

Towards an Action Research Approach to ELT in Morocco: Why, and how ?

Manar Dahbi

Imzouren Secondary School, Imzouren City
Morocco

Abstract

While the practice of carrying out action research of various scopes has lately been the academic tradition in English language classrooms in many international contexts, most Moroccan teachers of English devote themselves to the teaching routine, but seldom reflect on the issues underlying the teaching/ learning process. Also, the new educational reform, just like the previous ones, stresses the need to change just teaching methods and textbooks. However, any attempt to change education cannot be achieved without teacher change. The aim of the present paper is to argue for the need to adopt an action research approach to English language teaching in the Moroccan educational system.

Keywords: action research, teacher-research, practitioner-research, reflective practice, professional development.

1. Introduction

As a matter of fact, the public perception of teaching in Morocco is that it is a simple task, merely requiring the teacher to present information to students, and test them to see that they have learned it. As teachers know, teaching is a much more complex task. The problem with classroom research being conducted by outside researchers is that classrooms are very complicated specific contexts, replete with their own routines and expectations which are difficult for outside observers to understand. According to Pica (1996, p. 59), classrooms are complicated “social communities” because teachers are confronted by a diversity of students who differ markedly in what they bring to the classroom in terms of their ability level, gender, learning style, motivation and attitude toward the teaching/learning process. Therefore, Stringer (2014, p.14) maintains that there is no “one-size-fits-all” formula that teachers can apply to their teaching in all situations. Language teachers, hence, may find themselves in need to engage in systematic processes of inquiry as an ongoing feature of their classroom life in order to analyse their teaching practice, and their students’ progress as part of the process of planning classroom activities. The more aware they become of the consequences of their teaching, the more control they get over how to teach.

Given this need for teachers to understand their own classroom situations, action research, or variously identified as teacher-research/ practitioner-research/reflective practice, provides the means for them to build a body of knowledge about the students under their care, and to incorporate it into an effective program of teaching and learning. The term “action research” was adopted to describe a small-scale investigation undertaken by a class teacher. Kemmis (1983,p.179) describes it as a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by teachers in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own educational practices, their understanding of those practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out. With the advent of this type of research, there has been a common focus on practice as inquiry. North (1987, p.37) contends that practice becomes inquiry only when practitioners/ teachers themselves identify a classroom problem and search for possible causes and solutions. This trend of research gives voice to the teacher who is the closest to students. It empowers teachers to take an active, leadership role in their teaching context, reflect on and improve their practice. As such, teachers become less vulnerable to, and less dependent on, external answers to the challenges they face in their specific classroom contexts.

As a matter of fact, action research is widely used in the western context by teachers who use it to improve their practice. In Morocco, however, it hasn’t become a tradition yet for teachers to see action research as an integral part of their responsibilities as professionals dedicated to developing their teaching and themselves. However, high schools in Morocco are changing radically-there are more students, new teaching programs and methods, and increasing debates around standards and effectiveness. In fact, the adoption of the National Charter for Education and Training (NCET), issued in 2000, resulted in drastic reform touching upon many aspects of the educational system in Morocco. Among the many aspects dealt with in the reform is the status of foreign languages in the Moroccan educational system. As a way of meeting national aspirations for openness and communication at the global level, the charter devotes a large space to teaching foreign languages including English. Article 110 in the second part of the charter clearly states the reasons behind enhancing the teaching of foreign languages:

- Considering the country’s geo-strategic position, as a civilization crossroads;
- Considering the neighborhood bonds between the Maghreb, African and European dimensions;

-Considering the country's insertion into the tendency to communication and open approach at a global level.

(NCET, Part II, Art.110)

In order to facilitate the initiation of learners to foreign languages as well as their command, the reform stresses the need to revise and adapt the programs and methods, the school manuals and the didactic supports (NCET, Part II, Art. 106). Moreover, the following orientations are also to be implemented:

-The teaching of each foreign language shall be connected with the teaching of cultural, technological or scientific modules, in the same language and within the schedule limits foreseen for it, in order to allow its functional use and its constant practical exercise, and, therefore, the consolidation, the maintenance and the improvement of the linguistic communication competences, in the strict sense;

-The upgrading of language teachers shall be undertaken in a systematic and planned manner, and so shall be undertaken the regular assessment of language acquisition.

