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A Teacher-Initiated Action Research in a Middle School

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The current status of in-service teacher development shows that teachers' awareness can be enhanced through critical reflection. This study shows how an English teacher improved her own teaching situation through action research. It reports back the action research the teacher-researcher carried out in the EFL classroom setting. Aiming to improve the pupils' English speaking ability, the teacher introduced 'Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)' to the English class. The teacher and the pupils took part in the evaluation process of learning and teaching. It was found that the new approach to teaching speaking helped the pupils improve speaking ability and take an active role in learning process. It is further suggested that teacher-initiated action research can be done in collaboration with colleagues, administrators and researchers.

I. INTRODUCTION

The recent trend towards action research is closely related to the focus on classroom research and in-service teacher development. Action research is gaining ground in the field of second language classroom research as well as in educational research methodology. In spite of its importance, only a few existing studies on action research have specifically addressed second language learning and teaching in the given context.

The current research aims to investigate the application process of a teacher-initiated action research and its result. The central theme of this research

is that teachers can and should be involved in researching their own practices in their own classrooms, and that this implies extending the concepts of both practice and development. The present study also attempts to investigate the impact of teacher-initiated action on speaking skill. The specific research questions to be answered through the investigation are:

- To what extent can theoretical aspects of action research be applied in the current EFL situation?
- What benefits does the teacher-initiated classroom investigation into TBLT bring to the students in focus?
- Does the teacher's active participation in her own research project result in increased commitment to changes in her teaching practices?

Following the introductory part, the second part provides a theoretical background to the current research. It focuses on aspects of action research in second language education as well as in general education. Part Three provides an account of a teacher-initiated small-scale action research project. The procedures of data collection and analysis are described and the results of the project are discussed. In the concluding part, the research is summarised, the implications of the findings are considered, the scope of the research is discussed, and the researchers give their reflective concluding remarks.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. Definitions and Processes of Action Research

Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988:5) definition is widely-known in the field of education. According to them, action research is a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practice, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situation in which these practices are carried out. In the field of foreign language learning and teaching, Wallace (1988) puts it in a simple way, action research is the process done by systematically collecting data on your everyday practice and analyzing it in order to some decisions about what your future practice should be. Burns (1999) identifies some

common features of action research. First, action research is contextual, small-scale and localized. It is also evaluative and reflective because it aims to bring about change in the context. Next, it puts emphasis on bottom-up approach to educational change. It also encourages the partnership between colleagues, practitioners and researcher

Action research occurs through a dynamic and complementary process. Four essential aspects are involved in the process of action research: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. In the planning step, a researcher sets up the plan to take actions to improve what is already happening in the classroom. This means that the concern identified within a given context engages the participants in planning actions. In the next action step, the plan is implemented. The effects of the action are observed in the given context. Then, the effects are reflected on as a basis for further planning. The reflection of the researcher can generate another cycle of action research. In this vein, Kemmis and McTaggart(1988) observe, the fundamental steps are in a spiraling process where the cycle of action research goes on. Somekh(1993) similarly portrays action research as 'chameleon-like', as the plans, actions and observations through which action researchers proceed should be able to be transformed by their social, educational and political settings as well as by their personal and professional values, beliefs and histories. Burns (1998) summarizes characteristics of the process of action research: 1) It does not necessarily follow a fixed sequence of procedures; 2) Central to action is its flexibility and unpredictability; and 3)The action research cycle may go on.

2. Research: Who is it for?

The central idea of the teacher as a researcher is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. As Nunan (1993) observes, the gap between theory and practice has been reinforced by methodological prescription for practice, which traditional scientific research has provided. Marsh (1973) also observes that so much contemporary philosophical discussion of education takes place in a no-man's land which produces theories that lack stringency or the power to influence practice.

