Action Research in German as a Foreign Language Teacher Education in Germany

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Summary

The study examined the role of action research in promoting critical reflective thinking among five pre-service teachers engaged in an integrated teaching practice in German as a foreign teacher education programs in Germany. Data from interviews, pedagogical diaries, self-observation notes, audio and video recordings, opinion exchange meetings, evaluation surveys revealed that conducting action research (a) engaged the participants in inquiry into their own practice, (b) was a means to reflect upon and determine ways to change their teaching practices, and (c) promoted critical reflection in a collaborative learning environment. Results underscore the importance of pre-service teachers critically reflecting to gain insights into teaching and student learning as they are engaged in action research. Keywords: action research, reflective practice, teacher education, pre-service teachers.

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas penkių studentų, besirengiantių pedagoginei praktikai pagal vokiečių kalbos, kaip užsienio kalbos, mokymo programą, veiklos tyrimo poveikis refleksinio mąstymo vystymui(si). Interviu su studentais, pedagoginių dienoraščių ir savistabos užrašų, garso ir vaizdo pamokų analizė, susirinkimų, kuriuose buvo dalijamasi pedagogine patirtimi, ataskaitos, susirinkimų rezultatų parodė, kad atlikdami veiklos tyrimą studentai a) buvo įtraukti į savo pedagoginės veiklos procesą; b) formavosi pedagoginės refleksijos įgūdžius, ieškojo saviosios praktikos optimizavimo kelių; c) bendraminčių aplinkoje igijo kritinės refleksijos įgūdžių. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidžia būtinybę naudoti veiklos tyrimo metodus studentų pedagoginio rengimo pedagoginiam darbui metu, kad būtų suformuoti ir išugdyti pedagoginės refleksijos įgūdžių. Esminiai žodžiai: mokslinkiai tyrimai, pedagoginė praktika, mokytojų rengimas, pedagoginės refleksijos.

Introduction: situating action research

Action research has recently gained increasing credibility as an approach to research that challenges the prevailing orthodoxies of qualitative and quantitative research. Despite considerable resistance from an academic establishment that has built complex systems of administration and professional reward around the basic assumptions of the traditional paradigms, action research has rapidly created new spaces within the research community. It has moved the boundaries and goalposts of investigation, and provided windows into forms of inquiry and new ways of providing legitimate academic knowledge. Like qualitative research that emerged from relative obscurity in the period from the late 1960s onward to challenge experimentalism as the only acceptable form of research, action research is now increasingly acknowledged as a legitimate approach to investigation. Widely accepted in academic journals, and the subject of many university texts, increasing sales clearly indicate its growing use in academic courses. Action research has achieved particular acceptance in education, where a wide variety of resources speak of its expanding popularity in teacher education and professional development programs, and presentations and papers related to action research continue to proliferate in academic journals and conferences. Action research is particularly attractive to educational
practitioners. It enables them to break free from the complex systems and patterns of thought associated with more traditional approaches to inquiry, providing simple and coherent formats that are easily applied to problems and issues within classroom, school and other educational contexts. Whether these processes are sufficiently stable to have generalized use over a broad range of contexts, or whether it is an inherently localized production suited only to a limited context is still subject to debate. What is clear, however, is that the move to action research provides a clear indication of the need for processes of investigation that deliver effective solutions to many of the enduring problems confronting practitioners in educational contexts.

**Theoretical background**

**The History of Action Research in Education**

The genesis of action research is often attributed to Kurt Lewin, a social scientist who sought constructive solutions to social conflict, particularly in situations when poverty and minority exploitation were predominant issues. His approach to action research (Lewin, 1946, 1948, 1952) drew on theories of progressive education from philosophers like Dewey (1938) who saw learning as emerging from processes of inquiry, questioning, and dialog. Lewin was interested in assisting people to learn how to solve their own problems through self-education that would enable them to improve their situation. Lewin presented action research as a cyclical or reiterative process that included fact finding, planning, action, reflection, evaluation, and refinement of the problem. These types of investigation emerged in a variety of forms in a number of locations and were later applied to education by Stenhouse (1975, 1983) and Elliott (1987, 1990, 1991) in Britain, Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) in Australia, Klafki, Altrichter and Hermes (1974, 1989, 2001) in Germany. The general thrust of their activity supported the notion of teacher as researcher, investigation being oriented to issues relevant to everyday classroom practices and problems. These types of development emerged more broadly from the profession’s frustrations with research that failed to provide effective solutions to problems of professional practice.

