Action Research to Enhance Quality Teaching

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Abstract
Quality teaching is and will remain a challenge for procedural educational innovation, as it is both the target objective and the vehicle of change. The main contributor to this process is always the teacher who has to adhere to the process of change for the purposes of developing his/her own career and improving the quality of teaching. This study aims to determine how action research would improve quality teaching in pre-service and in-service teacher training, and shed light on the reciprocal relationship between action research and innovation. In this paper, action research is considered as a constant independent variable that can enhance the dependent variables of pre-service / in-service teacher training and quality teaching requirements. The latter are supposed to be two purposes of innovation. Innovation is, thus, performed as the usual practice of innovative teachers who take risks of improving quality teaching in a methodological procedure according to their teaching contexts. The study attempts to answer the following questions: What is quality teaching and how does it impact innovation within the quality teaching assurance framework? What is action research and how does it help teachers improve their research and innovation potential? What does the ENS programme course provide as qualitative training to improve quality teaching and innovation? And, What are the results achieved, so far, at the ENS Constantine? We will illustrate the whole procedure with a specific example of teacher training at Ecole Normale Supérieure of Constantine.
*Keywords***:** Action research, innovation, quality teaching, teacher training

Introduction

During the last 13 years, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education (MHE, henceforth) introduced major reforms in the organization, implementation, and evaluation of course programs in order to improve the rates of quality assurance (QA) and adhere to worldwide referential frameworks. Its mission consisted of supporting opportunities for every citizen through democratic values of social and economic development to meet the increasing needs of the Algerian community.

The whole process of reforms was led and managed by the MHE; it was organized in a hierarchy of roles and responsibilities according to a top down / bottom up model. At the top level, the ministry acted as a leader and organizer of reforms through pedagogical meetings hierarchically organized locally (every HE institution) and regionally (East, West, and Central regional conferences) to disseminate norms and conventional frameworks of the Unit Credit system of the BA, MA, and Ph.D. degrees. At the bottom level, and at every pedagogical committee, teachers met to suggest the implementation of program courses of all disciplines.

This dynamic activity of reforms and change brought about some improvement in course contents but required a much better pedagogical and evaluative quality in teaching and assessment methods and tools. QA came into play to evaluate, on the one hand, the efficiency of testing students' achievements according to the competency-based approach (Bader & Hamada, 2015) and, on the other hand, to check the quality of teaching according to QA criteria. Accordingly, the changes in course contents and methodology required assessment efficiency by shifting from summative assessment towards a formative and criterion reference assessment. Pencil and paper tests remained as term exams of knowledge while additional continuous assessment tools were introduced to evaluate students' achievements in terms of performance. As far as QA is concerned, the MHE introduced Competency Based Assessment (CBA) to ensure triplet evaluation that consists of associating the three partners involved in HE (The educational institutions, the employment departments, and the employers); this partnership resulted in the Algerian QA Framework: Commission d'Implémentation de l'Assurance Qualité dans l'Enseignement Supérieur (CIAQES, henceforth).

The reform mentioned above concepts enhanced the practical contribution of teachers, researchers and course designers by Action Research (AR, henceforth) to achieve two major purposes of HE that are teacher training and quality teaching. At the HE institution level, like the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Constantine (ENSC, henceforth), the contribution consisted of providing the teaching and learning environment with libraries, computing facilities, and virtual learning environments like e-Learning, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and OER (Open Educational Resources). Furthermore, the MHE recently improved and developed an Evaluation Grid (MESRS 2018) to assess and reward teacher/researcher contribution according to QA requirements. At the teachers' level, the contribution consisted of adopting an innovative model through pedagogy enhancement, organization, implementation, and evaluation of program courses for pre-service and in-service teacher training according to market and employment demands.

Action Research and Innovation

Innovative models and approaches for teacher professional development may vary from one

educational system to another. Depending on the educational policy, the educational reforms may affect educational objectives, course contents and programs, and social, demographic, and economic requirements. As educational reforms may emphasize one or some of these purposes, the innovative models and approaches for teacher professional development would be interested in improving teaching quality according to the context requirements, educational policy guidelines, course, and program designers. The former always claim for improvement, innovation, and change that have to be applied during the pre-service and in-service experience. Would teachers and teacher-trainees adhere to the process of educational innovation, reform, and change with or without training? The fossilized teaching practices proved to be a major hindrance to innovation and reform. However, motivation and awareness are necessary for discussions on qualitative teaching criteria to enhance quality teaching through innovation.

