Original Paper

Language Teachers Improving Their Practice and Generating Knowledge through Action Research

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate a group of language teachers who seek to improve their general English syllabus through action research. Action research offers practitioners possibilities to address syllabus issues through thoughtful inquiry. Because the study requires the researcher to comprehend the subject of study, research techniques allowing participants express their beliefs, and opinions about the syllabus are entirely appropriate. Thus, it is unlikely that other research methods allow action researchers understand the contextual reality as qualitative methods do. Interviews are conducted as they are widely used in action research studies and are suitable techniques to gain insights into the practitioners' collective reflective enquiry. The study shows that action research is a valuable tool to improve a language syllabus, an additional element action research offers to the process of syllabus improvement is that teachers can take responsibility for themselves and their actions thus by improving the syllabus they follow, they are able to emancipate themselves from the controlled situation they can find themselves in.

Keywords

teachers, improve, knowledge, action, research

1. Introduction

Perhaps the most recognized reference of Action Research (AR) is that AR is a well-known tool for change and improve (Burns, 2010; McNiff, 2013), several studies validate this (Yuan & Lee, 2014; Cabaroglu, 2014; Talandis Jr & Stout, 2014; Wang & Zhang, 2014). This study also confirms that AR is a way of looking at one's practice and take action to improve it. This investigation has also found that AR supports the development of teachers, involving them in a research process. Additionally, AR

can serve as a method to help teachers becoming more confident and knowledgeable.

The study presents the case of a researcher who involved a group of language teachers in a process of reflection upon a prescribed language syllabus they have followed. Throughout enquiry, teachers became aware of the changes necessary to make to the syllabus. They also realised that conducting research is not a restricted activity for them, and that AR research could generate grounded theory.

The paper develops a theoretical framework following three main premises: AR can be conducted by practitioners, language teachers, AR can help improve a problematic situation, and AR generates knowledge grounded in practice. A section about critique given to AR is also included. The methodology of the study is mainly qualitative, using interviews as the main source of data. Results of the investigation produce a rich description of the involvement of the teachers in the process of syllabus renewal as well as the knowledge they gained during their participation.

2. Theoretical Framework

According to Burns (2005) AR is seen as a method used to generate "meaning and understanding in problematic social situations and improving the quality of human interactions and practices within those situations" (p. 57). AR is a methodology that encourages teachers to ask questions about theory and practice and to evaluate their teaching through systematic inquiry (Cabaroglu, 2014).

AR is a form of collective reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

The above definitions coincide that AR identifies a problematic situation which needs to be solved within a work environment. Reflective inquiry needs to be conducted by practitioners across the AR process. Through inquiry practitioners understand the problematic situation and the possible causes of the problem. Action is taken in order to improve the initial problem that has been found. There is literature which also suggests that AR can be conducted by practitioners, and generates grounded theory.

2.1 Action Research Can Be Conducted by Teachers

Adelman (1993) claims that through AR participants can undertake systematic inquiry in search of greater effectiveness through democratic participation. For Glassman, Erdem and Bartholomew (2012) AR is a form of social inquiry through which members of social groups interact with one another, engage in open dialogue about their intergroup relationships, and collectively participate in a learning process to create social change within their communities.

AR has become increasingly popular around the world as a form of professional learning, specifically in education. One of the reasons why teachers started to participate as researchers was because traditional educational researchers have a tendency to impose abstract research findings on schools and teachers with little or no attention paid to local variation (Anderson, 2002). As Mertler (2014, p. 14)

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reports "I believe that, due to this continued imposition of more traditional research findings, there is a real need for the increased practice of teacher-initiated, classroom-based action research".

The process goes through ontological moments in which practitioners critique their practice, recognise what it is good and build on strengths, as well as understand what needs attention and take action to improve it (McNiff, 2013). Producing insights about their own teaching practice is through a process of developing lessons or assessing students learning with careful consideration of education theory, existing research, and practical experience, along with the analysis of the lesson's effect on student learning (Parson & Brown, 2002).

