

Teacher trainees learning through action research

Anne McLellan Howard and Russell Fauss with Chie Kuroda, Ryuichi Nakahara,
Aya Arimura and Naoko Tagami

本研究論文は、日本において英語のみで授業を行う教師のための研修プログラムで用いられる実地研究プロジェクトについて述べている。研修生となる学生は、1回の教育実習を基に各自の研究テーマを選んだ。その後小規模の研究を計画し、テーマに関する調査を行った上で2回目の授業を行った。指導者はプロジェクトに組織的な問題があることに気付いたが、学生は役に立つし有意義だと感じた。ここでは学生が行ったプロジェクトの4例を紹介する。

This paper describes an action research project that was used in an English-medium teacher-training program in Japan. Trainees chose their own subjects of research, based on one teaching event. They planned a small piece of research, investigated the subject, and then taught a second class. The instructors found that, although there were logistical problems with the project, the students found it helpful and rewarding. Four examples of student projects are included.

“Action research is a very effective way of helping teachers to reflect on their teaching and to come up with their own alternatives to improve their practice.” (Tsui, 1993, p.173)

Many people would say that reflection is an integral part of teacher training, yet teaching trainees to reflect is not easy. The task becomes even more difficult when the trainees are Japanese L1 speakers being trained in English, with very little experience in the classroom. This project was conceived to help trainees through these difficulties, while encouraging autonomy. Through simple projects based on the principles of action research, trainees can practice a systematic, data-based way of examining their own teaching. They can also learn ways of improving their own teaching, resources for information on teaching, and skills that may last for their professional lifetime.

Background

This project was done at Miyazaki International College, in which all the classes are taught in English. As part of the Teacher Certification (TC) Program, students take a course in English Teaching Methodologies. This course consists of two classroom hours per week and one teaching practice per semester at a local high school, Miyazaki Gakuen (also referred to as “Miyagaku” in this paper). The teaching practice is done in a group, with each student responsible for a short section and other students assisting, for two forty-five minute sessions of a class called General English.

Trainees prepare for the class in their groups, with some input from the instructor. They then teach the class, with the MIC instructor, the high school instructor, and one other group of MIC students observing and giving feedback. The students are expected to reflect on their lesson by talking to observers, collecting feedback and, in the second semester, watching a videotape of their teaching.

Anne Howard teaches at Miyazaki International College. Correspondence may be sent to: MIC, 1405 Kano, Kiyotake-cho, Miyazaki-gun, Japan 889-1605, Tel: 0985-85-5931, Fax: 0985-84-3396, E-mail: ahoward@miyazaki-mic.ac.jp

First year of the project

Last year, I [Howard] taught the second semester of the course for the first time. Some problems had arisen in the first semester of the course. First, in their reflections students sometimes seemed to be simply repeating the advice they had been given by their observers. Second, it was not clear whether the observers were able to give advice on matters of concern to the trainees. The main problem that trainees had was discipline, which other trainees do not have the experience to give advice on. Finally, we wondered whether we had shown the trainees how to critically reflect on their own teaching without reports from observers.

The trainees prepared by doing an exercise where they read various steps of the action research process: identifying a problem, looking at data for more information, hypothesizing a solution to the problem, and testing the hypothesis. Trainees read each step in groups, and then brainstormed what the next step would be. After this, they had a brainstorming session to identify areas of concern in their own teaching (they had taught one class at this point). At the brainstorming session, students came up with many interesting ideas and ambitious ways of investigating them. However, as the semester went on, we were able to give less and less class time to the project, and enthusiasm fell off.

Second year

In the second year, we decided to make it a full-year project. Trainees were introduced to the idea of action research in the first semester after having done their first teaching. They then wrote their ideas for their own action research as part of the first reflection paper. In the second semester, they turned in a step-by-step plan for their research with their lesson plan, and wrote their results in the final paper. It is important to point out that this project does not fit the rigor of an actual action research project. With only two teaching events, it was not possible for the trainees to collect enough data to have confidence in the results of their research. However, the trainees were able to discover some solutions to problems they were experiencing.

Here are four examples of student projects. Some corrections have been made for grammar and length, but the language is largely the students' own.

Seating arrangements—Chie Kuroda

When I was teaching at Miyagaku for the first time, I noticed that students behaved or reacted differently when they sat individually from when they sat in a group. I assumed that there would be some connection between students' behaviors and seating arrangements. That is why I chose how seating arrangement affects students as my Action Research topic.

