Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327
مجلة اللغة الانكليزية في العالم العربي

AWEJ Volume.4 Number.3, 2013

Pp.346-354

Ways to Help Students Overcome the Testing Hurdle: Tunisian Experiences

Hela Ajmi
English Department, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Tunis
University of Tunis I, Tunisia

Abstract

Ways to Help Students Overcome the Testing Hurdle is a paper presented at the Study Day on *Testing and Evaluation* at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Tunis to assess Tunisian EFL students' performance in their exam papers. The testing methodology used with these students was revised for the sake of implementing an Action Research methodology instead and revealing typically our Tunisian experiences in this regard. The importance of the paper resides in its attempt to revolutionize the classroom teaching experiences we are witnessing. Furthermore, there is an attempt to shed light on hidden facts we seem to lose sight of. Particularly, the findings of this investigation revealed that certain conditions accounted for having bad results on many testing occasions such as class discipline and size, students' struggle with Language skills and their lack of motivation in dealing with their language courses. The findings also revealed that the implementation of Action Research methodology in my classroom teaching was effective in dealing with the aforementioned problems.

Key words: Testing, Action Research, EFL Students in Tunisia

Introduction

One of the most challenging tasks for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers in Tunisia is finding effective ways to determine what input they should provide their students with to meet their exam expectations at the end. However, based on my teaching experience for more than fifteen years now in higher education institutions in Tunisia, most often our students fail so badly to get good grades in their tests that we have class discipline problems, frustration and anxiety. Even though, it is not a surprise to tell that a lot of tension exists between teachers and their students whenever there is an exam failure, it is not expected that all teachers accept to give classroom tasks and the methodology used with them a lot of modifications to make those tasks more helpful in preparing students for their exam papers. Notably, a review of literature related to language testing indicates that teachers and tests are strong sources of anxiety for EFL learners (e.g. Horwitz & Young, 1991; Young, 1991). Thus this paper aims to investigate ways to help students overcome the testing hurdle. Among the most effective ways to deal with this problem is to implement an Action Research methodology in the EFL course.

Study Background

The history of modern language testing has shown that testing in education is not a simple issue to investigate. Since the 1940s, language testing has been steadily gaining popularity as an object for scientific enquiry involving intricacies and problems (Kunnan 1999). More specifically, the so-called 'traditional tests' which treated the four basic language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking) as independent of one another thus need to be assessed separately were rejected and seen as likely cause of failure. The main reason for this failure is that good testing should not involve the mastery of a language formal system alone. Language testing is something that goes beyond that. It needs to raise learners' awareness not only of what they know about the language, but also of what provides an accurate measure of what they are able to do with it in real life i.e. developing communicative competence.

Afterwards, integrative tests were seen as an alternative to traditional testing methods stressing the importance of context-specific components in testing formats such as essay writing and/ or oral interviews. At a later stage, integrative testing was claimed to be expensive and potentially unreliable (McNamara 2000). In response to such claims, John Oller proposed the so-called pragmatic tests on the basis of Unitary Competence Hypothesis (Oller & Perkins 1978). John Oller observed that since language proficiency is an indivisible phenomenon, it could not be tested in part.

During the1980s, the concept of Communicative Testing gained popularity (Canale & Swain, 1980). Implicit in the Communicative Testing approach is the idea that language is "interactive, direct and authentic" in nature (Shohamy 1997, p. 142). This means that actual language testing should include authentic stimuli and tasks presented to learners. Moreover, central to the Communicative Testing approach is the idea of engaging learners in real communication. In fact, the Communicative Testing approach which Shohamy (1997) reported to dominate the field was not an outstanding challenge to previous assumptions.