A positive atmosphere should provide a methodological framework for AR and innovation. The claim for innovation by thinking outside the box- is a misleading procedure when it does not take into consideration the contextual variables of innovation. The former are demographic/societal needs, national and international challenges, financial resources, and specific educational purposes.

In the case of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the ENSC, AR focused on sharing experiences and research results of innovation in real contexts of teaching. It targeted the enhancement of teacher career development through and by research commitment to their teaching tasks and encouraging research publication among the academic community, not through administrative decisions,

The overall study of this particular case of innovation and AR aims to:
- Determine to what extent AR would improve quality teaching in pre-service and in-service teacher training;
- Determine the reciprocal relationship between AR and innovation.

It also seeks to answer the following questions:
- What is quality teaching, within the quality teaching assurance framework, and how does it impact innovation?
- What is AR and how does it help teachers improve their research and innovation potential?
- What does the ENS programme course provide as qualitative training to improve quality teaching and innovation? And
- What are the expected and achieved results, so far, at the ENS Constantine?
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Quality Assurance and Quality Teaching/Learning at the ENSC
The required criteria of QA to assess quality teaching are determined by the national referential framework that emphasizes the aspects of evaluation, accreditation, and audit. The institution's QA team carries out an internal evaluation while accreditation is accepted or refused by the national CIAQES; consequently, the audit is a report that is elaborated by the CIAQES. In sum, the major criteria of QA evaluation regarding the ENSC consist of evidence regarding the following criteria:

- Quality Teaching/ Learning Results and Outcomes;
- The expected results allow teachers to correlate their teaching with the overall objectives of a course;
- The expected results must be expressed in terms of knowledge, performance, attitudes and values;
- The results must be expressed in performance/ Action verbs (Avoid using verbs like *'understand', 'learn', 'know'* that express internal mental processes);
- The results must consist of 3 to 8 outcomes that focus on what learners are supposed to *DO, to PRODUCE, to DEMONSTRATE* that are included in the course units/ lessons, and written in a language that the learners can understand.

To satisfy the required criteria of QA, the ENSC provides an EFL course and training program that is highlighted below.

Quality Assurance and EFL Course Design
According to the knowledge requirements and objectives of an EFL course, the syllabus includes background knowledge and language skills to be improved throughout the undergraduate course and initiation to TEFL pedagogy (see ENSC nouveau programme). It consists mainly of four major units of competency development that are:
- Language knowledge: Grammar, Written expression, Oral Expression, Reading Techniques, Linguistics, Phonetics, Speaking and Intonation,
- Language Teaching: Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Psychology (psychology of learning; memory and thought; intelligence)
- Psycho-pedagogy (Child and adolescent psychology; developmental psychology; learning styles and strategies; educational objectives; classroom management).
- Culture and communication: Communication and attitude preoccupations, English speaking literature, Civilisation, Cultural issues, and ICT).

Quality Teaching Objectives and Action Research Procedure
The quality teaching objectives cannot be achieved unless they target the actions that teachers at the ENSC have to undertake in order to make the trainees practice AR at the various levels of their education. According to Norton (2009):

> Reflective practice should be seen as a core element of teachers' work, not as an optional extra' because ' it has benefits not only to the teachers for thinking about how to improve their own practice but also for their students. (p. 22)

Those actions are relevant to research methodology which paves the way to and enhances logical reasoning before taking pedagogical action (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). They develop the ability to Observe, Analyse, Implement and Evaluate academic/professional courses, textbooks and teaching materials during workshops at the ENSC. Furthermore, the trainees put into practice the abilities to Observe, Analyse, Design, Plan lessons and act as teachers by assuming roles, tasks, and interactions with their pupils during the training.

From these two perspectives of teacher education (at the ENSC and during the training), the teacher trainees are supposed to develop a quasi-experimental design of their critical and

innovative actions. During the training, they are given the opportunity to experiment their design of innovative actions through design, manipulation, and treatment of a particular teaching aspect (lessons and course content, communication, interaction in EFL, and classroom management) and evaluate their study by using test, checklists, observation grids and questionnaires. In addition to pencil-paper tests and quizzes, the outcome of this experience is reflected in two documents: every teacher trainee produces, individually, a training report as a reflection on the training program. Additionally, in pairs or small groups, the trainees produce a term paper that includes a review of literature and a practical implementation and evaluation of their AR results. To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, some potential requirements and innovations must be provided for AR and QA to take place.