First, I found three types of seating arrangements: "lockstep," "pair work" and "group work" (Harmer, 1989). Lockstep is the seating style where every student faces front, and this is the traditional teaching arrangement. In this seating style it can be easy for teachers to control the class, and students to concentrate. However, students have little chance to practice or talk. In the pair work arrangement each student has a partner, and they can take part in the class or use the target language more than lockstep. Students also have more chance to practice than lockstep, and they can solve problems together. At the same time all of the students can use the target language freely so it will be difficult for teachers to correct all students' errors in the class, and students will speak loudly so there can be noise and lack of discipline. Group work can be used for oral work, reading and writing tasks, cooperative writing, and so on. It has the same advantages and disadvantages as pair

work. In addition to those, teachers also will have difficulty in selection of group members.

After the research, I thought that lockstep, the individual seating style, can be for giving information to all the students at once, encouraging individual ideas, and solving questions by students without any help; such as for tests. I assumed that pair work is for letting students compare and exchange their ideas, and to work together. Group work can be for cooperative tasks.

At Miyagaku I did two activities using group work, one individual task and one pair work activity. In the first group work students compared what they answered for their homework. Next, the teachers asked questions to students one by one for the individual work. After that, we did the second group work playing "Whisper Game." In this game students could help each other. Finally, students had a writing task for pair work.

From the teaching, I found that students were well motivated and enjoyed the lesson in both group work activities. Sometimes they were so active that it was hard for us to control the class. On the other hand, students were very quiet in lockstep and pair work. There were only a few students who could tell their ideas voluntarily when we asked students to tell their ideas to the class. I think that the differences might have been caused by the seating arrangements. Students may not have confidence about their answers or ideas. If they are in a group, they can discuss them and check whether they are right or wrong before saying them in front of other classmates. I think pair work is kind of middle point between lockstep and group work. In pair work students can feel more confident than in lockstep, but they might feel less confident than in a group.

In addition to the above points, chatting among students happened all the time, and students spoke Japanese most of the time, even though teachers taught in English. I think that may be caused by teaching skill. The seating arrangement may be one of the causes, because chatting was more often seen in the group work and less in the pair work and lockstep, but I have already learned how to react to these students' behaviors and I was supposed to be able to solve them. However, I could not. I think it was lack of experience. I realized that teaching is not simple.

Teachers' comments

The fact that group work encourages talking and individual work makes students quieter will come as no surprise to an experienced teacher. It is interesting that, although Chie has had ample experience of group, pair, and individual work as a student in her MIC classes, this project made her look at these as a teacher, perhaps for the first time. Probably the value of this research lies more in the fact that Chie discovered for herself one solution to the problem of students who will not voluntarily speak in class. Although she does end with the idea that her own lack of teaching experience is the cause of discipline problems in her class, she may have gained more of a feeling of control over one aspect of classroom management.

Students' Motivation—Ryuichi Nishihara

The definition of the "motivation" in English class is the students' willingness to study and try to use English. The students who are motivated have a big interest in learning English. This willingness brings a positive attitude from the students. For example, they will concentrate on class and do homework. In addition, the teacher can control students easier and the class will have a good atmosphere.

According to Lightbown and Spada (1999), motivation comes from communicative needs. If students need to speak English in the English speaking community or they have some opportunities to speak English with native speakers, they are motivated to learn or acquire the language. When they say their opinions or ideas in a communicative situation, their identities are recognized, and this makes them motivated.

Moreover, Lightbown and Spada (1999) mention some techniques to make students motivated. If students have the same pattern in class, they may be bored. The first step is to break the class routine. The teacher can use different types of activities, materials and tasks. Changing the pace and rhythm can also change the class routine. It means that teacher speaks faster or more slowly depending on the class atmosphere, and pays attention to the timing when moving to a new activity. The second technique is to use co-operative and competitive goals effectively. When students have group activity, each student is responsible for completing the project. Without all members' working together, the project cannot be completed. If students have a race or competition, they will be motivated because almost all students want to win in the competitions.

Based on those ideas, my group made our lesson plan and tried some techniques and original activities in our Miyagaku teaching. Our activities were a listening activity and translating activity. In the listening activity, we used American, Japanese and Indian English. Students answered questions and guessed where the speakers come from. In this activity, students were able to experience real English directly. In Japanese English education, only American English (sometimes British English) is taught, so students have never heard other kinds of English. However, in real English community, we meet many varieties of English, so this challenge makes the classroom more communicative. Actually, this activity was little bit difficult for them, but they seemed to enjoy it and to be interested in learning English.