According to Mcniff and Whitehead (2010) AR has become increasingly popular around the world as a professional learning tool for practitioners. It has also been recognised as a model for professional growth. Furlong and Salisbury (2005) found that taking part in AR often led to teachers becoming more confident and knowledgeable, collecting and using evidence, and learning about their own learning. Some educational researchers claim that teachers who conduct AR are better informed about their field (Bennett, 1993).

The participation of teachers and even students in AR has been widely documented. Wang and Zhang (2014) report on a collaborative AR project carried out by a group of university researches with a group of senior secondary school English teachers in an attempt to promote teacher autonomy in the Chinese context. By joining the project, teachers were able to move beyond their routine teaching and critically reflect on their practice, which enhanced their understanding of educational context, making them more active participants of the reform. The main impact of the project on teachers includes their changes of views about students as ways of working with other colleagues.

Halai (2011) describes a case study conducted by the Ministry of Education in Pakistan aiming to develop understanding of how teachers become action researchers. Within the research results, researchers found that teachers who engaged in the AR found that there were many benefits to be obtained from this process; it provided them with opportunity to gain an understanding of conducting research in their own classroom, to become aware of the ways they can study and change their own practice. Hong and Lawrence (2011) present insights gained from a review of eighty AR projects completed by classroom teachers. The gathered data revealed AR impacted on literacy instruction, something which teachers had struggled with.

2.2 AR Generates Knowledge Grounded in Practice

McNiff (2013) claims that traditional scientific and social scientific researchers usually see knowledge as a single or detached element found in literature. "Knowledge therefore becomes separated from the people who create it" (p. 28). According to Johnson (2008) there is a gap between what researchers find and report as a result of their investigations, and what really happens within the field of work. For instance, what occurs every single day in school classrooms, or teacher's points of view, the teaching-learning process, or the practical challenges are not often reflected in research findings.

Support comes from Whitehead (2009) who received responses from a group of local teachers he had been working with, after presenting them with a research report about local curriculum development based on current theories. Whitehead explained to the teachers what they had been doing in regards to curriculum innovation, teaching and learning process, and evaluation. Teachers agreed the report might be satisfactory to Whitehead's academic colleagues, "(…) but they could not see themselves in the report. They could not recognise the explanation in terms of the explanations they gave for their practice in working to improve their pupil's learning" (p. 91).

Whitehead (2008) claims that it is a misapprehension to think that the disciplines of education, individually or in combination, could explain sufficiently an individual's educational influence in their own learning and in the learning of others. Hirst (1983) argues that many of the educational theory's operational principles "(…) will be of their nature generalizations from practical experience and have as theory justification the results of individual activities and practice" (p. 18).

This argument has a resonance with what Johnson (2008) acknowledges about AR in the way that AR creates knowledge based on enquiries conducted within specific and often practical contexts. Somekh (2006) also recognizes that knowledge that is produced through AR "in collaboration with practitioners is grounded in practice (…)" (p. 94). In addition Crawford (1995) introduces the concept of actionable knowledge which is defined as knowledge that can "change professional practice or social institutions through the active and transformative participation of those working within a particular setting" (p. 239). Sexton and Lu (2009) suggest that actionable knowledge is produced in "nature and is generated by, and for, a particular social setting" (p. 686).

According to Elliot (1989) developing self-reflection about teaching experiences can turn an AR process into an exercise in "ideological deconstruction" (p. 3). This means that the teachers' experiences of class research can be grounded in trying to facilitate their professional development and not in theoretical inputs by teaching experts. Support comes from Ahmad and Sajjad (2011) who state that native Anglophone writers lead the ELT community in research for innovations and improvements in teaching English and their findings tend to be universal; but "it is not possible for such studies to have universal application" (p. 1766) due to local constraints.

Sano, Takahashi, and Yoneyama (1984) present a case in which participants gained knowledge after adapting the CLT concept into their own needs and contexts. The efforts of a group of Japanese teachers resulted in a manifesto where they captured their local vision of what communicative competence was; building on the principle that "for most of [their] learners, English [was] not and [would] never be an instrument to do something with" (p. 170). The knowledge generated through the research conducted by the Japanese teachers agrees with what McNiff (2013) believes about the knowledge produced by AR. McNiff thinks that "(…) knowledge is never static or complete; it is in constant state of development as new understandings emerge" (p. 28).