Tripp (1980:5) raises two questions concerning the subject: 1) is the research context specifically schools? and 2)who will be most informed by the research outcomes? His answer is that the majority of the traditional educational research is laboratory research performed on children but not children in a classroom learning situation. The answer to the second question is that the outcomes have

been of great interest to academics, but much misunderstood by, and irrelevant to, classroom teachers. It has often been true that teachers do not apply the research findings to teaching, but rather they draw objectives and strategies from common sense based on practice experience.

The isolation of researchers from schools by the very nature of research activities results in many exciting difficulties. Very little inquiry has been made into what teachers' and pupils' views are about research. Little emphasis was given to the notion that teachers and researchers need to work together, to appreciate each other's concerns and difficulties. Wiseman (1970) notes that those difficulties make it plain that some teachers are antagonistic to research. It seems clear that within the traditional framework, the roles teachers and researchers play are clearly distinct and there is no interaction between them.

The rationale for classroom-centered action research is that there is nothing like the classroom that we could look into for improvement in classroom teaching and learning. This changing picture provides a new perspective on the roles of teachers, researchers, classroom process. Teachers are directly involved in action research, or cooperate with researchers in the research. The role of researchers is becoming different from the traditional view. They take the role of a mediator in teacher-initiated classroom research, or they can conduct the classroom research with teachers' collaboration. The benefits of collaborative classroom research go to both the teacher and the researcher. In the interactive way, researcher and teacher become partners in theory-building.

3. Teacher Development through Action Research

Action research has been seen as one of approaches to integrating theory with practice, which is at the heart of educational research. We will consider how it is justified in the teacher development field. It has been argued that action research has its value in enabling teachers to become reflective. It seems that one of the important underpinnings of action research is reflective teaching in the classroom research context. Wallace (1991:57) links reflective practice with action research.

'Research of this kind is simply an extension of the normal reflective practice of many teachers, but it is slightly more rigorous and might conceivably lead to more effective outcomes.'

He views the advantage of action research as its specific and immediate outcome directly related to practice in the teacher's own context. In a similar vein, Wright (1990) suggests that action research may provide a means for teachers to examine the effects of new ideas implanted by teacher education programmes. From the discussion, it can be concluded that the recent significant move forward in action research is one that holds promise for bridging the theory-practice gap. The current status of teacher development, particularly in the in-service context shows that enhanced awareness through critical reflection has an impact on making instructional decisions. It has been also discussed that ownership of change is essential to the development of teachers' attitudes and classroom practices.

III. ACTION RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

I am an experienced EFL teacher who have worked for several years in middle schools. Because of changes in the national curriculum for English education, I have seen increasing need for improving students' speaking ability. I decided to investigate the way of improving the difficult situation where students were not motivated to use English for communicative purposes. This is a report on my own action research, which was carried in a school setting where I am working.

1. Aim and objectives

The research topic is 'Task-based Language Teaching and Its Application to Korean Middle School Context of ELT- Focused on Developing Learners' Speaking Ability'. The aim of the research is to find out whether how well task-based language teaching (TBLT) can be worked in Korean middle school context of English language teaching. The more specific objectives of the classroom research are as follows:

- to improve students' speaking ability
- to involve students in learning process more actively
- to encourage students to cooperate with group members with their previous knowledge
- to motivate students to learn the English language
- to verify TBLT is an effective way to teach English

2. Research Design

Quasi-experimental research method was used for comparing the students' performance before with after applying TBLT to in-class learning and teaching. The subjects of the current research are the thirty-seven second grade students of C.D. Girls' Middle School. The research was carried out from March 2 until June 31 in the year of 2000. The evaluation was done in July 10, 2000. Performance-based assessment of the students' speaking was done during the class using the teacher's checklist. Along with the teacher's checklist, the learners were also invited to the evaluation process by completing the questionnaire and by writing a brief self-report about the classes they experienced.