**Defining action research in present-day teacher education**

Almost from its inception, action research has been viewed as a way for teachers to inquire into and improve their practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). According to contemporary theories action research is a way to promote a cyclical process of improvement that includes describing a problem, seeking knowledge from previous investigators, collecting data, devising and implementing a strategy for change, evaluating the results and planning for another cycle of improvement (Authors, 2009). According to Mills, “Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn.” (Mills, 2007, 5). It is seen as “a series of steps in which the action researcher reflects, acts, and evaluates” (Hendricks, 2006, 9). Action Research is “a type of inquiry that is preplanned, organized, and can be shared with others” (Johnson, 2003, 1). Further, it cuts across various dimensions of the school and its clients, such as teachers’ own instructional methods, their own students, and their own assessment (Mertler, 2006). Action research is more than a mere concern over the technical problems of teaching, but provides the teacher with the necessary tools to investigate their perspectives on curriculum and moral concerns. This approach to action research moves away from the positivist and empirical approach to one that is more interpretive and critical (Capobianco & Feldman, 2010).

In Germany the concept of action research is known as ‘Handlungsforschung’ or ‘AKtionsforschung’ and is closely related to the name of Wolfgang Klafki. He stated that “action research should not be considered as an alternative to traditional empirical research, but if it comes to supporting educational innovations that can provide improvement in one’s teaching, action research can prove to be an appropriate approach with a great future” (Klafki, 1974, 271). Hermes (2001) defines action research as “… a combination of methods, that help teachers to reflect on themselves and their own teaching, make respective changes, analyze and evaluate themselves in relation to the expected educational aims.” (Hermes, 2001, 9). According to Altrichter “teacher research offers teachers assistance for further development of their knowledge and skills, allows to enhance their professionalism and to increase their social status” (Altrichter et al., 1989, 4).

Several reports have been written in the last couple of years that challenge traditional teacher education programs in Germany (Bayer et al., 2001; Becker, 2004, Beckmann, 2004; Bohnsack, 2000, Czerwenka, 2004). These reports advocate for teacher education programs that provide opportunities for pre-service
teachers to inquire into their own teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Lumpe, 2005; Terhart, 2001; Fried, 1997; Flach et al. 1995; Bertschy, 2004). The available international research literature provides a growing body of empirical evidence that recommends that teachers should systematically engage in inquiries about their practice (Crawford, 2007; Freeman, 1998; Little, 2002; Zhang, Lundeberg, McConnell, Koehler, & Eberhardt, 2010). Such an approach to teacher education is believed to support reform-based instructional practices in school classrooms (Feldman & Minstrel, 2000). This view of teachers as reflective practitioners implies that teachers become active knowledge producers as they continuously address problems of practice they encounter to meet the unpredictable learning needs of all of their students (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

In Germany there has been an increased interest in critical action research in which the teacher gains a greater self-understanding of practice, conceptual change and a way to keep to the actual principles of life-long learning (Dobischat & Hartmut, 2001; Apel, 2002; Heidemann, 2001).

As we can see, there is, on the one hand, a range of positive statements on the possibility of action research to prove as a way to improve teacher education programs, and, on the other hand, there are no substantial empirical investigations in Germany on action research, especially in terms of adapting it to German as a foreign language teacher education programs. Thus, we will further attempt to provide an empirical justification from the view of participants of the study on action research as a way to provide better possibilities for reflection in terms of a German as a foreign language teacher education program.

### Method

The present research is designed to shed light on how students of “German as a foreign language” programs define action research and what methods of action research they characterize as most comfortable to work with during their school practice.