In the translating activity, students translated one part of the lyrics of the song "You're Beautiful," into Miyazaki dialect. When I asked students whether they like translating, no one said they liked it. However, they concentrated on this activity, enjoyed it and translated very well. The advantage of this activity is that students' individual identities are recognized through their dialects. This activity focused on the contents of the song, not to the meaning, and their language that they use in their daily life. There are many different answers and no correct answers in this activity, so they were able to have confidence to translate.

To motivate students, there are many techniques and ideas. The best way is to care about student's feelings, decrease the pressure to study and make actual goals.

Teachers' comments

Motivating students is, along with discipline, one of the issues of most concern to the trainees. Although Ryuichi has learned many techniques for motivating students in his time in the TC program, through this research he was able to approach it from the standpoint of the students' identity. Since Ryuichi is also a speaker of a Japanese dialect, he was also able to put something of himself into the research.

Directing students' attention—Aya Arimura

How do teachers direct students' attention? When I went to Miyagaku in the last semester, which was my first time to teach in a real situation, I struck a snag in directing student's attention, which I had never considered before teaching. To make students interested in teaching or

teachers at the beginning of the class, to make students listen to us, and to move on to next activity smoothly, we need to pay attention to this issue. I believe it is the secret of successful teaching.

In the Miyagaku teaching I identified five techniques to get students attention: using a loud voice, clapping hands twice or three times, telling students that I will call one of them to the front after the explanation, tapping a student's shoulder, and standing behind a student silently. These are good for both the whole class and for individuals. All of these techniques came from my observation of teachers.

First of all, I used a loud voice to get students attention and to show my authority in the beginning of class. I wanted students to think I am a teacher, not a college student. It was a very good start. Observers also said it and some students whispered that I seemed a real teacher. Through the teaching I kept using a loud voice to whole class. When another teacher was trying to get the attention from the whole class, I used two techniques, which were using a loud voice and clapping hands. I thought just using the loud voice might become 'shouting.' Therefore to lessen the loud voice, I used the second technique. When I did it, students looked at me, and tried to listen to the teacher. I thought it was easy to hear the sound of clapping hands for the students.

Secondly in my plan, I told them that some students from each group would have to come up to the front and present stories that they got when they started working on their task. Through observing the last class, I noticed that the students show attention or are more interested in their classmates than in teachers. It seemed to work well; however, some students practiced speaking while others were presenting their stories. For this kind of students I used other techniques, which were tapping student's shoulder and standing behind a student silently. I also told to the whole class that they would have a quiz in the second class. As a result, when I used these techniques they realized they have to listen to others for the quiz.

As a consequence of the research in Miyagaku, I found things I did not predict. I thought about the techniques which could be used for both for prevention and after a problem happens to get students' attention directly. Of course it is the best thing to get attention before a problem happens. I predicted the most effective technique for this is to tell students that I will call someone up to the platform. As I mentioned earlier, I found that students were usually quiet and paid attention to their classmates when some of them were in front of the class. Unexpectedly, 'using a big voice' was the most effective way to get direct students' attention to teachers and their task. Of course, two techniques of clapping hands and standing silently worked for individuals. When I used these two techniques students tended to try to understand teacher's instruction.

However, after teaching, I felt very tired. I think it is the next issue for me: to manage/change a volume of my voice. It is also important to consider in what situation I should use a loud voice. I believe it is still effective to use a loud voice, because it also has the effect of showing authority. I think it is good to use it in the first two weeks of teaching. However, I predict students would become afraid of me and of learning English if I continue using the loud voice in every class. Therefore, after the first two weeks past, the teacher can reduce using the loud voice in the class.

Teachers' comments

Although we might question whether the use of a loud voice is an effective technique for teachers in the long run, we recognized its value in helping this student teacher get the attention and respect from her students that she desired. We

encourage Aya to continue to experiment and discover effective ways of managing the class.

Making students more active—Naoko Tagami

The topic of my action research project was that both teachers and students can create a positive and active learning class together. That is, I wanted most of the students to participate in the class actively and willingly. I realized that some students seemed to have little interest and participation in the class during our previous Miyagaku teaching. This time, I wanted to analyze what we can do to solve those issues through actualizing my ideas in teaching at Miyagaku.

Students should express and share their ideas and opinions freely. This was my main goal because today's students seem afraid of giving "wrong" answers; this can make students too passive about speaking. So, we briefly recommended useful expressions as "What does __ mean?" or "How do you spell __?" However, this plan was not so helpful. Only a few students used the expressions in English, or students mostly said, "I can't understand." or "Is it correct?" in Japanese. So, we also should have used other concrete plans as displaying the expressions or giving points when students used them in English.