As a reaction to previous assumptions about what constitutes a good testing method, the introduction of the term Alternative Assessment came into existence to tell that general language ability is too complex to be sufficiently and adequately assessed by one single test. Generally speaking, assumptions about testing conditions, contexts and methods were controversial leading to a rather torn picture of what constitutes an effective testing method. Being less general and more specific, testing in EFL classrooms, however broadly defined, has taken on a more

significant role namely in higher education institutions admission process. Therefore, issues associated with test preparation initiatives have been stressed and given priority over other aspects related to EFL preparation programs. One of the recently advocated views to gain more insights into classroom practices and overcome the testing hurdle has raised Action Research as an efficient classroom methodology (Ferrance, 2000). It is as best expressed by Finch (2005):

> AR is thus a practical tool which every EFL practitioner can use as a means of improving the teaching/learning environment, since it involves qualitative and subjective reflection on the learning process as perceived by the main participants – teachers and students. (p. 1)

The term Action Research, first coined by the social psychologist and educator Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1948), refers to such activities in which research and action intersect in order to solve a problem (McFarland & Stansell, 1993). Among the major theories that contributed to the development of Action Research are *Chris Argyris' Action Science* (Argyris; 1970; 1980; 1994), *John Heron* (Heron, 1996) *and Peter Reason's collaborative/Cooperative Inquiry* (Reason, 1995), *Paulo Freire's Participatory Action Research* (Freire, 1970) and *Jack Whitehead's Living Theory approach to AR* (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). The mid 1950s witnessed a significant shift in the growth and popularity of Action Research, for which the term has taken on many meanings over time. By that time education practitioners started to question the applicability of Action Research as a means to solve educational issues (McFarland & Stansell, 1993). However, by the 1970s Action Research regained popularity and its practice became visible. Among the merits of using Action Research was the ability to challenge traditional social sciences (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Simply put, Action Research is a growing field of educational research and model inquiry into classroom instruction which Hopkins (2002) describes as informal, qualitative, formative, subjective, interpretive, reflective and experiential. Action Research, not to be mistaken for a problem solving activity, refers to the idea of using research as a tool to improve instruction and increase students' achievement. In other words, it is essentially a reflective process in which a practitioner is most likely to work in his /her own environment for better achievements in his/her educational setting (Watts, 1985). Be it an individual work or a collaborative one, Action Research aims at considering new ways of working with real problems experienced in one's own environment. It is now increasingly used as a tool for school reform, professional development, systems planning, for instance, and as an evaluative tool (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995).

Statement of the Research Questions

After teaching EFL for more than fifteen years in higher education institutions, I was surprised to find some relatively pronounced challenges in EFL classrooms. Noteworthy, such challenges posed problems that turned the testing methodology into a real hurdle that affected students' performance negatively. Consequently, the existing situation in my educational environment urged the need for answering two questions. The first question raised was an attempt to know what was behind the language testing problems witnessed on various occasions. The second question raised was an attempt to look for ways that could help learners overcome the testing hurdle. That is what could be done to enhance their learning strategies and skills so that they could be able to perform well in their exam papers. To this end, Action Research was implemented in my language courses with a number of tasks tried over a whole term with my students. The goal was to prepare them for their exam session. To carry out this investigation two questions were raised as follows:

What was behind students' low performance in their exam papers?
What could be done to help students overcome the testing hurdle?

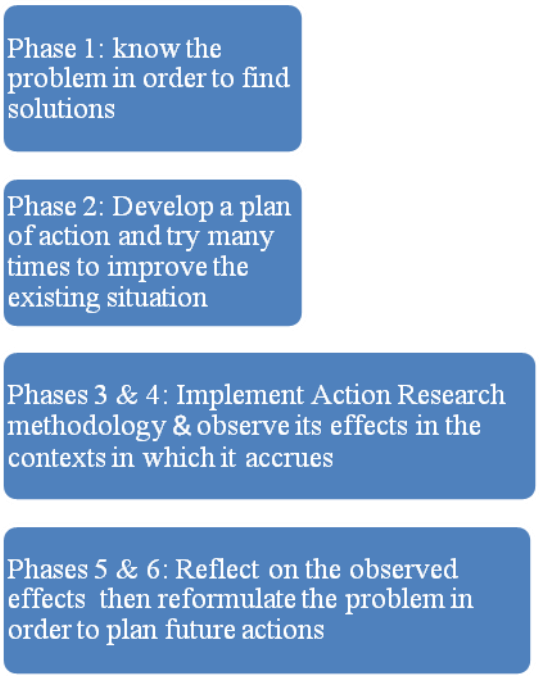
Methodology

Action Research is widely used as a research method today. However, while most teachers "do not deny the value of experiential activities, they do not know exactly how to implement an experiential strategy" (Stern, 1992, p. 322 quoted by Kenny, 1996). Therefore, to meet the aims of this investigation, some aspects and goals of Action Research were retained when the methodology was implemented in classroom teaching. These aspects are summarized as follows:

1. Action Research involves change and intervention (Borgia & Schuler, 1996).
2. It is cyclic in nature (Gabel, 1995).
3. It has to do with reflection and value (Borgia & Schuler, 1996).
4. It is initiated by the practitioner (Borgia & Schuler, 1996).

