

Action Research in Teacher Training Programs: What Do Teachers Learn?

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Reference Data

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In this paper I present the research background, research context, and the outline of a study in the field of teacher research. The participants of the study took part in a teacher training program in the field of German as a foreign language (GFL). The blended learning program called in German *Deutsch Lehren Lernen* (DLL: Learning to teach German), integrates collaborative research projects rooted in the tradition of action research into its curriculum. I wanted to find out if and how these research projects contributed to the participants' professional development. Some interesting patterns emerged. In particular, participants identified benefits concerning their professional knowledge, their self-confidence, and their relationships with colleagues. Moreover, all participants acknowledged the possibility of collaborative learning. Collaboration was not only considered as rewarding but also as challenging, especially when participants worked with partners they exclusively met on the online platform.

本論文では、ティーチャー・リサーチ（教育者（による）研究）の領域における研究調査に関する背景と状況、その結果について論じる。この研究調査の参加者たちは、「外国語としてのドイツ語（GFL）」の分野で教育者研鑽プログラムに参加している。このブレンド型学習プログラムは、ドイツ語では *Deutsch Lehren Lernen* (DLL: ドイツ語を教えることを学ぶこと) といひ、アクション・リサーチの伝統における共同研究プロジェクトと言える。本論文は、この研究プロジェクトが参加者の教育者としての職業的研鑽に寄与しているのか、また如何に寄与するのかを明示する。データからは、いくつかの興味深いテーマや傾向が見出された。参加者は、自身の専門知識と自己確信、そして同僚らとの関係に関してとりわけ肯定的に認識している。くわえて参加者は共同的な学びの可能性を前向きに捉えている。共同的な作業は有意義なものとして知覚されるのみならず良い刺激とも感受される。それがオンライン上でのみの交流であっても、同様の結果が見られた事は特筆すべき点である。

During the last decade action research has been widely accepted as a vehicle for professional development and has therefore been integrated in more and more teacher training programs around the world (Burns, 2014). Decisions to do this are based on the assumption that theory without practice does not lead to a change in the thinking and the actions of teachers (Schön, 1983; Wallace, 1991). Action research seems to be a promising approach to professional development. Moreover, it is considered an effective learning tool not only for future teachers but also for teachers who are already teaching and who want to develop their skills and method repertoire (Burns, 2005).

Claims for research still remain; empirical research, which focuses on the development of teaching skills through action research, has been especially encouraged (Riemer, 2015). Research into teacher learning is, however, not an easy task due to the complexity of the learning process that is influenced by various factors, such as teaching experience, educational background, personal beliefs, and attitudes (Terhart, 2012).

In this paper I present a teacher training program that integrates action research projects into its curriculum, as well as outcomes from my own research in the context of this program. The aim of the research was to gain insight into the learning of the teachers who are studying with the program *Deutsch Lehren Lernen* (DLL: Learning to teach German). The qualitative data consists of interviews with 12 teachers who have gone through the DLL training program.

The paper is organized as follows: First, the aims and effects of action research are discussed as well as teacher engagement in research. Second, the research context of the study is presented. Because the study is still in progress, only initial insights are outlined. To conclude the paper, future research is discussed.

Aims of Action Research

Through action research, different targets can be pursued. Burns (2005) pointed out that teacher development has become dominant in terms of action research. Yet, produc-

Niewalda: *Action Research in Teacher Training Programs: What Do Teachers Learn?*

tion of knowledge in pedagogy and curriculum seem less relevant. Researchers agree, however, that action research is an effective means to improve teaching practices and to examine classroom situations systematically (Altrichter & Posch, 1994). Action research studies have a close link between theory and practice because research questions and designs are based on the individual classroom situation (Crookes, 1993). Teachers can take on two roles at the same time, allowing them to be both producer and user of theory (Riding, Fowell, & Levy, 1995). As a consequence the gap between theory and practice perceived by many teachers can be bridged through action research: “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 way of doing things) in the social situation” (Burns, 2014, p. 290).

Several research cycles should be carried out to fully exploit the advantages of action research. Indeed, two central characteristics of action research are its cyclical process and collaboration. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) suggested the following four phases of the action research process: planning, action, observation, and reflection. Several cycles should follow each other in the cyclical process, which can be seen as a spiral. The results can lead to new research questions and allow the researching teacher detailed insights into a complex classroom situation. While carrying out several research cycles and reflecting on them with colleagues, one situation can be examined from several angles in different educational contexts. This is why the iterative aspect of action research becomes especially powerful when collaboration with colleagues is involved (Burns, 2005).

