistcs, for example, it has to be said that this inevitably put supervisors in the position of monitoring and "correcting" the interpretations placed on the literature by the researching teachers. This was particularly the case as the participants were supposed to make use of the input from the units of their course to select and define the area in which they would work.

Another problem stemmed from the limitations of the time available to actually carry out the "cycles" of the research. The original model of Lewin envisages a cycle in which the teacher analyses a problem, designs an intervention in the class to tackle this problem, and observes the degree of success achieved by the "solution". To this has been added the idea of a forward motion through a series of cycles, or a sort of helix, where at the end of the cycle the teacher

reflects on his experience, and on the basis of his increased understanding of his problem, modifies his approach or devises a new solution., and so on through successive cycles, (Kemmis & McTaggart, loc. cit.). However, in the conditions of the degree it was found that there would only be a period of 9 weeks which the participants could dedicate to actually carrying out their research. With an eye to inevitable disruptions of the programme within Colombian schools it was urged on participants that they should confine themsleves to just 3 cycles of 3 weeks each. This would give them a degree of flexibility if some classroom procedure that they wished to investigate could not be realised in one week because of a class cancellation. They would still have 2 weeks for implementation, analysis and reflection.

However, one effect of this limitation of time was that it seemed to the team that there could not be any guarantee that the action research undertaken should necessarily lead to success. Clearly, it is hoped that any investigation of the nature and practice of the language teaching classroom will have a beneficial effect, but it was the aim of the degree to introduce participants to the nature and procedures of Action Research with a view to future development, rather than ensuring that such changes were achieved within the brief time allotted to the study. This is one way in which the action research undertaken in the Specialization is differentiated from the action research undertaken at Master's level for instance, where the completion of research features is an important aim.

Another important effect of the limitations of time available but also of the emphasis on the development of the capacities of the teachers which seemed to the team inherent

in the title of "Specialist" was that the actual "Research Question" had to be limited. The emphasis had to be on things that the teacher might do and realize in the classroom rather than on some of the larger questions of the organization of educational institutions. To take an example, an area like "Motivation" is an interesting and problematic area within Colombian schools and the educational system; there may be quite a number of doubts and uncertainties about which participants would like more information. But before they had a specific question into which they could enquire they needed to think of what particular effects of motivation they might want to investigate, and, perhaps more important for action research, what they could do about it.

In fact it was found that the limitation of the scope of the research question was such that, in order to escape from a formulation that appeared to promise research into an immense area, and to keep the focus on the teacher´s practice, the most appropriate formulation was something on the lines of "How can the teacher ..." By using this formulation, focus could be maintained on investigating what the particular teacher could achieve in the classroom without appearing to promise any generalisable conclusions. So examples of actual research questions adopted by groups drawn from the first promotion of the degree include :

"How can the teacher make use of a series of questions to stimulate the production of ideas in the phase previous to writing ?"

"How can the teacher foster positive attitudes towards the reading of ESP materials by using prediction and accompanying pictures ?

" How can the teacher implement semantic mapping as a pre-reading strategy to facilitate reading comprehension among EFL Learners ?"

"How can the teacher encourage students to identify new vocabulary in context in the post-reading stage ?"

In this way a degree of control was introduced into the developing of the research projects but at the expense of limiting the teachers´ right to research into matters which they considered important.

Another aspect of the implementation of Action Research within the context of a degree was the matter of evaluation. Within the degree it was felt that every effort ought to be made to adopt a "criterion referenced" approach to evaluation along the lines of the "logros" that the teachers themselves were being invited to implement in the schools under the decreto 1860. For every stage of the research, indeed of the whole degree, criteria were drawn up and published which could guide the participants in preparing their work. For example the criteria for the Research Project are these (The Numbering again refers to the sections of the Action Research Guide (Cousin & Arias 1996) :

4.6 Criteria for the Research Proposal

For a grade of 5

The project is clearly conceived and logically presented, with a clear statement of the problem to be handled and proposed for improvement, defined with due reference to the literature on language teaching and learning. The methodology to be adopted is duly justified with reference to the literature on action research, and the possible problems of implementation are

imaginatively presented and resourcefully tackled.

For a grade of 3

The project makes a clear statement of the problem to be handled with due reference to the readings of the course. The methodology of the research is given due consideration, based on a logical application of the possibilities for action research presented in the course, and practical problems are satisfactorily dealt with.