-A foreign language ten-year development plan shall have to be drawn by June 2000. This plan ought to define the different aspects regarding its implementation, based on the language objectives stipulated in Article 112:

-creation of a training body for teachers;

-recruitment and training of teachers, improvement of the training of active teachers by recurring to continuing education, and elaboration of adequate pedagogical methods and didactic tools;

-preparation of the national assessment tests, and the implementation schedule and the financial means that are to be used.

(NCET, Part II, Art.117)

Reading the above sections in the Charter devoted to languages clearly indicates that this language policy focuses on the improvement of the quality of education and training. The teacher has therefore been called upon to adapt to this new situation. In fact, practitioners have always been held publicly accountable for student achievement results. Paradoxically, however, they are denied responsibility for making decisions in the operations of the teaching learning process.

Recent reform related to teaching languages, like the previous ones, reinforces a traditional paradigm in academic staff development that emphasizes the practice and perfection of only teaching methods and techniques. In fact, this paradigm is rooted in a training tradition of skills and objectives, outcomes, prediction and control of what is to be learnt and how. However, modern approaches to teaching and staff development center the role of teacher reflection in the teaching/learning process. Action research/teacher research and teacher inquiry is part of a new vision of teacher education and professional development. It suggests that what educators need are opportunities to explore and question their own and others' interpretations, practices, and ideologies.

According to Scheidler (1994, p. 45-56), any attempt to reform education cannot be achieved without teacher change. And the key to substantial change is professional development. Moroccan teachers need to adopt a self-reflective attitude to their work, they need to explore and test new ideas, methods and materials, to assess how effective the new approaches are, to share feedback with fellow team members, and to make decisions about which new approaches to include in the curriculum, instruction and assessment plans. According to Fullan (2000, p. 34) teachers should be key players in the change process and not observers on the sideline watching the process moving back and forth.

In line with this argument, this paper highlights the need for a new professionalism in ELT in Morocco. This paper also attempts to propose an action research approach to ELT in Morocco to assist teachers to achieve the professional development that enables them to meet the demands of change rather than fail to participate in the process. And finally, it calls for the need to promote teacher motivation to practise action research and argues for turning teacher training into teacher development.

2. The need for a new professionalism in ELT in Morocco

The nature of teacher professionalism is open to varying interpretations. In analyzing teacher professionalism, Hoyle (1980, p. 9) differentiates broadly between “restricted” and “extended”, or also called, “new” professionals. The former could be described as practitioners who prepare their lessons and care about their students. However, they are limited in outlook, failing to think beyond their classroom. They do not consider the broader purposes of education as relevant to them. Extended professionals constantly question and try to link theory to practice, seeking to improve their performance by engaging in professional development activities. In this way they are continually developing as teachers and placing their classroom work in wider educational context. Hoyle emphasizes that this model of professionalism should be the aim of all teachers.

However, according to McNiff & Whitehead (2011, p.2) the literature tends to reinforce the portrayal of practitioners as doers who are competent to be involved in improving practice, but not as thinkers who are competent to be involved in debates about knowledge. Consequently, in wider debates concerning educational policy practitioners tend to be excluded on the assumption that they are good at practice, and they should leave it to official theorists to explain what, how and why people should learn, and how they should use their knowledge.