More specifically, the Kemmis and Mctaggart's model for Action Research (1988; 1990b cited in Richards & Nunan, 1990) was adopted. It comprises basically six phases as indicated in the figure below:

Figure 1. ***A modified version of Kemmis and McTaggart's model of the six phases of AR***



The first stage in implementing an AR methodology was to identify a problem area. At this stage one has to search a question that is meaningful and deserving investigation. However, to quote Ferrance (2000),

> Action research will not provide all the answers to our questions about how students learn or what educators can do to improve practice. But action research happens at the place where these

> questions arise; it happens where the real action is taking place; and it allows for immediate action. (p. 29)

The second stage consisted in collecting and organizing data. The data collected was selected to appropriately address the issue at hand. This is so far a crucial step for the practitioner to decide on the best course of actions to take.

The third and fourth stages consisted in implementing Action Research methodology and observing its effects in the contexts in which it accrues.

The fifth and sixth stages consisted in reflecting on the results then reformulating the problem in order to plan future actions. In other words, based on the data collected, analyzed and interpreted, the practitioner needs to design a plan of action that enables for a real change to occur.

Moreover, to answer the research questions, two sources of material were exploited: First, an unstructured interview was conducted on many students and teachers alike. The unstructured interview is a means of collecting qualitative data. It is used interchangeably with other terms such as informal conversational interview, in-depth interview and/ non-standardized interview (Fife, 2005). For Minichiello et al. (1990) unstructured interviews do not include predetermined question and/or answer categories for they rely on social interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. This source of material enabled for an in-depth analysis. It helped identify the causes of the low performance of many students in their exam papers. Second, a checklist sheet was kept for compiling information on what was observed and reflected concerning students' achievements when a number of tasks were tried over a whole term. These observations and reflections helped me decide on the changes that should be made to such tasks in order to adapt them more effectively to my classes.

5. Findings

Phase 1: know the problem in order to find solutions

The first step one has to pursue was to identify and analyze the problem. In other words, one needs to reveal the causes of the persistent problem leading to students' low performance in their exam papers. To this end, an unstructured interview was conducted on a number of EFL students and teachers. The latter were actively teaching in different higher education institutions. After all, identifying the problem by means of an unstructured interview is well recommended within the tradition of Action Research methodology due to its conversational nature which facilitates the interviewer's response to individual variations and situational changes (Patton, 2002). More importantly, to quote Emily Post (1922):

> *Ideal conversation must be an exchange of thought, and not, as many of those who worry most about their shortcomings believe, an eloquent exhibition of wit or oratory.*

In the same line of thought, White (1988) observes that a good practitioner is someone who checks with the user community and with the learners themselves in order to obtain a rounded picture of their needs.

Subsequently, the interview yielded significant results that enabled for an in-depth analysis and provided me with an answer to my first research question. It was clear from the findings that there were causes behind the students' low achievement in their exam papers. The major common causes were summarized as follows:

- **Class discipline**

Most teachers admitted that they were having a lot of distraction and frustration in class with their students.

- **Class size**

At Tunisian higher education institutions, language classes are large; the maximum size of one single class ranges from thirty five to forty students. Everyone interviewed be it a student or a teacher indicated that this is a real problem.

- **Language skills**

Learning English was regarded crucial for professional and social promotion. However, the majority were found to struggle with language skills.

- **Lack of motivation**

Students admitted that most language courses were not motivating. However, teachers did not show awareness of their students' attitudes.

Taking the lead from Rogers and Freiberg (1994), I assumed that a good teacher can gain understanding of the reasons for successes and/ or failures in his/her educational environment only by getting closer to his/her students. Communicating with students was tactically advantageous to let them talk about their conditions of learning. Thus I was keen to resolve the problem by getting into direct communication with my students. By getting closer to them, I started to see the language classes they were attending from their perspective and to understand that 'we' teachers and 'they' students hold different expectations about the university classroom we both share.