Master’s program “German as a foreign language” (GFL) in Germany has a period of 4 semesters. Integration of theory and practice is the guiding goal of the program. It is presupposed that both theoretical and practical course components are not treated separately, but flow into one another and are in constant exchange. Such a study design aims at stronger practical relevance in the context of contemporary theoretical and methodological developments. It helps GFL students through continuous integration of theoretical and practical knowledge to make a more transparent combination of the two parts of the training.

Integrated teaching practice is a mandatory part of the Master’s program. Action research is an integral part of the teaching practice and has a strong impact on learning processes of students, influences the development of reflection and provides the possibility for life-long learning.

Five participants for the study were selected from the universities of Marburg, Bielefeld, Kassel, Munich, Berlin and are all students of master’s program “German as a foreign language”.

**Research aim** of the study is to give insight of how students perceive action research in teaching practice and what methods do they find the most comfortable to deal with in this process as well as to provide evidence of the effects that action research had on pre-service teachers’ learning and practice through reflection.

### Data Collection and data sources

Data collection was conducted over a period of one year to enable the researcher to collect data from the five pre-service teachers in the process of their practical training, analyze and write the narrative. The data for this study was gathered through in-depth interviews, pedagogical diaries of the participants, their self-observation notes, audio and video recordings of lessons and opinion exchange meetings, pupils’ and colleagues’ evaluation surveys during the training.

**Interviews**

Interviews were the main source of data collection for the study. The interviews provide the explanations and interpretations through the voices of the specific interviewees who can provide important insights into this particular situation. Essentially, in-depth interviewing provides the researcher with an understanding of other people’s experiences, and the meaning they make of those experiences (Seidman, 1998).

The interviews were qualitative in nature and were taken by means of Skype where the pre-service teacher and the researcher participated in a conversation that covered open-ended questions. Here, I asked key questions for facts as well as the opinions of the participants, and insights into certain occurrences (Yin, 1994). The open-ended questions were included for the participants to demonstrate their unique way of looking at the world and their definitions of the situations (Silverman, 1993).
Follow up questions were used for clarification and to capture the unfolding of the perspectives of the participants’ as they viewed the phenomenon of interest, and not how the researcher views it (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

The technique of three separate interviews was adapted for the study (Seidman, 1998). The first interview established the context of the participants’ experience. The second interview allowed the participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context, and the third interview encouraged the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences (Seidman, 1998).

Pedagogical diaries / self-observation notes/ audio and video recordings/opinion exchange meetings / evaluation surveys

At the beginning of the teaching practice the pre-service teachers were required to write a pedagogical diary as part of their practical training process. It was also suggested to take self-observation notes during the lesson as well as conduct video and audio recordings. Evaluation surveys by pupils and colleagues were conducted on a weekly basis. Pre-service teachers were asked to regularly participate in opinion exchange meetings as well as any other reflective activities and take audio recordings. The mentioned materials were collected and analyzed at the end of each semester. The materials formed a part of the data, and were used to extend the views of the pre-service teachers.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the data. Each phase of analysis entails the reduction of data collected into manageable chunks, so that meaning and insight is brought to the words and actions of the participants in the study (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

Data analysis process comprised of two phases. The first phase of data analysis was aimed at filing the interviews and organizing the narratives of each student teacher. The interviews and transcriptions for each participant were numbered. The interviews were then read and re-read to become familiar with the participants views. I read the interview transcripts and wrote the ideas that the participant was conveying. According to the main goal of this study, I searched for patterns in the data noting any traits of pre-service teachers’ personal views on the action research process and its methods (Hammersly & Atkinson, 1983). The second phase of data analysis served the purpose of incorporating the interviews of each participant. I subsequently coded other collected data to match the patterns I planned to identify in the interviews.

Results and discussion

Benefits of dealing with action research were highlighted by the participants from different perspectives. The main argument, however, was professional development. Of major importance was the usefulness of the approach for acquisition of research and evaluation skills, which can then be applied in class. Participants also shared their views as for the necessity of using action research for the acquisition of numerous professional competencies.