3. Theoretical Assumptions for TBLT

TBLT, a strand of Communicative Language Teaching, is an approach in which tasks are in the center of language teaching and learning process both inside and outside. In other words, the theoretical premise for TBLT is that learners are engaged in communicative tasks which reflect language use in a real situation so that the development of communicative competence is accomplished more successfully. Prabu's (1987) Bangalore Communicational Teaching Project, which was carried out with 54-60 Indian students at a secondary school in 1979, has become a classical experimental research of task-based language teaching in which teaching result turned out to be of great meaning and importance in terms of the effectiveness of TBLT. His work is based on the principle that the learning 'form' is best carried out when attention is given to both 'meaning' and 'task' and the tasks engage learners into completion of the assigned tasks rather than only learning language itself. Prabu (1987) suggests that students naturally come to contact with language learning as they are involved in performing a task. It has been found out that TBLT eventually enables learners to achieve their goal of language learning including communicative competence through the process in which they perform and complete a task (Harmer, 1991).

I mostly used the model at the below by modifying Littlewood's model of teaching procedure for every lesson.

Pedagogical Task	Pre-Tasks	Tasks for learning structures Tasks for improving vocabulary
	Tasks	Tasks for encouraging communication

Pre-tasks help the students to acquire new words and structures required for use of the target language during the learning process. Pre-tasks consist of specific knowledges of structure and vocabulary while tasks which I call communicative tasks provide the students with the chances to participate in meaningful communication activities.

4. A Lesson Plan based on TBLT

Master Plan

- 1) Text : Middle School English (by Jihaksa publishing com.)
- 2) Unit : What Sports Do Americans Play?
- 3) Time Allotment : 9 periods of 45 minutes each
 - The 1st Period: Getting Ready and Listening Comprehension
 - The 2nd Period: Reading
 - The 3rd Period: Reading Comprehension
 - The 4th Period: Let's Practice & Let's Talk
 - The 5th Period: Group Activity
 - The 6th Period: Group Writing
 - The 7th Period: Language Points
 - The 8th Period: Exercises
 - The 9th Period: A Group Task or Project
- 4) General aims :

Students will be able:

 - to acquaint themselves with the expressions used to ask and give information

- to communicate with each other in English, giving and receiving information
- to interview by themselves

Sub Plan

- 1) Date : May 31, 2000
- 2) Class : The 1st Class at High Track in the 2nd Grade
- 3) Period : The 9th Period
- 4) Task
 - Goal: to get information at an interview performed in the real setting of a sportswear fashion show
 - Input: a video tape of real conversation happening at the real fashion show
 - Activity: interview
 - Teacher's role: facilitator and monitor
 - Learners' role: performer(interviewer and interviewee)
 - Setting: in pairs and in small groups
 - Preparation: Role cards for interviewer and interviewee
 - Procedure:
 - Task type : Role play(to interview and to be interviewed)
 - ▶Look at the video clip of a model interview with a sport player.
 - ▶Find the words for an interview a sport player in a group.
 - ▶Make more than 5 questions for an interview in pairs.
 - ▶Try to answer the questions in turn.
 - ▶Have a role play

Role card A: You are an interviewer. You'll now interview a sport player. Try to ask as many as questions.
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Role card B: You are a sport player. You'll answer the questions from the interviewer. Do your best to answer.
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Sample of interview questions and answers

(Park, Chan-ho)

- ☎ Where is your hometown?
-I was born in Kong-ju, South Chungchong Province.
I lived there until high school.
I played for two years at Hanyang University in Seoul.
- ☎ When did you make your Major League debut?
-In 1994. The first year my record was bad.
So I played in the Minor League for two years.
- ☎ What do you do in your spare time?
-Usually I sleep. I don't have games on Sundays.
go shopping and watch movies.
- ☎ Have you seen any Korean movies recently?
-Shiri. It was interesting.
- ☎ Which season do you like best?
-Fall. Because it's not too cold and not too hot.
- ☎ What is your goal this year?
-I hope to win more than 20 games.
- ☎ What is your hope?
-Above all I'm very happy to be here.
I met all the great players I watched on TV.
I hope to be a full-time major leaguer.
When I get the chance to go to the mound, I'll do my best.