Meanwhile, we kept a warm mood while using points or praise. This plan was helpful because several students volunteered in order to get points, and even students who made mistakes raised their hands again. Some students actually started competing to give answers after we started praising. I hope students could get confidence and start to feel pleasure in expressing themselves through this plan.

Students get more input from interesting materials or ones that are connected to their lives. After listening to Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream speech, students worked on free writing. At that time, they created their own sentences about their dreams, using the pattern "I have a dream that" This plan was most helpful. Most students seemed to work enjoyably and hard. Even a boy who often slept in class wrote his sentences. We also spent time interacting with students and got many questions. According to an observer, this was the most student participation in a free writing activity through the semester. This may be because the positive topic about dreams matched with students' curiosity and they easily could express themselves.

Various types of learning materials that suit the learners' levels can increase students' understanding and participation. Each student must have individual learning styles such as audio, visual and tactile. In this time, I focused on the visual one and used many visuals for introducing the Civil Rights theme of this class.

We focused on the African Americans' efforts that students could easily relate to, rather than the difficult topic of racism. So, we showed the American flag and pictures of today's successful African Americans such as Beyonce and asked their names. Later, we introduced Martin Luther King's picture and connected his effort to the above people's success. We chose this way because students might get stuck in encountering a complex issue at the beginning. These plans were helpful because many students seemed to be interested or involved in the class and answered names soon and willingly.

From doing this project, I realized I did not know what the definitions of what "active, positive and autonomous students" are. Before teaching, we defined these concepts as students having fun or talking a lot. However, we now believe that we can define them as even students concentrating on the work or trying to do so. This is because many students worked on some exercises quietly and could answer voluntarily or correctly, while other enjoyably chatted with their task untouched.

It is hard to see the students' understanding. When we said, "Do you understand?" students seldom responded or started chatting. And, the same students always spoke out. This suggests that many students may still be shy, may not understand the content or may not feel autonomous. So, we really should do similar exercises or quizzes several times, and prepare activities so that students can be exposed more to English and to get more responses from them.

To increase students' autonomy, teachers should participate in the class not by indulging students but by sharing with them and guiding them to create a better learning environment. When we gave students tasks to find answers by themselves with their groups' help, and responsibility for their ideas, we facilitated as helpers. Students should learn from activities as well as enjoy them. Again, students' silent work can also imply active learning. Improving the balance between the fun and seriousness can be my next project to work on.

Teachers' comments

Although Naoko had trouble limiting her research topic, she obviously learned a great deal from her attempt. She found that she can increase students' participation by first relating content to students' interests and knowledge, and by making tasks that are easily manageable for students, especially in the beginning of a unit or lesson. She was also able to reach a more mature understanding of how "active" class work and students can be defined. These realizations will be very helpful for her in the future.

Analysis of the project

We believe that the proceeding student reports represent the success of the project overall. However, behind this were many day-to-day challenges, even though we changed the format of the project this year. In this section we will describe what we feel were some weaknesses of the project.

As I [Fauss] guided the students in the fall semester through their research projects, I found that it was hard for many students to understand the requirements and process of the overall project. Part of the difficulty was undoubtedly due to their level of development as trainees. However, certainly some responsibility must lie with the way I presented the project and gave instructions, examples, advice and feedback.

As mentioned in the background section, one way we attempted to improve the project was to allow more time for it by starting students thinking about research topics in the spring semester. All students proposed general topics in their spring end-of-semester reflections paper; they therefore had a head start. Unfortunately, we found that students did not take advantage of the extra time. Most students started to plan their specific research too late, usually about a week before their actual second lesson. There was not enough time to give them feedback and help them choose appropriate sub-topics or narrow their topics before they went to teach. This may have been due to poor scheduling of deadlines on my part.

Students also had difficulty identifying topics that were appropriate (measurable) and focused enough (manageable). As Hadley (1997) states, one of the main "barriers to starting an AR project" and concluding it successfully is "vague research ideas"(p.88). The research plans that students submitted along with their fall lesson plans bore this out. Many of them had trouble coming up with ideas that were more detailed than those that they identified in the spring. Topics tended to be very general ones, such as "how to motivate students" or "how to keep students'

attention in the class.” Many students also did not do proper research on their topic before teaching, likely due to a lack of time, not knowing where to look, and not being focused enough. We assume that this is natural at first due to our students’ lack of knowledge and experience. However, because of the lack of time mentioned before, we were sometimes not able to rectify the problems before students had to go and teach.