Phase 2: Develop a plan of action and try many times to improve the existing situation

The second phase consisted in planning and looking for authentic tasks that are intrinsically motivating and most likely to impel students to use whatever language they have at their disposal. Thereafter, the tasks I presented to them were well-designed to trigger their interest and motivation. In addition, these tasks were exploited along with the most suitable methodology that worked with them. They were also pre-tested in a friendly environment. Thereafter, I tried to make the classes smaller by dividing my students into two groups each attending a different class session. Besides, for the sake of evaluating these tasks and the methodology used with them, I followed Prabhu's (1987) advice that a task has to be seen as having a "reasonable challenge" in order to engage learners in learning. As such, I presented quiet difficult tasks to my students. High motivation with small classes was highly achieved. All students, with no exception, were involved in authentic self-expression. Even shy students started to see themselves in a more positive than negative light.

Many tasks were tried over a whole term; however, because of space limitations, only one task type will be discussed in what follows.

Phases 3 &4: Implement AR methodology & observe its effects in the contexts in which it accrues

To increase the motivation of my students, a shopping role-play activity was presented to them. This activity was motivating, giving learners the opportunity to use interactional language in a role-play situation — the task of going shopping along a famous shopping street they know. I divided the class into two groups. Group one played the role of the buyer using shopping lists while group two played the role of the shopkeeper .i.e. the seller. To grab their interest in role-play activities, I organized the role-playing activities according to four stages as proposed by (Cherif et al., 1998):

1. Preparation and explanation of the activity by the teacher
2. Student preparation of the activity

3. Role-playing
4. Discussion or debriefing after the role-play activity

I pursued an Action Research methodology when implementing the task, trying to use all available resources to communicate with my students such as providing them with the necessary language items for effective communication. The method went through several cycles until in the final cycle the role-play activity was modeled for the class with several students who managed to write dialogues in their groups. Reaching a more advanced level, they were able to achieve a high level of communicative competence in English as well. The greatest achievement was to see that my students successfully developed their speaking and listening abilities and increased their level of interaction. Besides, the most important achievement I noticed was their ability to use their prior knowledge of English in solving the communicative task that was presented to them in their exam session. They were doing well in terms of authentic self-expression and correct use of vocabulary in context

Phases 5 & 6: Reflect on the observed effects then reformulate the problem in order to plan future actions

Two questions are raised in this paper: First, what was behind students' low performance in their exam papers? Second, what could be done to help learners overcome the testing hurdle?

The First Question:

After looking at the causes of the low test performance and listing the factors that affected the whole teaching process, it became much easier for me to see that there were grounds for difficulties in the classroom. Besides, I managed to establish a working relationship with my students building confidence in them that they can perform much better. This is so far an initiation of what Rogers and Freiberg (1994) call *the constructive process*.

The Second Question:

There was some evidence that improved learning took place, or more accurately, that some conditions for learning to take place had improved. First, giving everybody a try was the principle that guided much of Action Research with my language classes. Second, the set of tasks I presented were so interesting that students were most likely to produce real communication, using less controlled language. More specifically, the shopping role-play task I used in class as a teaching strategy was beneficial to my students. It increased their involvement in a role-playing lesson and encouraged them to reflect on their knowledge of a subject. It was beneficial to me as well especially when using it for reviewing material at the end of a course of study. Not only did it prepare my students for their exam session but also facilitated the revision process for me.

Conclusion

To wrap up, feeling unsatisfied with my students' achievement in their exam papers, I decided to revise my teaching practices. Action Research which is a reflective process emerged as a practical tool to improve the immediate learning environment, change the existing reality and transform teaching conditions for a better life. In this regard, I followed the steps recommended in Action Research methodology with modifications that suited the purpose of my investigation. By the end of the course, I gained great achievements. Using Action Research for my benefit and the benefit of my students was one of the most gratifying experiences I have ever had. I felt at the final stage of my investigation able to reflect on my own Action Research methodology and draw constructive conclusions. I started to reformulate the problem, hence plan

future actions. Finally I decided that there were many things I could have done differently or would do in the future such as getting updated with the teaching conditions of my students. Moreover, I found the idea of using a checklist sheet that served for compiling observation and notes on a systematic basis very helpful. It helped me organize the information I compiled from my class observation which in turn facilitated the way I planned to add modifications to the tasks I presented for teaching.