The emergence of new knowledge was reported by Mcdonough (2006) during the conduction of AR at the University of Illinois in the Division of English as an International Language. The study

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investigated whether carrying out AR as part of a graduate seminar affected the professional development of graduate teaching assistants who were teaching in foreign and second language departments. Findings reveal that through a process of inquiry participants gain knowledge in three different areas: their conception of research, which broad at the end of the semester, their appreciation for peer collaboration and the application of knowledge obtained by doing AR to improve their L2 teaching practice.

2.3 AR Can Help Improve the Work Environment

It has been repeatedly mentioned above that one of the main reasons why AR projects are undertaken is because they help improve the work environment of participants. This has been confirmed by several scholars. Glassman, Erdem, and Bartholomew (2012) suggest that AR is essentially a social-education-based intervention for communities dealing with difficult, deep-rooted problems. Carr and Kemmis (1986) also claim that AR is seen as a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices.

McTaggart (1994) mentions that a distinctive feature of participatory AR is that those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on courses of critically informed action which seem likely to lead to improvement. Meyer (2000) maintains that AR's strength lies in its focus on generating solutions to practical problems. Winter and Munn-Giddings (2002) state that action reach represents the study of social situations carried out by those involved in that situation in order to improve both their practice and the quality of their understanding.

Somekh (2006) affirms that participating teachers could improve their own practices and contribute to the larger educational system. Carver and Klein (2013) comment that AR is a useful tool for supporting continuous improvement in teaching programmes. Borko, Liston, and Whitcomb (2007) point out that through AR unique opportunities for reflection and improvement of the practice are created.

AR offers opportunities for teacher learning. In Johnson and Button's (2000) study, teachers noticed the links between their own learning and the learning of their students, affirming that the principles of good learning that they used with their own students applied to their own classroom by using AR, they began to appreciate their own ability to increase knowledge through their own projects.

Several case studies confirm that AR is the motivation for changes in teaching. Yuan and Lee (2014) document a case where Chinese teachers felt dissatisfied with the quality of teaching and learning in their classroom. This motivated them to participate in an AR project to solve these problems and "improve the effectiveness of their teaching" (p. 3). After observing the students' classroom behavior and interviewing some students about their learning needs, and different moments of reflection. Teachers began to implement actions to solve the problems found, and with this contribute to their professional growth through AR.

Cabaroglu (2014) reports on a case study which explored the impact of AR on Turkish English language teacher candidates' self-efficacy beliefs. After attending a 14-week course, where an inquiry-based approach to learning and teaching was adopted aiming to help prospective teachers

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understand and improve their classroom practice. According to Cabaroglu participants experienced growth in teaching efficacies, increased self-awareness, improved problem-solving skills and enhanced autonomous learning.

Talandis Jr and Stout (2014) describe an AR project conducted with students at a Japanese university during a school year. The researchers faced different problems concerning the Japanese students' conversation skills. Thus, their primary aim was to help them improve their speaking skills via an intervention, developing a syllabus featuring spoken interaction around social topics, pair practice activities, and frequent oral assessment. Through three cycles of enquiry, researchers evaluated their intervention aiming to understand how it could help them address the problem.

Talandis Jr and Stout stated that not only did the AR project help students become aware that conversing in English was possible, but it also helped the researchers to develop into more reflective teachers "guided by the multiple perspectives that collected data could provide" (p. 21).

Schratz (1992) presents a case in which the faculty members of the University of Innsbruck (Austria) improved their teaching by becoming more reflective about what was occurring in the interaction between the students and the teacher. This happened after a senate commission was established at the University to deal with the issue relating to the lack of value lectures placed on their activities in the classroom. The study was based on previous findings showing that university staff was generally motivated to improve their teaching competences even though their main interest laid in their disciplinary fields of scientific research.