Effects of Action Research

As shown in the previous section, action research is considered to contribute to the professional development of teachers. In fact, much research indicates that action research projects contribute in particular to the development of reflection. Wadsworth (1998) summarizes the impact that action research has on teachers, who become

- more *conscious of ‘problematizing’* an existing action or practice and more conscious of who is problematizing it and why [they] are problematising it;
- more *explicit about ‘naming’ the problem*, and more self-conscious about raising an unanswered question and focusing an effort to answer it;
- more *planned and deliberate* about commencing a process of inquiry and involving others who could or should be involved in that inquiry;
- more *systematic and rigorous* in [their] efforts to get answers;
- *more carefully documenting and recording action* and what people think about it and

in more detail and in ways that are accessible to other relevant parties;

- more *intensive and comprehensive* in our study, waiting much longer before [they] ‘jump’ to a conclusion;
- more *self-sceptical* in checking [their] hunches;
- attempting to develop *deeper understandings* and *more useful and more powerful theory* about the matters [they] are researching, in order to produce new knowledge that can inform improved action or practice; and
- *changing [their] actions* as part of the research process, and then further researching these changed actions. (p. 3, emphasis in original)

In summary, teachers become more reflective and conscious of their approach to their methodology and teaching once they have started doing action research. Teachers’ thinking and actions are more likely to change; they are no longer building their decisions on assumptions but on solid information that was collected through data (Burns, 2010). Hence, teachers can be more secure about their decisions because they can justify them properly. Indeed, research suggests that teachers are more willing to change or integrate methods or actions when they find them to be useful for their students’ learning (Guskey, 2002).

Burton (2014) pointed out that the axiom of being reflective is widely accepted in language teacher education contexts. However, there is no consensus on what being reflective actually means. One difficulty is the nature of reflection, which is like any other cognitive skill—problematic to observe and to assess. Nonetheless, a lot of research underlines the positive effects that regular reflection has on foreign language teachers. In their study, Curtis and Szesztay (2005) found several positive aspects in the statements of a group of teachers who reflected regularly and systematically about classroom issues. In addition to having their awareness raised, the teachers reported other benefits like renewed enthusiasm for teaching, being able to look at teaching with fresh eyes, and shifts in understanding teaching. Furthermore, teachers mentioned enhancing the quality of students’ learning and the importance of building professional communities.

Teacher Engagement in Research and Conditions for Doing Research

Even though action research has many benefits as presented above, Borg (2013) claimed that for most language teachers “engagement in research is not part of their professional lives” (p. 104). Indeed, most teachers who carry out action research projects are doing this in an academic context that allows them on the one hand to pursue their professional development and on the other hand to fulfil their publication duty (Norton, 2001). Borg

Niewalda: Action Research in Teacher Training Programs: What Do Teachers Learn?

distinguished between teachers who do not recognize the role as researcher and others who accept this role but are satisfied with reflective practices without working systematically and without publishing their projects.

It is difficult to find evidence of the number of teachers engaged in research. Borg's (2013) survey results showed that just under 50% of over 1300 teachers said they did research at least sometimes. However, these results should be read with caution. Indeed, research conducted by Rainey (2000) revealed that more than 70% of teachers are not involved in research activities at all. Also, Burns (2005) recognized that involvement of teachers in research is limited and that in many cases research results are not published or only accessible to a small number of people. The low number of teachers doing research is surprising considering the fact that many teachers consider research as strong and effective in terms of their professional development. "These findings suggest a tension, then, between the perceived value by teachers of engagement in research and the extent to which they engage in it" (Borg, 2013, p. 104). Even though they might acknowledge its value, the most common reasons why teachers do not undertake research are lack of time, the conviction of not having enough knowledge about research methods, and lack of support from colleagues and employers (Borg, 2013).

When action research is included in teacher training programs some of these barriers can be eliminated. From the beginning, future teachers should have possibilities to develop a research-oriented attitude during their training. One important aspect that contributes to this attitude is an appropriate handling of research literature. Teachers should be able to consider published research "as a source of enhanced understanding of their work, not as a direct solution to their problems" (Borg, 2013, p. 99). Teachers should, for example, know how to handle the practical implications that are often given at the end of scientific papers. Teachers must adapt the research to their classroom situations to make use of it in their individual local teaching context, which is unique with respect to various factors, such as learners or type of institution. Moreover, they should be encouraged to develop an interest in exploring classroom issues and have opportunities to integrate insights from reading with their current classroom practices and pedagogical theories (Borg, 2013). The integration of insights from reading can be achieved through planning, implementing, and reflecting on their own research project. This in turn may expand their repertoire of data collection methods, which helps them not only to understand their own classroom better but also to assess other research. To sum up, a research-oriented attitude can be developed when participants see contact points between theory and their classroom practice. Therefore participants need to get in touch with classroom situations and guidance through a professional teacher. Crookes and Chandler (2001)

stressed the importance of providing teachers with tools that help them to assess their teaching and to improve it.