The learning processes should gain intensity by means of action research. The interest in research-based learning and better career opportunities waken a greater motivation to engage both in educational and research activities. Action research aims at providing an open and inquiring attitude to education as well as presupposes taking more responsibility for one’s actions. It implies dynamics of teaching profession through a progressive development and professionalization of teacher qualifications. The participants emphasize the desirability of cooperation and collegial exchange for the strategic overcoming of ‘uncertainty’ in the classroom. Subjective theories of the respondents as for the action research and its methods are presented below.

Sabine

S. considers teaching profession a dynamic profession. She thinks that the development of the profession depends on the continuous evaluation of individual teaching practice: reflection is essential because it is a basis for the teaching profession; reflection makes the profession dynamic and contributes to teacher’s life-long professional development. But the ability to reflect should not be considered as a single principle of professional development. In that sense a positive attitude to action research is obligatory. The most important function of action research is educational. Action research is an engine of individual progress. In this conceptual framework a teacher should be aware of one’s strength and build them further. Also the awareness of the weaknesses is important, thus a constructive critique of third parties is fundamental. A constructive opinion exchange with colleagues is important as well. Learners should take part in the research process as well as the teacher himself; as such awareness can give them a better learning dimension. Although a video camera can distract and be unpleasant, it is very important
to get to know yourself as a teacher type, to
determine one’s own progress and to increase the sense
of responsibility for one’s actions. Student surveys
support self-awareness and help to perceive the learn-
ing process as a teacher. Self-observation during the
lesson is useful and leads to a better perception of
one’s teaching methods; a teacher can respond flex-
ibly and adjust them to a particular student needs.
Written evaluations lead to a deeper reflection and
archive the events more or less the way they hap-
pened in the classroom. In general, Sabine considers
action research as way to get a better perspective of
teacher’s role and take one’s teaching with a greater
sense of responsibility. The corner stone of action
research for Sabine is professional development
based on individual reflections which help to plunge
into an action research process.

Gerhard
The respondent considers action research as a
multi-dimensional and inter-subjective concept. It
requires equal cooperation between teachers and
learners in the process of reflection. Such reflection is
based on openness and cooperation, however, cannot
be realized easily. Particularly in a study process the
student evaluation can encounter problems. How-
ever: whether you are a student, a university teachers
or a foreign language teacher – you are involved in
a learning process and influence collectively the
mutual success.

It is important that one’s teaching is kept trans-
parent for other participants of the learning process.
The code of ethics fulfills the function of a healthy
control in human relations. It is especially important
in a practical context, when the analysis of teaching
attempts require a proper critique. Reflection is es-
sential. It is the basis for productive teaching and
learning and necessary for a proper cooperation.

George considers important such action research
methods as evaluation surveys (to strengthen the
cooperation between teachers and students) and
pedagogical diaries (to provide a possibility for
reflection). Evaluation should not only take place
at the beginning and at the end of the semester but
also in shorter intervals within the semester. Video
observation, though sometimes bothersome, opens
a view to otherwise difficult to percept aspects and
provides more space for reflection and acquisition of
teaching skills. Gerhard thinks that action research
is still insufficiently presented at work and during
the practice at universities. Fear of stress, loss of
authority and additional workload can explain the
situation of the lack of willingness for action research
in one’s pedagogical activity. Moreover, it is not easy
to create an appropriate atmosphere for the mutual
cooperation. Even for students is the action research
an unknown concept and leads to uncertainty.

Andrea
Action research teaches openness to oneself and
others. For A. it provides an ideal foundation for
self-education and represents a way for constructive
opinion exchange. Both factors are crucial for the
development of one’s own teaching skills. On the
one hand, action research helps teachers to get (using
appropriate methods) a constructive analysis of their
teaching. On the other hand, the concept offers the
opportunity to build social relationships and to share
personal experiences with others. The respondent
does not deny the fact that it can be difficult to find
the way to open for new ideas and break up the estab-
lished structures. Thus it is of particular importance
to start working on action research projects as soon
as possible (ideally from the first period of teaching
practice at the University). For A. action research is
a way to redefine the teacher’s role, gain a feeling of
being able to teach “free, creative and competent”.