Advocators of action research, like Burton & Bartlett (2005, p.3), criticise this “narrow” view of teacher professionalism because education involves much more than the development of knowledge and skills. They argue for an “extended” view of professionalism in education that acknowledges and celebrates self-study and reflection. Thus, they advocate a key role in critical professionalism for inquiry into practice by teachers themselves through action research. Implicit in this idea is the concept of the teacher as researcher. This image of the teacher criticizes the notion of teacher as technician- someone who has mastered certain skills for classroom control, and learnt techniques for teaching a particular subject, but accountable to others for ideas developed elsewhere. Teaching as such is, unfortunately, a form of alienated labor, with teachers comprising a sub group lacking in professional autonomy, denied control over their form of work, subject to external monitoring and relegated to a purely instrumental role. It is unsurprising, then, that the image of the teacher as researcher is unfamiliar, for it embodies features that value responsibility, critical reflection, and the exercise of professional judgment. The teacher-researcher image is a powerful one. It embodies a number of characteristics that reflect on the individual teacher’s capacity to be autonomous in professional judgment. This image challenges the one within the restricted view of professionalism. According to Becker (1962), as cited in Burton & Bartlett (op.cit, p. 7), a restricted view of the teaching force embodied certain characteristics that describe professional behavior. These include subscription to an exclusive, specialized body of knowledge partly learned in higher education, a code of professional conduct and ethics with a strong emphasis on service and high degree of self-regulation by the professional body itself over entry, qualifications, training and members’ conduct. The problem with this approach is that it tells teachers how to be good at their job, and does not get them recognized as competent to make decisions about their job, or further, about directions their profession should take.

3. Action research as a form of teacher professional development

The need for ongoing teacher education has been a recurring theme in language teaching circles recently and has been given renewed focus as a result of the emergence of teacher-led initiatives such as action research. Mc Niff (2009, p. 5) emphasises that the professional development of teachers is a challenge facing contemporary education. Teachers have much knowledge about the nature of learning; created from their own experiences as learners and the input they receive through their tertiary training. This creates, as Nicol (1997, p. 97) describes, a “wealth of knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning”. However, these beliefs, while well-formed and powerful are often resistant to responding to curriculum change. Teachers are expected, by the community at large, to keep abreast of current thinking with regard to the teaching of literacy practices and accommodate for this thinking within their classroom practice. Teacher professional development needs to be responsive to this call. Action research/teacher research and teacher inquiry is part of a new vision of professional development. It suggests that what educators need are opportunities to explore and question their own practices.

According to Richards et.al (2005, p. 3-4) two broad kinds of goals within the scope of teacher education are often identified, training and development. Training refers to activities directly focused on a teacher’s present responsibilities and is typically aimed at short-term and immediate goals. Development, however, serves a long-term goal and seeks to facilitate the growth of teachers’ understanding of teaching and themselves as teachers. The need for ongoing renewal of professional skills and knowledge is not a reflection of inadequate training but simply a response to the fact that not everything teachers need to know can be provided at pre-service level, as well as the fact that the knowledge base of teaching constantly changes. Also, experience is insufficient as a basis for development. While experience is a key component of teacher development, in itself it may be insufficient as a basis for professional growth. Many aspects of teaching occur day in and day out, and teachers develop routines and strategies for handling these recurring dimensions of teaching. However, research suggests that, for many experienced teachers, many classroom routines and strategies are applied almost automatically and do not involve a great deal of conscious thought or reflection. Experience is the starting point for teacher development, but in order for experience to play a productive role, it is necessary to examine such experience systematically. The idea of self-reflection is central here. Critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching. It involves examining teaching experiences as a basis for evaluation and decision making and a source for change. Teachers who are better informed as to the nature of their teaching are able to evaluate their stage of professional growth and what aspects of their teaching they need to change. In this respect, when each lesson is looked on as an empirical investigation into factors affecting teaching and learning and when reflections on the findings from each day’s work inform the next day’s instruction, teachers can foster continuous growth and development.