- ▶ Present your work to the class.
- ▶ Have a role play with another partner.

Lesson	Lesson 4 What Sports Do American Play	Period	9 9	Level	High-track
Goal	Communicative goal : to get information in an interview at the real setting of a fashion show				
Teaching Aids	Sentence cards, Evaluation cards, OHP, Video and Monitor				

Stage	Procedure	Activities of Teacher & Students	Aids & Remarks	Time
	Greeting	Say hello to each other. (Hi)		
	Pre-tasks	Brain storming activity (What American sports do you like?)	OHP (word power)	
Intro- duction		Review: comparative form(as-as, -er-than, conjunction 'that')		10'
	Presenting goal	Sts look at the monitor guessing what they will do. Tr asks them the main topic and tell them about their learning goal of the class.	Monitor (a fashion show & some sports)	

	Task 1	Make interview questions on students' own in pairs.(get ready for interview)	Papers	
	Task 2	Role play with their interview cards	Interview cards	
	Task 3	Some pairs perform their interviewing with other group members (exchanging members)		
Develop- ment	Performance	Sports Fashion Show! (Three models go to each groups.)		30'
	Task 4	The representative interviewer interview the models with the interview cards they made. (The other members will write down some answers from the interviewee on the paper)		
	Task 5	If time's left, one representative group will show their interview performance		
	Evaluation	The teacher hands out evaluation papers and evaluate themselves:	Evaluation sheets	
Consoli- dation		1.How much active were you in class? 2.How well did you do the tasks? 3.How much cooperative were you in performing tasks? etc.		5'
	Assignment	1. Recording another interview meeting a person engaged in other jobs. 2. Find the new words for the next class		

Teacher Talk

Procedure	Teacher Talk
Greeting	Hi! Nobody's absent. Good.
Warming-up	<p>It's time for review what you learned last class. It's a sort of sentence game. Here are some word cards. I picked up easy words. So you'll have no problem for the game. If you make as many as sentences using them with the group members for only one minute, you can be a winner and have some candies. Don't forget to raise your hands when you finished putting the complete sentences on the board. All right. Are you ready? Set, go.</p> <p>Now I'm gonna give you a chance to find out the words you need for this class. I'd like you to write down some words of kinds of sports, sports equipments, and exercise actions for sports with the group members. If the team finds many words, it'll be a winner team. OK? Are you done? We have many things to do today, I think you should hurry up.</p>
Presenting the goal for today's class	Your goal is to get the informations by asking or answering interview questions at the similar context with a real sports-wear fashion show. Let's take a look at the monitor. Nearly at the end of the class, you can do it like them. Be courages. OK?
Task 1	I gave you an assignment for each pair to make up an interview card of questions and answers. Let me give you a handout to you. Maybe it'll be helpful for making more contents. Now three minutes are given to you for that activity.
Task 2	If you are finished, you can have a role play till I call you to stop.
Task 3	If possible, you exchange partners and have another role play.
Performance	Today's sports fashion show will begin. Are you ready. Here we go. The sports people, walk around the groups and meet interviewers who came to interview you. Are you all met? Now have a good interview time.

Procedure	Teacher Talk
Task 5	I know you all have done well. Is there any pair or group to show your good job. It's all right even if you make a mistake. It can be a great time if you do that. Thank you for your active attitude.
Evaluation	Evaluate yourself and today's class. I'll also assess your job, watching the recorded video tape and your interview cards later, including your performance during the class.
Presenting Assignment	Try to record another interview meeting a person engaged in another kind of job. She/He may be your mom, dad, brother or sister. And find the new words for the next class. Time's almost up. Any questions? That's all for today. Bye-bye.

5. Research Findings

1) Assessment

The assessment was done at two levels. I as a teacher checked the learning progress students made as individuals and in groups. My students were also invited to evaluate the learning and teaching process by completing a questionnaire and a self-report.