The necessity to offer adequate programs for people who come originally from other professions is increasing, which in the long run goes along with the assumption of a continuous lifelong learning process (Crookes & Chandler, 2001). Nowadays, people are more flexible in planning their professional careers. In many countries, a lot of university lecturers were not originally trained as language teachers, but have come from other academic fields. It is therefore likely that these teachers did not have enough possibilities to study didactical and methodological aspects of language teaching. Hence, there should be ways for them to develop their teaching skills and their theoretical knowledge base in an appropriate and feasible way. One possibility in the field of GFL is the program DLL, which will be described in more detail in the following section.

A Current Research Project to Gain a Better Understanding of Teacher Learning

Research Context: The Program Deutsch Lehren Lernen (DLL)

Aims and Contents of DLL

DLL is designed as advanced training for GFL teachers in different areas, for example school teachers or teachers in adult education, but also for persons who want to enter the GFL teaching field as lateral entrants. Conditions for participating in the program are having a university degree and a sufficient language level in German (B2 of the CEFR). The basic program includes six units. The program is based on current didactical and methodological principles in the area of foreign language teaching, such as learner autonomy or task orientation. These concepts and principles guide the learners through the basic units of DLL and are explained in the context of the individual topics, including the traditional four skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) and different areas in language teaching, such as vocabulary learning or grammar.

Theoretical and Didactical Concept of the DLL Program

DLL can be studied at the German language and culture centre *Goethe Institut*. Among the different constellations in which the participants can work with the DLL program (including online and attendance seminar), a promising approach seems to be the blended-learning setting (Legutke & Mohr, 2015). This means that tasks are discussed on an online platform and that research projects are presented in face-to-face-meetings.

Niewalda: *Action Research in Teacher Training Programs: What Do Teachers Learn?*

Encouraging reflection is an important aspect of DLL. This is achieved through videos and tasks. While discussing videos of other teachers' lessons, participants speak about concrete classroom situations and challenges. The videos are not best practice examples, rather they show authentic classroom situations. According to Gerlach (2015), videos especially help beginners or newly formed groups to talk about teaching. Videos make it possible to reflect on a third party instead of speaking in a group about one's own teaching. Additionally, reflection is encouraged through different tasks. When solving them, it is important to refer to individual—even though limited—teaching experiences and to connect the theory to one's own classroom experience. The key elements for encouraging reflection are small research projects, which will be discussed in the next section.

Integration of Action Research into DLL

In the context of each unit, participants plan, carry out, and evaluate an action research project. The projects are adapted to the participant's own teaching context and are planned and discussed in groups of three. The project is called *Praxiserkundungsprojekt* (PEP: Project of Practice Exploration). The term *research* is avoided to stress that PEPs are not big projects that take a lot of time and require a lot of empirical knowledge, but small studies allowing interesting insights in the teacher's classroom (Legutke & Mohr, 2015). The approach is supposed to give confidence to teachers who might be intimidated by doing a research project without much research experience.

Furthermore, the project should be kept small to encourage teachers to use PEPs as a means of individual professional development at a later time in their professional life. The sustainability of reflective processes is more likely achieved when participants work together and have a facilitator who gives advice and helps them in structuring the process. Therefore the participants of DLL have a tutor who supports them online as well as in face-to-face instruction, which takes place after each module.

Design of the Study

Research Questions

The current research project dealt with the self-assessed learning progress of DLL participants in formal blended-learning settings in East Asia. It is assumed that participants studying with DLL gain competences on different levels, especially through carrying out several research projects such as PEP. Hence, the research questions are as follows:

RQ1. What do participants learn, from their perspective, when working with the DLL program?

RQ2. What do they learn, in particular, through carrying out several research projects?

Participants

Data were collected through qualitative methods. The main instrument of the inquiry was semistructured interviews. At the centre of the research interest was the individual and therefore the subjective experience of the participants. Semistructured interviews helped to provide insights into the participants' thoughts and feelings. They were on the one hand open enough to let the participants freely explain their perceptions, which made it on the other hand easier for the researcher to address the key points. In addition to the interviews, the researcher carried out nonparticipatory observations during three face-to-face instructions and had access to the virtual learning platform.

Data have been collected since December 2014. Twelve participants from different institutions in East Asia have been interviewed. Their academic background as well as their teaching experience varies greatly. Some have already been teaching for many years and joined the program to refresh their knowledge (three teachers); others are lateral entrants and work with the program as basic training (nine teachers).