For a grade of 1

The project fails to make clear the object of research, and/or shows confusion as to the nature of the theory of language teaching and learning and its application to the problem. The methlodogy to be employed is missing or misapplied, and the practical problems of implementation are not addressed or are unconvincing.

With the application of these criteria it was possible to ensure that all the participants had a research project that was viable and that could be carried out in the very limited time available for the research. However, clearly in this process of submitting their proposal for approval, indeed, with the application of the whole idea of assessment and evaluation to the process of Action Research a good deal of the participants' freedom of action is taken away from them and with that a degree of responsibility for their self-development as members of a profession which is the sort of commitment I interpret Kemmis & McTaggart as calling for, especially in the last of their headings for the research diary that was noted above.

In order to reconnect the work of the participants to this idea of the general advancement of the profession by means of Action Research, it was decided to include a final phase of the research in which the groups responsible for each project would make a presentation of their work to a public which would be constituted principally by other English teachers. This involvement of the public in the outcomes of the research was in conformity with a requirement for all the University of Tolima. However, it represents a chance to make major modifications to the traditional "public defense" of such *"Trabajos de Grado"* which, over time, have become largely ritualised. So in the case of this presentation in the emphasis of English it was stressed that the essential purpose of the presentation was to *communicate* with professional peers. The presentation of impressive looking flip charts or transparencies would be much less important than the demonstration of the ability to relate to the reality of colleagues' experiences within the classroom. Wherever possible the audience was to be *involved,* through group work and discussions or, at the very least, a question and answer session at the end. However, simply carrying out with the audience a sample of the teaching that had been tried in the research would not be highly regarded.

Even for this more peer-directed activity it was felt that criteria should be published as, in any case, this public defense would be graded and would play its part in the total evaluation of the Research element of the degree. The criteria for the "presentation to the public" were as follows :

For a grade of 5

The presentation is logically planned and appropriately related to the abilities and interests of the target

audience. The group succeed in establishing a "rapport" with the audience, within the limitations imposed by the characteristics and linguistic ability of the same, which enable them to explore and react to the concerns of the peer group both with regard to the general professional framework of their activity in the school and the particular technical difficulties of innovation within language teaching and learning. Insights into the nature and working of research in the professional life of teachers are duly shared.

For a grade of 3

The presentation is clearly and logically developed. The involvement of the audience is planned and opportunities are given for doubts and uncertainties concerning professional matters to be raised and appropriately discussed. The presentation succeeds in relating the activities of the research project to the daily experience of the school.

For a grade of 1

The presentation lacks substance and/or organisation. There is little or no evidence of awareness of the context of professional concern in the school, and attempts to engage the teachers to whom the work is presented are absent or fail. The presentation consists of little more than general comments on the activities carried out in the course.

Thus the major commitment of making of action research a cooperative social event has turned up in the criteria by which the candidates for a university degree are to be judged. It has to be said that it is doubtful if

the originators of action research had any such application in mind and it is a matter of some embarrassment that such matters as passing judgment in an extremely hierarchical manner on the efforts of the professional teachers should appear in such an essentially egalitarian context as action research.

However, against should be weighed the fact that suitably qualified university staff, with opportunity to dedicate their time to the supervision and support of such activities as action research are surely in a position to offer help and guidance to those, like teachers, who are struggling to research in their daily work environment. In matters such as the definition of research questions and the interpretation of the literature, it is surely the case that the staff of University language departments have, after all, to dedicate their time and energies to the matter of teaching. In a neo-liberal way, one might even argue that it is precisely this experience and knowledge of the theoretical background that universities have to offer, and that in offering the leadership of such activities as action research they are only fulfilling their purpose. Always assuming, as argued by Elliot (op. cit.), that such advice and leadership can be proffered in a participative and non-hierarchical way !

In describing the way Action Research is handled in the post-graduate degree of Specialist in Education with emphasis on the teaching of English at the University of Tolima, it has to be frankly acknowledged that there are departures from the sort of cooperative, participative approach that seems to be the background to the Australian work of Kemmis & McTaggart. However, by placing emphasis on group work, and requiring the presentation of the

work to other professionals in the field an attempt is made to adapt the University situation to the underlying commitments of professional development and reflective practice. However, this requires a degree of sympathetic handling of the underlying relationship between staff and participants in tutorial, on the success of which the facts have not yet been accumulated.

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