No-one would deny that ELT is an innovative field; teaching methods and materials are being changed continuously to achieve better standards of language proficiency. In relation to the Moroccan context, the adoption of the National Charter for Education and Training (NCET), issued in 2000, resulted in drastic reform touching upon many aspects of ELT in Morocco. Teachers are called, therefore, to adapt to the new situation because they are made accountable for student achievement to the community as a whole. Teachers have two options: they can either shelter behind a long-established tradition of passivity. Alternatively, they can take up the challenge to explain what they believe, why they believe it and how all this relates to the way

they operate in the classroom. While the formal option may have obvious attractions for the teacher, it carries a great danger. If teachers fail to enter and influence the debate, decisions of great educational importance may be taken by those with less informed understanding, with negative consequences for teachers and learners alike. If, on the other hand, teachers can argue for what they do and why they do it, they will further the professional development they need to be up to any change or reform rather than staying passive on the side line

4. Enhancing Moroccan teachers' motivation to practise action research

In Morocco, owing to the fact that action research is still at its dawn, teachers' self-motivation in launching action research projects need to be implanted and promoted in every EFL educational level in Morocco. For this, action-research workshops or training courses are essential to build up a research atmosphere and practice to those who are in the teaching profession particularly research novices.

Also, practitioners have the right to have their work formally recognised. This can take the form of professional certificates and awards. Most award-bearing courses internationally acknowledge that personal inquiry and forms of self study are as equally valuable forms of research as traditional empirical investigations. This recognition of the value of practitioner research is accompanied by a growing awareness of the need for increased access to opportunity for all and accreditation.

Finally, with the issuing of the new educational reforms in Morocco, there have been consistent national investments in changing teaching methods and materials in order to improve teaching pedagogies and skill sets, and thereby help raise students' levels of achievement. In spite of these reforms there are still increasing debates around standards and effectiveness. This is because any attempt to reform education cannot be achieved without teacher change. And the key to genuine change is professional development. The Moroccan ministry of education needs to invest in human resources. There should be a budget allocated to action research to cover the expenses required by teachers' research projects.

5. The need for turning teacher training into teacher development

Teacher pre-service training in Morocco is a combination of the transmission and the experiential models. Behind many of the best-known theoretical approaches to language teaching of the past three decades lies the assumption that there is one set of pedagogical principles which apply to all teachers in all learning situations. For followers of these approaches, it is the job of the teacher to match his/her teaching style to the principles of the method rather than for the method to be flexible enough to adjust itself to the distinct teaching styles and personalities of individual teachers. Not surprisingly, then, the dominant paradigm in academic staff development emphasizes the practice and perfection of only teaching methods and techniques. In this respect, the transmission model of training works on the assumption that role of the trainee is largely receptive. The Moroccan staff development program for ESL teachers is also experiential in the sense that teacher education results from close observation and analysis of what happens in the specific classroom environment during the practicum period.

In the literature, there has been recently a substantial growth of interest in the notion of teacher development instead of teacher training. The developmental model differs from the traditional transmission and the experiential models of teacher education in that it extends the concept of teacher education beyond pre-service training into the development of the qualified teacher as a practitioner and an individual. Teacher education is seen as open-ended and is not

considered complete when the pre-service training course ends. It should lead to a lifelong concern with developing and improving the teacher's professional skills and self-awareness.

The aim of teacher development is to encourage teachers to reflect on their teaching and become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. The reflective practitioner is a teacher who wishes to discover more about his/her own teaching in order to facilitate personal and professional growth. Accordingly, teacher development is an active process, initiated by the teacher, not imposed by others.

Given that a major aim of teacher education is the development of a reflective practitioner who seeks to develop both as a professional teacher and an individual, action research is an important component in achieving this goal. The inclusion of an action research element within an in-service training programme can make a significant contribution to the developmental aspect of in-service teacher education in Morocco.

6. Conclusion

The influence of action research around the world is significant. There is a real awareness that if governments wish their citizens to become productive and adaptive workforces, professional learning has to be given the highest priority. The Moroccan educational system needs to be a context that supports a culture of inquiry, and acknowledges the voices and knowledge of teachers. Also, individual and collective change begins in the individual mind; to change in an educational and sustainable way teachers have to see the sense of changing and want to change. This requires courage and tenacity.

About the author

Dr. Manar Dahbi holds a Ph.D in Applied Linguistics from Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdelah University, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences of Fez, Morocco. She teaches English for business, English for computer engineering, and translation at the National School of Applied Sciences of Al-Hoceima. She has also a ten year teaching experience as an English secondary school teacher.

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