Finally, students seemed to have trouble focusing on their (second-ever) lesson plans and the research project at the same time. We recognized this fact when first considering doing this project, but felt that it was worth trying regardless. There is little we can do about this inherent difficulty, but we can do much in terms of presentation and management to ease it.

Nevertheless, despite these problems, through much teacher-trainee consultation prior to the teaching practice, we were able to guide most of the students to a reasonably clear understanding of their task and its aims, and to topics that the students could manage. We could clearly see from reading their reflections, such as the previous examples, that all the students had gained a heightened awareness of the specific pedagogical issues they investigated; they also gained the beginnings towards finding the solutions they sought and the tools they needed to find answers.

Feedback from students

At the end of the fall semester, we gave the students an evaluation questionnaire to get their feedback on various aspects of the course, including the Action Research project. They were asked to rate three aspects of the project: the teacher’s instructions, examples and advice; their own making and implementing of their research plans; and their post-teaching reflections papers and class presentations. Students gave the entire project a ranking of 4 out of 5, and included many comments, mostly positive, as follows.

The teacher’s instructions and advice received the lowest score, a 3.9, which confirmed our earlier concerns about our effectiveness in presenting the project. Comments were mostly positive, but included the following:

- “Sometimes I didn’t understand what I’m supposed to do . . . need clearer instructions.”

The score and comments suggested that our presentation was effective overall, but that there is room for improvement.

Students gave the planning and implementation of their action research plan a score of 4.2. This score reflects the value students gave to having the activity as part of their class, not a self-evaluation of how well they did it. Comments included the following:

- “To have another goal [in addition to teaching] was good.”
- “It can make us realize or think deeply about teaching methods.”
- “We have to find solutions by ourselves and we can see the results.”
- “It was hard to focus on both teaching and our research topic at the same time.”

These comments were quite positive, and they affirmed the value of the experiential approach we used. Still, the last remark confirmed the challenge of the task we gave students.

Students also gave high marks, and average of 4.2, to the assignments of the individual reflective essay and group presentation for the class of their research projects. Feedback included the following:

- “Reflection makes us think again and learn more.”

- “Observers gave us strong and weak points—it was helpful.”
- “Sharing gives us other opinions and standpoints. I can borrow some ideas.”

The value of sharing experiences and learning from each other was the most common comment regarding the class presentations.

Conclusion

Although we did not originally conceive of the project in this way, it could be viewed as an action research project within another one: the group and individual projects of our students, and surrounding that the research project of we the teachers, judging the overall effectiveness of the project we conceived, assigned and directed. The key questions that we needed to ask ourselves at the end of the year were the following: Was the project generally successful? Should we include it again in our plans for the course? If so, how should we go about it next time? What should we change?

Based on students’ reflective essays and presentations, and on their feedback on the value of the project itself, we can positively conclude that it was worthwhile for them. However, there are a number of things we could do better. For example, we can make the project easier for students to understand with easier instructions in a step-by-step fashion, more concrete examples (especially of appropriate and specific topics), and class discussion (perhaps using a case studies approach). We also need to show them how to do the kinds of research they will need to do to get informed support for their ideas. Starting the project in the spring was definitely helpful, but in the fall we allowed students to waste this advantage by not having them start focusing on more specific topics until shortly before they were to teach. We must have them submit specific topic ideas and research plans as early as possible, early enough to give them proper feedback and time to revise their plans before they go to teach. Plans may need to go through several drafts, or we may need to advise some students individually to put them on the right track.

With these revisions, the action research project will no doubt continue to be a challenge for our teacher trainees, but at the same time a positive and valuable experience, and a resource that they can take with them and use throughout their future teaching careers.

“Can a teacher with no previous experience undertake action research? The answer is an emphatic ‘yes.’” (Hadley, 1997, p.90)

References

-
- Hadley, G. (1997). Action research: Something for everyone. In D. Griffiee & D. Nunan (Eds.) *Classroom teachers and classroom research*. (pp. 87-98) Tokyo: Japan Association for Language Teaching.
- Harmer, J. (1989). *The practice of English language teaching*. New York: Longman.
- Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research planner*. Victoria: Deakin University Press.
- Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. (1999). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- O'Hanlon, C. (1996). *Professional development through action research in educational settings*. London: Falmer Press.
- Tsui, A.B.M. (1993). Helping teachers to conduct action research in their classrooms. In D. Freeman & S. Cornwell (Eds.), *New ways in teacher education*. (pp. 171-175). Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wallace, M. J. (1998). *Action research for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.