Action Research Requirements
As members of the educational community, future teachers are supposed to be committed to the educational system according to its reform for the purpose of improvement by bringing into play the innovative changes. AR "like all forms of research, requires time, commitment and resources in order to carry it out successfully" (Norton, 2009, p. 1). To do so, AR requires the distinction of a particular aspect or a problem of teaching for innovation purposes in a particular context (Djouimaa, 2016). This initial step of commitment and distinction leads the trainees to logical reasoning of problem sensing and risk-taking of suggesting a solution.

The problematic statement of an AR topic increases the logical design of the study and improves the methodological procedure of trying out and testing a probable solution. In a collaborative AR, the future teachers should accept to share this experience with a supervisor (a tutor or a mentor from the ENSC teaching staff and a teacher trainer at the secondary school) and accept peer evaluation and criticism. To promote AR, every teacher trainee is supposed to provide a written report and a graduating term paper / dissertation by the end of the academic year. Occasionally, an account and a poster of that experience are required at the end of the graduating term for publication.

Innovation and Evaluation of Pre-service Teacher Training
Since 2008, additional subjects to the basic EFL course have been designed, implemented and updated for the last two academic years -4th and 5th year of graduation (see ENSC- Nouveau Programme 2008/2018) in order to improve teaching quality through AR. Every subject consisted of weekly lecture and workshops that included topics that directed the trainees' attention towards language varieties, academic and professional genres to gather for the teaching of EAP and ESP, and introduced worldwide educational systems and pedagogical trends to widen the scope of trainees' knowledge about old and new educational practices.

Pedagogically, learning styles and strategies, classroom discourse, and communication attitudes consisted also of lectures and workshops in order to provide the trainees with alternatives for change and possibilities of innovation whenever they have to conduct an AR project (Djouimaa, 2011a). Food for thought about change and innovation focused on the teaching means that are necessary for every foreign language class: the EFL syllabus, the textbooks, and the teaching materials. The subject of Syllabus Design and Textbook Evaluation is also organised in lectures and workshops for the purpose of theoretical illustration and practical analysis of the

present syllabuses' objectives and contents in addition to analysis of textbooks' relevance to the designed objectives, language proficiency development, and editing quality.

In a detailed examination of teaching materials, the ENSC introduced the subject of materials design and development (MDD, henceforth) to familiarize the trainees with the existing teaching materials in terms of functional communication outcomes, objectives, authentic materials, illustrations, and activities organisation according to the taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom, 1956) and language learning strategies (O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford, 1990). Purposefully, designing language learning activities and items takes a lion share in MDD process of analysis and evaluation in order to lead the trainees gradually to critical thinking and designing their own teaching materials by the end of the academic year (Hamada, 2013). Involving novice teachers and teacher-trainees in materials analysis, evaluation and design increases their exposure to the profession and enhances their self-confidence and their self-efficacy in designing their own teaching materials (Graves, 1996, 2000).

Comprehensively, the subject of research methodology in education had also to include lessons of Writing a Research paper in Education to enable the trainees edit their training reports and term papers as a contribution in AR. In a gradual progression of the training programme, the trainees are provided with a teaching portfolio (Beleulmi & Hamada, 2014) and an observation grid where they can note their comments and reflect on their experience (Djouimaa, 2011 b). These tools would help them write their training report in an academic style. The exposure to all these activities (lecture notes, workshop productions, training report and portfolio) actively guide the trainees to focus on a problematic issue of EFL, design an appropriate methodology and carry out their AR project. The latter is then drafted and edited as their graduation term paper or dissertation.

Quality Assurance and In-service Teacher Training
Action research for innovation is a continuous process throughout a teacher's career development and needs evidence of achievement. We consider, below, how quality assurance can be demonstrated by teacher qualifications at secondary school and at higher education.

In-service Teacher Training and Career Development at Secondary School
The moment novice teachers are assigned to start their job, they are supposed to gain more experience and prepare accreditation examinations. The latter is subject to visits and examinations that are performed by an inspector and a board of examiners (experienced teachers); the feedback from national education authorities are very positive as they show that the majority of former ENSC trainees pass the accreditation for their performance, good collaboration with peers in teaching contexts, and innovation in classroom dynamics and activities.

