

Developing EFL Teacher and Learner Autonomy through Teacher-Initiated Action Research

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This paper is based on research carried out at the ESP Centre (ESPC), Damascus University (1996-1999). One of the findings of this research suggests that teacher-initiated action research (AR) helps in developing teacher and learner autonomous learning.

Action research is defined as:

“... a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by practitioners in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out” (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 162).

The Collaborative Action Research Project (CAWRP), on which the study is based, was teacher-centred, teacher-initiated, collaborative, participatory, teacher self-directed, and teacher-evaluated. “Teacher-initiated” means teacher action is not imposed but can be extrinsically motivated. The project was proposed to ease the problem of teaching and learning of academic writing in the research context.

The paper is in five parts. Part One focuses on project design and methodology. The CAWRP was implemented in two phases, Baseline and Main. The baseline research aimed at articulating a picture of teacher and context needs and assessing project viability. The Main Phase had three stages: Orientation, Research and Reporting, and Summative Evaluation and Follow-up. The role of the researcher was to facilitate teacher self-learning and the introduction of needed pedagogic innovation. In designing the project, Wallace’s (1991) maxim of “practise what you preach” and Holliday’s (1994) principle of “appropriate methodology” were found particularly relevant and useful.

Part Two of the paper focuses on participants’ responses to the AR approach to teacher learning in the Baseline Phase. In this Phase, 23 teachers and administrators (out of 26) participated voluntarily in the study. Following the investigation of their needs and wants, project aims, objectives and requirements were made clear to them in a general staff meeting held at the end of a six-week research period (April-May 1996). The teachers were then invited to sign up for the collaborative project if they so wished and to select the area and manner (individually or in collaboration) they desired to contribute. Twenty (17 teachers and three administrators) signed up for the project.

The Third Section of the paper presents participants’ responses to the Main Phase activities. Evidence comes from formative and summative feedback questionnaires. For example, teachers’ evaluation of their learning from the first discussion circle (a project learning activity) was categorised into four areas of teacher learning: concepts, research methodology, innovation, and beliefs and attitudes. All participants in the discussion circle reported learning from it. Summative feedback is also presented to show participants’ responses to the project as a whole (see Boxes 1 and 2).

Box 1: Full Participants' Perspectives

1. The results speak for themselves: Action research, participation in the Tunis Conference, and more self-awareness has been noticed in every aspect (Jihad).2. The project initiator was very hardworking and very persistent. At the same time she was very friendly and helpful to all participants. Most of the participants were collaborative and very dedicated. So the project, I think, is a great success (Noor).3. The goals have been realized (5 teachers are going to Tunis!) (Shehab).4. I mentioned previously (the last feedback sheet) that it is the first time I feel others as well as me highly interested in attending, participating and discussing problems. No one could raise our curiosity and interest to such extent (Sadik).5. It is a success because it taught us many new things including methods of teaching, collaboration, doing a research, how to read and write, etc. What is most important, however, is that it taught us how to share and care and it made us one family (Ola).6. It encouraged me as a teacher that I can be something more; that is, I can make a mini-research. It supported my belief in myself and my colleagues. Regarding information and knowledge, it was very successful (Reem).7. I think the project succeeded in achieving the set goals ... that will be beneficial for ... students and ourselves (Abeer) .

Box 2: Moderate and Occasional Participants' Perspectives

1. It has introduced some new methodology and concepts and opened the way for teachers to a better knowledgement [sic] of themselves and their potentials (Salma).2. With four teachers participating in Maghreb Conference with papers that was [sic] done through this project, I believe it was a very good success (Hind).3. In fact I cannot judge objectively because I took part on a very limited scale (Shaza).

The focus of Section Four of the paper is the follow-up stage (April 1997 – September 1999). In introducing this section, it is pointed out that continuity is the most significant indication of any project's success. The paper then lists a number of factual information, supported by data evidence, that illustrate continuity of the CAWRP:

1. Shortly after the CAWRP had ended, three teachers went to present improved versions of their Tunis conference papers at another conference in Morocco. From there, they sent me news of their success (data evidence).
2. The Centre Administration responded positively to a proposal put forward by the teacher-researchers (as part of their evaluation of the project) to replicate the CAWRP, focusing on another course component. The teachers' proposal was discussed in a general staff meeting, and a unanimous decision was taken to implement a similar project called "Action research for listening and speaking". This is part of a letter in which the Centre Director informed me about this staff decision (data evidence).
3. Shehab, Sadik, Ola, and Noor participated in another conference in Jordan in August 1997 and gave papers based on their new classroom research. After the conference, Ola and Noor sent me a letter each informing me about their success (data evidence).
4. The last news about the Centre action researchers came from all four of them while I was revising the manuscript of my PhD thesis. They sent me copies of their new abstracts for the 1999 conferences. Shehab, Noor and Ola presented new research papers at TESOL Arabia '99 in the United Arab Emirates, while Sadik went west to participate with a paper in TESOL International in New York. He faxed his news on 5 February 1999 (data evidence).

The final and most important section of the paper illustrates through a case study the relationship between teacher and learner autonomy. The case is Noor's, an experienced teacher, who was an active project participant. She carried out AR for the first time in her professional journey as part of the CAWRP and continued to do so long beyond its end.