(1) The teacher's assessment

The classroom teacher's effective use of performance assessment tool to evaluate student progress enables the individuals to become much more proficient in effectively speaking in the English language. That's why I used it for this research. The following is one of the tools I used during the class.

Individual Assessment by the Teacher

A Scale of 7-10(with 7=poor, 10=excellent)

Number	Name	Points	Number	Name	Points
2101	Jung,S.Y.	10	2220	Im,N.Y.	8
2106	Lee,J.H.	10	2209	Oh,S.J.	8
2116	Kim,S.J.	10	2226	Cho,H.S.	8
2124	Lee,K.S.	10	2205	Kim,C.H.	8
2118	Kim, S.N.	10	2211	Bae,E.J.	8
2121	Kim,S.J.	10	2204	An,J.S.	8
2110	Kim,A.R.	8	2225	Um,J.Y.	10
2108	Whang,E.J.	8	2210	Lee,N.Y.	10
2132	Bang,U.L.	8	2224	Oh,S.J.	10
2129	King,W.Y.	8	2223	Lee,J.Y.	10
2111	Lee, M.Y.	8	2216	Song,H.J.	10
2107	Jung,J.S.	8	2218	Yun,H.J.	10
2127	Heo,Y.J.	10	2232	Kim,J.M.	8
2104	Joo,S.Y.	10	2233	Yu,J.H.	8
2109	Kim, S.H.	10	2217	Han,J.H.	8
2125	Cheon,W.J.	10	2231	Jung,B.R.	8
2123	Ko,D.R.	10	2213	Lee,B.M.	8
2133	Cho,Y.J.	10			
2135	Lee,B.M.	10			
2128	Hong,A.R.	8			

Group Assessment by the Teacher

A Scale of 1-5 (with 1=poor, 5=excellent)

Group Name	Points (20points÷2=10points)			
	use of English (5)	cooperation (5)	participation (5)	completion of the tasks(5)
Cherry	4	5	5	5
Lemon	3	5	5	4
Tomato	4	5	5	4
Apple	4	4	4	4
Kiwi	3	5	5	4
Orange	4	5	5	5

Date: May 31, 2000

(2) The students' self-assessment

Self-assessment is used for assessing students as a quantitative tool and diary is also used as a qualitative one in the research because they are effective ways for the teacher to see exactly whether objectives which the students are expected to meet are achieved or not in-class performance. The examples of self-rating and self-report are as follows.

<p>Self-Assessment</p> <p>A Scale of 2-10 (with 2=poor, 10=excellent)</p> <p>1. How active were you in participating in the activities? ① 100%(10p) ② 80%(8p) ③ 60%(6p) ④ 40%(4p) ⑤ 20%(2p)</p> <p>2. How much English did you use in class? ① 100%(10p) ② 80%(8p) ③ 60%(6p) ④ 40%(4p) ⑤ 20%(2p)</p> <p>3. How cooperative were you performing the tasks? ① 100%(10p) ② 80%(8p) ③ 60%(6p) ④ 40%(4p) ⑤ 20%(2p)</p> <p>4. How well do you think you completed the tasks? ① 100%(10p) ② 80%(8p) ③ 60%(6p) ④ 40%(4p) ⑤ 20%(2p)</p>
<p>Self-report</p> <p>1. How interesting was the class ?</p> <p>2. Do you think the class was good enough for you to improve speaking skills?</p> <p>3. Do you think the tasks encouraged you to communicate with the others?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Group name: _____, Name: _____ Date: _____, 2000</p>

2) Analysis

The following survey conducted by the students gives a clue that task-based

language teaching had some effects on developing their speaking ability of the English language.

From the result, what is inferred as the first important fact is that the students became more interested than before with 37% increase. The second is that the students evaluated themselves better than before by 22% and they answered that their amount of English use in class has increased by 40%. In addition, they showed they contributed more with 65% up and interacted with themselves more by 80% up for their task completion.