In summary, AR participants are able to undertake systematic inquiry in the search of a learning process to create social change within their communities. AR often leads to teachers becoming more confident and knowledgeable, collecting and using evidence, and learning about their own learning. Teachers who conduct AR are better informed about their field. AR can be conducted by practitioners and not only by researchers whose research findings leave a gap between what they find and report as a result of their investigations, and what really happens within the field of work.

On the other hand, AR creates knowledge based on enquiries and grounded in practice conducted within specific and often practical contexts. As a result of all this AR is seen as a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve their practices, generate solutions to practical problems.

2.4 Critiques of AR

One of the main risks of understanding AR as an educational policy is that the institutional policy makers or managers may want to maintain control, which would make this a centralised initiative (Chun, 1999).

Perhaps one of the principal arguments against AR is that it should be left for specialists who have the training and capacity to utilize it effectively (Burns, 2005). Jarvis (1981) emphasizes that AR is without academic reputation, and should therefore be left to academic specialists who have the experience and aptitude. According to Burns (2005) AR:

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has not developed sound procedures, techniques and methodologies, [it] is small-scale and therefore not generalizable (has low external validity), [it] shows low control of the research environment and therefore cannot contribute to causal theories of teaching and learning, [it] exhibits string personal involvement on the part of participants and therefore is overly subjective and anecdotal, [it] is not reported in a form that conforms to a recognizable scientific genre (p. 67).

Elliott and Sarland (1995) provide a list with several criticisms of teacher research related to "the dominance of description over analysis in many accounts [and] the tendency in many accounts to adopt a narrowly technicity stance to the problems of pedagogical change" (p. 373). Other arguments also raise concern about the quality of the research being conducted. For instance Foster (1999) criticizes the reports written by teachers engaged in the Teacher Research Grant Pilot Scheme and evidenced that some of the reports looked more like personal descriptions of, or justifications for, their own practice; or explanations of their attempts to improve pupil achievement.

Foster found problems with validity because "in nearly all the reports insufficient evidence is presented to support key claims (…) there are significant doubts about the validity of evidence actually presented (…) causal claims (…) are central to at least 10 of the projects, but in most they are unconvincing" (p. 388). According to Hodgkinson (1957) teachers as well as other stakeholders like administrators, and supervisors lack familiarity with the basic techniques of research.

AR presents different challenges and limitations. For example teachers do not understand what it is, or they do not seem familiar with it. Also, funding and workload can be limitations. Halai (2011) presents a study to illustrate how teachers became action researchers. After analyzing twenty AR theses written by Pakistani MEd students, the research found AR was "complex and messy" (p. 201).

According to Halai the most challenging situation for teachers was the fact that they needed to understand what AR was, but at the same time they were grappling with the improvement of practice and change in the classroom. One of the ideas difficult to assimilate was that that AR is seen as a cyclic process where it is expected that one process follows another, but "(…) the cycle did not mean that linear steps have to be followed, (…) in action cycles there were continuous small cycles within" (p. 205).

Simonsen (2009) claims that conducting AR projects can lead to challenges. AR projects must be initiated, established and carried out before you have empirical data for your research. One has to prioritize, allocate the needed resources for the AR project. All of this is time consuming (Crookes & Chandler, 2001), which makes it very challenging, especially for teachers whose schedules are already overloaded from teaching, who are usually not granted time to do the research (Block, 2000).

The challenges that AR presents are not only related to the lack of familiarity, or the capacity of participants to conduct it, but also to financial issues. Involving teachers in AR usually requires teachers to participate in meetings "(…) during school hours to discuss their research, then the problem becomes financial as well as temporal, as substitute teachers must be hired. Again the quality of present

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education is diminished" (Hodgkinson, 1957, p. 142). Gebhard (2005) pointed out that focusing on the solution of problems might limit the potential of teachers to explore other possibilities. "Although the AR process makes sense and is certainly worth doing, we can go beyond this process by exploring a variety of other avenues to awareness outside the problem-posing one AR" (p. 64).

AR does not necessarily lead to change (Cain & Milovic, 2010). This was confirmed by Haggarty and Postlethwaite (2003) who claimed that a group of teachers involved in AR did not clearly understand the relation between AR and change, in other words; the new knowledge gained and "classroom practice were separated—they had not altered or even confirmed their practice as a result of their new understanding who were conducting AR did not necessarily AR limited understanding" (p. 435).