About the author

Hela Ajmi is an English teacher at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Tunis, Tunisia. She holds an MA in Applied Linguistics, and she is completing her PhD in Media Studies. She is a member of Tunisia TESOL, and a member of TESOL International Association. Her areas of interest include ESP, Language Pedagogy, Pragmatics, and Critical Discourse Analysis.

References

Argyris, C. (1970). *Intervention theory and method.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Argyris, C. (1980). *Inner contradictions of rigorous research.* San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Argyris, C. (1994). *Knowledge for action.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Canale, M. & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing, *Applied Linguistics, 1*, 1- 47.

Cherif, A. Verma, S. & Summervill, C. (1998). From the Los Angeles zoo to the classroom. *The American Biology Teacher, 60*, 8, 613-617.

Borgia, E.T. & Schuler, D. (1996). Action Research in early childhood education. Retrieved September 2, 2013 from http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/eecearchive/digests/1996/borgia96.html

Ferrance, E. (2000). *Themes in education: Action research.* Northwest and Islands Regional Education Laboratory at Brown University. Available at www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/themes_ed/act_research.pdf

Fife, W. (2005). *Doing fieldwork: Ethnographic methods for research in developing countries and beyon.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Finch, A. (Dec 2005). Action Research: Empowering the Teachers. *Pleiades: Journal of Teaching Young Learners of English, 1*(1), 30-48. Available at http://www.finchpark.com/arts/AR_EFL_Teachers_Pleiades.pdf

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Herder & Herder.

Gabel, D. (1995). An introduction to Action Research. Retrieved September 2, 2013 from http://physicsed.buffalostate.edu/danowner/actionrsch.html

Heron, J. (1996). *Cooperative inquiry: Research into the human condition.* London: Sage.

Hopkins, D. (2002). *A teacher's guide to classroom research.* Maidenhood: Open University Press.

Horwitz, E. K. & Young, D. J. (1991). *Language anxiety: from theory and research to classroom implications.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research planner.* Victoria, Australia: Deakin University Press.

Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (1990b). *The action research reader.* Victoria: Deakin

University Press.
Kenny, B. (December 1996). *System, 24*, 4, 449-460.
Kunnan, A. J. (1999). Fundamentals [in language testing]. In B. Spolsky (ed.), *The Concise Encyclopedia of Educational Linguistics* (707-711). Oxford, U.K.: Elsevier Science.
Lewin, G.W. (1948). *Resolving social conflicts.* New York: Harper & Row. (Collection of articles by Kurt Lewin)
McFarland, K.P. & Stansell, J.C. (1993). Historical perspectives. In L. Patterson, C.M. Santa, C.G. Short, & K. Smith (eds.), *Teachers Are Researchers: Reflection and Action* (12-18) Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
McNamara, T. (2000). *Language Testing.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Minichiello, V. Aroni, R. Timewell, E. & Alexander, L. (1990). *In-depth interviewing: Researching people.* Hong Kong: Longman Cheshire Pty Limited.
Noffke, S.E. & Stevenson, R. B. (1995). *Educational action research: Becoming practically critical*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Oller, J. & Perkins, K. (1978). *Language in education – testing the tests.* Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers Inc.
Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Post, E. (1922). *Etiquette.* New York: Funk & Wagnalls.
Prabhu, N.S. (1987). *Second language pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Reason, P. (1995). *Participation in human inquiry*. London: Sage.
Richards, J. C. & Nunan, D. (1990). *Second language teacher education.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rogers, C. & Freiberg, J. H. (1994). *Freedom to learn.* New York, Maxwell Macmillan International.
Shohamy, E. (1997). Language assessment. In R. Tucker and D. Corson (eds), *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, (141-152), Volume 4, Kluwer Academic Publishers.
Watts, H. (1985). When teachers are researchers, teaching improves. *Journal of Staff Development, 6*, 2, 118-127.
White, R. (1988). *The ELT curriculum: design, innovation, and management.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
Whitehead, J. & McNiff, J. (2006). *Action research living theory*. London: Sage.
Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does the language anxiety research suggest? *Modern Language Journal, 75*, 4, 426-437.