Findings

Initial results show that participants were able to identify learning incidents on different levels, more precisely on the cognitive, affective, and interpersonal levels. In the following section, one example of each level will be described in detail. First, the participants reported a growth of professional knowledge. It is important to mention that this was highly varying depending on the participants' experience in teaching and the knowledge they had before starting the training. Participants who had a GFL degree and were already teaching several years had basic knowledge of foreign language teaching. Nevertheless, they found it rewarding to read about teaching theory and methods and to discuss these topics both online and offline with other participants. They could intensify their knowledge, for example, in terms of understanding terminology concerning teaching methodology. Novice teachers tended to look for concrete advice and tools to use in their lessons and found, in particular, modules that contained forms of tasks and activities very helpful. As for their experienced counterparts, the veteran teachers found these lessons less useful. They were more concerned about their reflections as a teacher.

Second, learning incidents occurred at the affective level: Participants noticed a growth of self-confidence. In a protected situation they had the possibility to try out a

Niewalda: Action Research in Teacher Training Programs: What Do Teachers Learn?

new method or activity. One teacher reported using iPads for the first time in class during her research project. Having been sceptical in advance, she found out that students were very confident in using these devices in class. Her worries of not being able to help them with technical issues turned out to be unfounded. She reported to be very happy for that possibility and the stimulus to try out something she would have avoided if it had not been in the training context. One thing she noticed, which was an important aspect for her, was the exchange of ideas with a colleague, with whom she carried out the research project.

On the third—the interpersonal—level, the impression of one participant was that relationships between and among teachers changed during the time of their training. The participant reported that she talked more often about her classes with colleagues and had more motivation to share both concerns and positive experiences about teaching. This seems an important aspect both for beginner and experienced participants. One very experienced teacher regretted that she started the training 6 months after having started to teach in a new institution. She reported that if she had begun sooner with the exchange of opinions and ideas with her colleagues, she would have got used to the new teaching context faster. However, concerning exchange, many respondents mentioned that the relation to participants they met exclusively on the online learning platform was less important. In this case, they felt less motivated to get into a deeper and more substantial exchange with them. One participant stated that she wrote comments solely to those she knew in person. Being a visual type, she felt it was important for her to know the people behind the comments on the online platform.

Discussion

Preliminary findings of this study suggest that while working with DLL, many learning processes are initiated. All participants found the research projects to be rewarding and challenging, especially concerning the time they had to spend and the efforts for collaborating with their partners. Indeed, cooperative learning requires a lot of willingness to compromise, empathy, and openness (Legutke & Mohr, 2015). Its positive effects, though, are supported by many studies (Zibeliuss, 2015). Collaborative teacher development “arises from, and reinforces, a view of teacher learning as a fundamentally social process—in other words, that teachers can *only* learn professionally in sustained and meaningful ways when they are able to do so together” (Johnston, 2014, p. 241). Most of the participants accepted the challenge of collaborative learning but identified many obstacles during the different phases of the project. Many reported that exchange of ideas often happened only in the beginning of the project or exclusively toward the end. Communi-

cation and collaboration with partners that stretched from the beginning of the project to the end was not the common situation and stayed demanding. Moreover, the respondents claimed to prefer collaboration with teachers they already knew in person. This is not surprising; it is an important condition that increases the success of the project (Legutke & Mohr, 2015). Social presence creates cohesion of the group. It is a key element that describes the ability of the participants of online courses to show themselves as real people behind their online identity (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Hence, unsuccessful teams could not provide enough communication and cohesion to carry out their project together.

Learning and building professional communities online is an important factor that needs more consideration. Respondents having a double or even triple burden of work, family, and professional training explained that the blended-learning scenario was helpful for their respective life circumstances. The possibility to access the information online anywhere and anytime enabled them to participate in the program. The blended-learning approach stays promising, even though the relationships created online might not be close enough for many participants to develop the necessary openness to share deep thought and detailed experience and feedback. This is an aspect that should be investigated further. Hall and Knox (2014) have called for further investigations of learning experiences and classroom practices of teachers who have gone through distance learning programs.

Conclusion

This research project has not been completed yet, which is why results in detail could not be presented. From the data collected so far, I have highlighted some interesting facets of teacher learning concerning cognitive, affective, and interpersonal development. Particularly, the participants in this study valued the possibility of learning together with colleagues about foreign language teaching. Collaboration was considered to be both demanding and rewarding. Therefore, it is crucial for facilitators to create the necessary framework for the participants to collaborate.

Further research will be directed towards adding explanations to the current findings and to systemize them. Moreover, it will be interesting to investigate the longer term impact the teacher training has on participants’ work. I will stay in contact with the participants to find out about this and hope to make a contribution to the central question of effects and sustainability of teacher training programs.

Niewalda: Action Research in Teacher Training Programs: What Do Teachers Learn?

Bio Data

Katrin Niewalda has been teaching German as a foreign language in Japan since 2011. She obtained her master's degree in GFL in 2010. Her research fields are L2 didactics and teacher research.

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