Dissemination of educational AR has also been problematic. The group reported in Haggarty and Postlethwaite disseminated their findings within the school, but the researchers report that this was "rather ad hoc" (p. 435), partly because teachers preferred to focus on the process of changing their own practice, rather than changing other people's practice. Also, although their own change in understanding and practice had taken place through engagement in ideas over a significant amount of time, "they assumed that other teachers' practice would change simply by being given the results of that process" (p. 436).

Besides the challenges and limitations presented above there are further arguments against AR that should be addressed. For example Hammersley (2004) suggests that frequently in AR the value of research is associated with an instrumentalist view as well as "the only legitimate kind of educational inquiry" (p. 156).

Inquiry certainly emerges from a problem, and is concerned with resolving it Hammersley asserts, the value of knowledge does not only derive from the solution to practical problems, but also from "its own right in solving intellectual problems, and perhaps even in stimulating new ones" (p. 170). According to Hammersley in Greek thinking *praxis* and *theoria* are treated as different ways of life; therefore to link research to action would be to confuse two different ways of life, "as well as betray the higher nature of *theoria*" (p. 168).

Borg (2010) provides a critical analysis of language teacher research, and found that:

> Many inspiring examples of language teachers engaging in research are available (together, of course, with methodologically-flawed examples and instances of pseudo-academic inquiry masquerading as teacher research); overall, though, there are whole populations of language teachers worldwide whose understandings of teacher, at best, are that it is something that might be done to them by others. It is likely, too, that there are many other teachers who, despite a genuine interest in becoming research-engaged, find it difficult to translate this interest into practical and sustainable action (p. 421).

Concerning teacher research in language teaching, Dörnyei's (2007, p. 191) view is that "there is one big problem with AR: there is too little of it". The lack of engagement might be probably encouraged by several challenges teachers must face when involving in AR projects. Making reference of AR

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Block (2000, p. 138) claims that "the entire enterprise is strong in theory but very difficult to carry out in practice". According to Block, it is because in most teaching contexts teachers receive no compensation for the extra work that engaging in research involves. Additionally Block feels that the lack of impact on the field of the results of AR discourages teachers from engaging in it. Regarding quality Ellis (2010, p. 189) says that "the methodological limitations that are evident in much teacher-research may make its findings of little value to the academe".

2.5 The Study

The study is predominantly qualitative aiming to produce a rich description of the use of AR introduce improvement. The data source was interviews with the participants. AR offers practitioners possibilities for understanding syllabus from a comprehensive perspective, as it is the local concerns and problems of the research, allowing them to address syllabus issues through thoughtful inquiry (Zohrabi, 2014). AR seeks to provide practitioners with the support and resources to do things in ways that will fit their own cultural context and their own lifestyles, allowing them and not only experts determine the nature and operation of the things that affect their lives (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003).

3. Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the use of AR to improve a language syllabus involving language teachers in the process of decision making. The aim is formulated in the research questions below.

- How engaged were language teachers?
- How did the process of improvement of the syllabus occur?
- How did they become aware of new knowledge?

Answers to the first question will provide information about the degree of involvement of a group of language teachers within the project. Answers to the second question will contribute to a better comprehension of how AR can change a language syllabus. Data will also reveal how AR generates knowledge grounded in practice.

3.1 Research Context and Participants

The context chosen to undertake the research was Mexico. The educational level chosen to conduct the research was Higher Education. The Faculty chosen for this study was the Faculty of Economics at the University of Colima (UC).

The group of teachers was selected based on their ability to provide rich and varied insights into the research problem under investigation. Language teachers were selected due to their relevant experience of the teaching situation. It was a homogeneous group of Mexican teachers who have a BA in English from the UC.

As an action researcher, the investigator stood with and alongside the group of teachers, not outside as an objective observer or external consultant. His role as researcher and teacher provided a unique possibility to explore the social and cultural context in which teaching is delivered. The active involvement of the researcher was not a threat, but something that produced more insight.