Manfred
M’s idea about his own teaching role and the for-
eign language teaching has changed during the teach-
ing practice very much. Even if he cannot consider
‘real’ professional progress to be very successful, he
nevertheless says, “anyway I’ve learned a lot”. The
respondent is sure that to be a teacher does not mean
to do everything perfect, but to understand, where
are your weak points and try to avoid them. Such
action research methods are essential for Manfred:
classroom observations, video camera, opinion ex-
change and self-evaluation. Working together as part
of an action research project is important. A major
advantage of action research is co-operation, teachers
are thus not subjected to self-criticism.

Video camera can also offer a substantial support,
because one can rationally deal with personal teach-
ing issues. The related fears should not be overstated,
since the presence of camera is forgotten after some
time. Basically, the acquaintance with action research
should take place as early in studies as possible, so
that one can get used to work with this concept.

Gisela
The respondent sees action research as an impor-
tant concept for teacher training as well as for one’s
professional life. There is no teaching without prob-
lems – new aspects always appear in professional
life. G. sees the major function of action research in dealing with these issues carefully. You can maintain your own professional development by identifying problems and finding ways to solve them. Only the awareness (formulation) of one’s weaknesses can cause changes in teacher behavior. Action research is an evaluation concept. With its numerous methodological measures it allows to deepen the individual development process. Thus, the views and experience is a valuable tool that helps to distance from one’s own work and to assess lessons from different perspectives and to get ideas and tips that come to it oneself. Teamwork is important, because an objective self-assessment is often difficult.

Written evaluation is helpful. It makes easier to formulate personally perceived weaknesses. The explication of weaknesses (problems) is necessary to initiate changes.

Video camera is a useful tool to see yourself from a different perspective and to detect errors. It can also have a negative impact on the learning process and negatively influence pupils’ behavior. Tape recorder as a less obvious device can be used to study the phonological aspects of one’s teaching. Third party observation can also exert a negative influence on those, who involved in the learning process. This method is in any case can only be worthwhile if the observer is expected to give useful and constructive criticism. Learner survey is definitely good and should be used as often as possible.

Action research prevents routine in learning and work. As a bridge between theory and practice, it provides a better understanding of teaching and learning processes. But it is not easy to use it in everyday situations, as many teachers refuse the concept for various reasons. This may be partly due to poor (and sometimes financial) working conditions or due to additional workload.

**Conclusions**

The experiences of the five pre-service teachers provide detailed insight into engagement in classroom inquiry and reflection to inform teaching practice in terms of action research over a one-year time span. The pre-service teacher’s professional development during the year-long teaching practice was collaborative and teacher-centered. While the participants utilized knowledge produced by others, they also theorized about their own work, and constructed actions that were linked to their context. The integrated year-long teaching practice allowed time for the participants to begin to critically reflect on their own experiences. It takes a great deal of time and support for pre-service teachers to see their work in terms beyond surviving the day-to-day routines to a more reflective approach to decision making based on knowledge forms. The participants were able to reflect upon and examine their beliefs about teaching and learning and many gained insights as they became more dialogic in their thinking.

The partnership between the student-teachers, the mentoring teachers, the school faculty, the principals, the university supervisors, and the action research professor was important in supporting the interns during the year-long internship. Meaningful action research that involves critical examination within the scope of goals that can be achieved requires a great deal of cooperation. The participants reported positive impacts of their action research such as learning how to interrogate the literature when exploring new ideas, becoming more reflective and thinking about teaching differently, and learning to ask others for help, to work together and to learn from what other interns had done. These findings confirm what others have found in that action research is a productive means of professional development.

Teaching is complex and context-specific in nature. Reforms call for radical changes in teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about subject matter, teaching and learning. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), there has been a renewed interest in action research in Germany. We have engaged in action research with an emphasis on teachers’ generation of new knowledge about teaching practice and student learning and with a focus on understanding the significance of teachers’ actions and responsibilities within the school context. We believe that teachers who are well-equipped with knowledge, skills and experiences to effectively deal with the challenges of teaching that many first year teachers face may also be more likely to be retained as teachers in the future.

We do believe that professional development opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative action research as a vehicle for promoting active learning, linking research to practice, and to developing the skills of critical reflection will best equip future teachers to pursue and address the problems they will face in their teaching careers.
Literature


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