In terms of errors, the students appeared to feel good when they were not corrected by the teacher. Concerning TBLT, they showed some evidences of its worth using that approach. First, when they were doing the tasks, they could be more cooperative by 29% of positive answers and more concentrated in communication by 100% of 'Yes'. Second, the tasks encouraged the students' use of English remarkably. Third, 86% of them answered 'Yes' when asked if TBLT is good for their leaning of English. However, 84% of the students answered the tasks were difficult. I think this is because they were almost not accustomed to performing the tasks in class.

My conclusion is that the pragmatic use of TBLT to the in-class teaching is found be valuable, effective, and applicable in use. I can point that a task is a critical factor in causing every students to be involved in class activities with motivated and initiated more than without it.

Questions	Result	Content	Before	After	Increase or Decrease
1. What do you think about the English class?		very interesting	7	15	+8(21%▲)
		interesting	12	18	+6(16%▲)
		little interesting	13	4	-9(24%▼)
		boring	5	0	-5(13%▼)
2. How good do you think is your speaking ability of English ?		excellent	0	1	+1(2%▲)
		good	10	17	+7(20%▲)
		average	21	17	-4(11%▼)
		poor	6	3	-3(8%▼)
3. How much English did you use in class?		very much	0	5	+5(13%▲)
		much	5	11	+6(16%▲)
		a little	15	19	+4(11%▲)
		not at all	12	2	-10(27%▼)

	very much		12(32%)	
4. How much did tasks encourage your use of English?	much		23(62%)	
	a little		2(5%)	
	not at all		0(0%)	
	very much		12(32%)	
5. How cooperative were you doing the tasks?	much		17(50%)	
	a little		6(16%)	
	not at all		0(0%)	
	very much	0	15	+15(40%▲)
6. How much do you think you contributed for the group?	much	6	13	+7(20%▲)
	a little	10	8	+2(5%▲)
	not at all	21	1	-19(51%▼)
	very much	0	29	+29(78%▲)
7. How much did you interact with the members?	much	6	7	+1(2%▲)
	a little	5	1	-4(11%▼)
	not at all	26	0	-26(70%▼)
	very often		3(8%)	
8. How often do you want your speaking errors to be corrected?	often		6(16%)	
	not quite often		21(56%)	
	not once		7(20%)	
	very difficult		12(32%)	
9. How difficult were the tasks to perform?	difficult		19(51%)	
	easy		6(16%)	
	very easy		0(0%)	
10. Do you think TBLT is good for learning English?	Yes		32(86%)	
	No		5(13%)	
11. Do you think the tasks encouraged communication?	Yes		36(100%)	
	No		0(0%)	

6. Conclusion

I introduced the theory of Task-based Language Teaching to my English class. TBLT is not the only way of teaching English, but I know TBLT is one of the doing-worth approaches because it made the students motivated and encouraged to speak in English during the process of carrying out the tasks. I believe that if any

theory does not reflect on practice, it is no worthy of knowing or studying, particularly in the area of ELT. Surely I can say TBLT helps teachers accomplish their main goal, which is to have the students achieve theirs. I hope my colleagues to use the approach for their class for making a better English class.

IV. A STEP FORWARD

There has been an on-going demand for English teachers as empowered and reflective decision makers. In this vein, those involved in English language teaching agree to the argument that action research is a viable approach to effective changes in terms of curriculum, teacher development, the gap between theory and practice, and learning. It is very likely that teacher-initiated action research can lead to effective change in English language teaching and learning. However, the lack of coherent theoretical foundation and support at the administrative level for such a need is one problem facing English teachers in the Korean context. What is needed is a conceptual framework that will guide English teachers towards reflective practitioners and support in many practical aspects. Within the supportive framework, English teachers are seen as researchers, who are motivated to analyze situations, set goals, plan and monitor actions, evaluate results, and reflect on their own professional development. The issues of disseminating and sustaining action research have not been discussed as much as its justification and methods. It is suggested that we need to develop effective ways to disseminate information about action research and sustain action research atmosphere.

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