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Although most of the decisions about the study were taken as a group, which implied that teacher participants were critically involved in the decision making process, the project continued to be a research, which implied that participants' involvement was on a voluntary basis, and it was made clear that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

3.2 Data Gathering Methods and Analysis

The data gathering methods employed in the study were personal and group interviews. All the interviews were conducted in different moments and dates, according to the agenda of the participants. The reasons for choosing interviews were mainly because interviews are suitable techniques to gain an insight into the practitioners' collective reflective enquiry taken place during the improvement of the syllabus (Richards, 2003).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Teachers' Participation in the Project

The participation and interaction of teachers throughout this project relates to what Glassman et al. (2012) believe about the nature of AR, AR is a form of social inquiry through which members of social groups interact with one another, engage in open dialogue about their intergroup relationships, and collectively participate in a learning process to create social change within their communities.

Participants of this investigation engaged in a process of analysis and reflection leading them to take decisions and change based on local needs. Interviews revealed that participants followed a process of analysis and reflection, understanding their teaching situation and change. This is in the line with Mcniff and Whitehead (2010, p. 19) who state that AR is "a process that helps you as practitioner to develop a deep understanding of what you are doing as an insider researcher, so it has both a personal and social aim". Teachers expressed their opinions, experiences and feelings about their participation in the project. The following comments were made by participants in regards to analysis and reflection:

> *"I believe I actively got involved in the project. For example from the moment it was discussed about the advantages and disadvantages of modifying the English syllabus, and from the moment we had reflection upon the process, I think we all got involved".* (Teacher 1, English translation)

> *"Being involved in the project made me have reflections upon the way I was working, and becoming aware about the fact that I could involve learners in the decision making process of the class, and it is not only what I think".* (Teacher 3, English translation)

> *"Having reflections about the process is a prove that we participate, if we remain in silence there is no participation".* (Teacher 4, English translation)

> *"What I really liked the most was the collaborative work, my colleagues' accompaniment was very important. It was not the work of only one person, but everybody's work. Another way I felt involved and felt I was part of the project was in relation to the syllabus. The syllabus I was using was designed by another person; it was not designed to meet the needs of my students. In*

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contrast, this new syllabus was designed according to the needs of my learners and it was designed by me". (Teacher 1, English translation)

Practitioners engaged in dialogues about the current situation of the syllabus made them develop an understanding of what they were doing, and reflect upon their situation; reaching greater effectiveness through democratic participation, providing opportunities to participate in collective research on common troubles through discussion, decision, and action (Adelman, 1993). The extract below illustrates that as a result of the process of analysis and reflection practitioners took decisions to improve their existing situation:

"I think we got involved from the very beginning. It was something that we wanted and needed to do. There were several moment of discussion that made us freely express our opinions, and also several sources of data emerging from the school which made us make decisions". (Teacher 3, English translation)

"Data revealed by the questionnaire of beliefs helped me realise that it was necessary to modify the syllabus of the class. Getting involved in the research project, know the data gathered through the analysis helped me to modify what I was teaching". (Teacher 2, English translation)

This coincides with the views expressed by Meyer (2000) stating that AR's strength lies in its focus on generating solutions to practical problems, and Winter and Munn-Giddings (2002) who state that AR represents the study of social situation carried out by those involved in that situation in order to improve both their practice and the quality of their understanding.

4.2 Action Research Can Help Improve the Syllabus

One of the main reasons why AR is undertaken is because it helps improve the work environment of participants, improve both their practice and the quality of their understanding (Glassman et al., 2012; Bat & Fasoli, 2013). AR has been used to improve the syllabus (McKernan, 1991). Evidence of curriculum improvement has been provided by Nason and Whitty (2007) who included AR as an essential component of curriculum development, entering a process of inquiry understanding, and improving their own professional practice.