Furthermore, the postgraduate contests' results of 2013 and 2015 (ENSC - Ecole Doctorate in Applied linguistics and language teaching) show that 90% of the accepted candidates are former ENS trainees; those successful candidates demonstrated qualifications for postgraduate studies, carried out their research projects and completed their Magister dissertations in due time. All candidates focused their research topics on problematic issues of EFL teaching through an AR methodology. This shows to a great extent that when AR is administered progressively through the training it will be a fruitful seed for innovation and quality assurance.

In- service Teacher Training at Higher Education
Since 2015, the Ministry of Higher Education required from all novice teachers of all disciplines to attend a compulsory teacher training course that would help them get accreditation for a permanent job. The purpose of such a compulsory measure is to improve teaching quality assurance in HE. Given its specific role in teacher training and education, the ENSC complied immediately with the HE specifications and accepted to provide the course for teachers coming from 15 HE institutions under the labels of Quality, Efficiency, and Diversity. Regarding QA requirements for innovation, one has to question what are the objectives and contents of such a course? These requirements are specified below.

The objectives of the course are specified in the training format (see MHE-Programme de la Formation Pédagogique des Enseignants) and indicate that by the end of the course every novice teacher should be able to perform the following tasks:
- To distinguish educational policy objectives, teacher-researcher role, pedagogical and scientific tasks; principles of ethics and deontology;
- To adapt one's behavior to the above-mentioned objectives;
- To distinguish the main characteristics of the reforms (LMD system);
- Selecting adequate methodology and evaluation tools.

Consequently, the course content consisted of relevant issues to comply with HE values, norms, and principles of QA and AR that focus on:
- Higher education legislation, Charter of Ethics, Teachers' rights and obligations;
- Program course structure (Unit Credit System);
- Competency Based Approach and methodology (active learning, objectives, and assessment);
- Course design; SMART objectives, course content and evaluation tools, human and material resources;
- Portfolio and training pedagogy (WORKSHOPS);
- Psychology and psycho-pedagogy;
- Collaborative teaching team, autonomous learning and tutoring;
- ITC and e-learning perspectives for course design;
- Writing academic research and scientific reports.

Results of Innovation and Quality Teaching
The combination of the EFL course with the practical implications of pre-service teacher training and AR methodology cannot be evaluated in the traditional summative, pencil and paper tests though they are necessary to measure the knowledge and language proficiency. However, the written reports and oral presentations are continuous assessment of the trainees' knowledge and their ability to transmit that knowledge to an audience during the workshops; teacher and peer evaluation provide, in this case, a fruitful feedback. Furthermore, a criterion-referenced assessment is most relevant to suit the requirements of QA that are always guided by the indicators of performance. Written reports, oral presentations, training reports, and term papers are evaluated according to norms of objectivity and competency based evaluation that gains validity by relying on three assessors: the teachers, the trainers, and the external examiners.

The in-service course implementation and evaluation had to obey to the same criterion evaluation of the pre-service course. As far as implementation is concerned, the course consisted of online lecture notes that the candidates had to consult; on a periodic and regular basis, those candidates had to attend compulsory tutorials and workshops at the ENSC for practice. The evaluation process had to consist of Power Point Presentations during the tutorials, written reports on personal projects during the workshops, and self-evaluation through questionnaires and checklists.

Conclusion

Innovation is an endeavor, a continuous and challenging activity, for teachers as researchers, that can be methodologically achieved through Action Research. The latter is the vehicle of innovation and change, surplus value of teachers' efforts in innovation, and a major criterion for career development. Administrative evaluation of career development does not reflect teaching quality as it may be biased by unfair decisions. Action Research, Innovation, and change are the only observable and measurable evidence of quality teaching. Through the revision, innovation, and updating of the training program, the ENS Constantine could achieve valuable qualitative results in terms of quality teaching of its graduates who demonstrated positive behavior towards the teaching profession. The adherence of higher education institutions to the ENSC in-service teaching program proves the notoriety of organized action research to bring change, innovation, and improvement of quality teaching. So, as teachers, we should not wait for change to happen; we have to make it happen by taking action through methodological research to improve quality teaching.

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