Noor's learning journey started with her attraction to AR through reading McNiff's (1988) book, *Action Research: Principles and Practice* and other project materials. The topic she chose to work on was "When Students Choose for Themselves". In her first presentation on her research, she focused on the process and seemed to have adopted the AR procedure in Richards and Lockhart (1994: 27-8). The five steps (initial reflection, planning, action, observation, and reflection) were identifiable in her in-progress report. (data evidence: recordings).

Further evidence of Noor's development in the Research and Reporting Stage emerged in her written paper, which was accepted for presentation at the Third Maghreb ESP Conference in Tunis (27 February – 1 March 1997). The challenges that faced teacher learning in the Main Project Phase influenced her "theorising" about student learning autonomy. In her first research cycle, she focused on learner autonomy, but in the second, she extended her research to include teacher autonomy.

Reflection is believed to be an important factor in actualising teacher learning. In Noor's case, the evidence is striking. Her reflections tend to be more of the moral and ethical type. There are several examples in her conference paper. "Freedom" and its connotations and metaphors are recurrent features in her text:

The freedom they [students] felt in talking about their lingual problems illuminated the discussion. Being released from tension in a non-threatening atmosphere, they gave clear realistic description of their suffering from language learning whether in college or in their past secondary schools.

Noor mentioned in the baseline interview and again in her paper that students were suffering from writing. Through the autonomous learning opportunities with which she provided her class, her students progressed "from writing sentences, to writing paragraphs", and finally, "to writing sections of their projects". To support her claims about students' development, she provided her audience with samples of their writings. The effect of "putting the steering wheel" in her hand to generate her own development in teaching and learning writing appeared to have motivated her to do the same with her students. She encouraged her students (postgraduates) to carry out research. This is how she described "Step 7" of her action research spiral:

One more step ... to check about their writing. I asked each student to prepare for an interview with somebody. They would choose the person, and they would brainstorm questions. They might either record the responses and later transcribe them, or write them down ...

To my pleasure, most of them chose to interview teachers in the ESPC. Through interviewing ESPC teachers, I thought I would know better about what students wanted to know about teachers. This was another benefit .

She then listed seven questions students asked the teachers and then reflected on the questions :

Reflecting on students' questions I could see that my students were mostly concerned about teacher's personal freedom. Notice how many times the words "make them" and "must" were used ...

This was a turning point in her paper and her development in general. Starting with pointing out the problem, she said and wrote:

I think our students suffer from kind of self imprisonment which leads to lack of creativity due to constraints at the family level, the educational system level, the curriculum level, and/or even the traditional class level .

Noor formed her own theory of learner autonomy and development. She generated it through moral and ethical reflection. Her perceived "solution" is embedded in her beliefs, values, and experience as learner and teacher:

To get the supreme creativity and inspiration you have to let the bird sing on a tree. It won't sing in a cage. When my students chose for themselves, I think their language could develop deeper and faster, although they still make grammatical mistakes which, I think, need a new cycle of action research .
(Noor's conference paper)

Both the "solution" and future action plan are enlightening about the extent of her development. Noor has grasped both the theory and its practice and creatively dealt with the constraints of her own situation. She has unconsciously fulfilled Elliott's (1991) vision of "creative resistance" in AR.

The result of Noor's AR was classroom innovation, which she herself initiated. First, she implemented team research and writing, which were encouraged in the CAWRP as a means for teacher autonomous learning. Ten of her 12 students worked on their projects in collaboration (in pairs). She mentioned this in her presentations and research diary. According to Noor's research record (or diary), "Students ... prefer to work collaboratively; out of 12 students only 2 will work individually". Secondly, in the process of her classroom research, Noor experimented with several of the new ideas discussed in our group meetings. For example, she applied "self-monitoring" and "peer reviews", but not rigidly. She indicated in her research diary that transfer of these ideas to her classroom was not unproblematic and that she had to persist in training students to become autonomous:

They wanted *me* [her emphasis] to correct their work. They think it's a waste of time to give them back their homework with only underlined mistakes. I wanted them to try and think of correcting the mistakes
...

Thirdly, there is strong evidence to suggest that Noor has developed into an informed supervisor of project writing. She raised her students' awareness about the purpose of each task or activity she wanted them to do. This is a point emphasised in the peer reviews article (Mangelsdorf 1992) and in McNiff (1988). In short, Noor transferred project ideas to her classroom pedagogy creatively.

To sum up, there is compelling evidence in this study that teacher action research contributes to teacher autonomous learning, and that teacher autonomy helps in fostering learner autonomy. Without teacher autonomy, learner autonomy in pedagogical contexts remains a theoretical ideal,

which is difficult to achieve. It seems that freedom to learn the way an adult learner chooses is essential for his or her development. Adults appear to value their freedom and respond more positively and work hard if this freedom is guarded and respected. van Lier (1996) emphasises this point when he writes: "If there is excessive control, and we are told exactly what to do, then education ceases to be education" (p. 8).

Discussion Questions

1. In his book *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*, Phil Benson (2001) points out that research on the effectiveness of the different approaches and practices to foster autonomy has been anecdotal in nature and lacks "hard empirical evidence" (p. 178). He argues that practitioner action research can redress the desired balance. In your view, to what extent has Daoud's study addressed the imbalance between anecdotal and empirical evidence?
2. Do you think that teacher autonomy is a pre-requisite for learner autonomy? Why or why not?

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