The two interviews with the groups of participants revealed that practitioners believed the project had a positive impact over the language syllabus and it helped to improve it in some areas; for instance, in the content. Two participants confirmed that:

"For me identifying what the needs of the students were helped me to modify the content of the syllabus, because they were studying content which they felt it was too heavy, and they expressed it like that. Modifying the content of the syllabus impacted the attitude of learners. They demonstrated greater willingness to learn". (Teacher 2, English translation)

"It impacted over the selection of the materials; the book has appropriate content meeting the needs of learners. The book helped standardized the teaching method, the content and the language skills to be developed". (Teacher 4, English translation)

The same feeling that Teacher 2 and 4 above, expressed in regard to his confidence about what and how to teach was also expressed by trainee teachers participating in an AR project. Trainee teachers felt "more confident about what to teach, how to teach, and why to teach" (Thorne & Qiang, 1996, p. 259) after participating in AR project. Thorne and Qiang also reported that the implemented changes enhanced the quality of teaching.

Teachers interviewed also indicated that the project also helped them realise that change should be supported with the systematic collection of data, the analysis of such information and its presentation in a formal way, for example through a report. As stated below:

> *"For me the largest contribution the project had was the importance of conducting an analysis, because we had not done it before. The analysis produced hard data, providing a guide about what we need to know to improve the process of teaching and learning".* (Teacher 3, English translation)

> *"There was something formal, written, it was not only useless information. Thus, from the moment when there was evidence, the data gathered through the analyses, from that moment there was something tangible, something to support what the needs were".* (Teacher 1, English translation)

Carver and Klein (2013, p. 174) confirm that the systematic collection of data and the application of findings "support transformed practice innovation and continued inquiry". Carver and Klein noticed this after conduction an AR project to examine the content and outcomes of their university programme. They found out that AR was a functional strategy for program renewal and instructional development.

Identifying learning outcomes has been frequently related to systematic analysis of the learners' communication needs. In the particular case of this project, as it has been argued, data helped teaches to make decisions about different areas of the syllabus, such as content, teaching materials, teaching activities. According to another participant the project also helped him to realise that the aims of the syllabus did not coincide with the learners' communication needs as learners expressed that they needed to learn more general content and not content related to business. As revealed by a participant quoted below:

> *"Students feel they are learning, and the modified syllabus helped, as learners are not going to do business, thus the fact of changing the content of the syllabus to general has given them confidence. I believe they have gained more confidence to be able to communicate themselves orally".* (Teacher 2, English translation)

McNiff (2013) claims that during the last decade AR has suffered changes, one major shift the field has suffered is in relation to the generation of knowledge. According to McNiff what practitioners investigate within their field of knowledge creates knowledge grounded in practice.

4.3 Action Research Facilitates the Creation of Knowledge Grounded in Practice

According to Elliot (1989) teachers' experience of class research can be grounded in trying to facilitate their professional development and not in theoretical inputs by teaching experts. This was acknowledged by teachers participants when they responded about the knowledge generated through the project. They became aware that the process of curriculum design through AR should be underpinned by a systematic research process and decision making should be based on the generation of hard data. As illustrated in the extracts below:

"The first thing I learned is that to conduct research one needs to follow steps. Time should be taken to let things happen. There should be moments of reflection to analyise to see how we are. The investigation you are conducting we can also do it, I mean, we can not only get together to talk about what is happening, but also to reflect and think how things can be done, how they can be changed. It is important to do analyses, this is what I have found that I learned most". (Teacher 2, English translation)

"It is important to obtain results, to know how to plan based on those results and to take them into account. Questionnaires are instruments which provide information to be taken into account, because information needs to be taken into account, we can gather data and based on that take decisions. This is very important to take decisions". (Teacher 4, English translation)

"Another important point is related to the formality of interpretation of results. I didn't think it was important. That was something that I learned. Results need to be interpreted and they need to be treated formally". (Teacher 3, English translation)

Quotations above have a resonance with what Johnson (2008) acknowledges about AR in the way that AR creates knowledge based on enquiries conducted within specific and often practical contexts. Teachers learned that research has to be systematic to provide valid data useful to take decisions to improve practice. As claimed by a teacher below:

"Now we are doing it that way with the exams we have administered, I am learning, but I think it should be done that way, through graphics in a formal way". (Teacher 3, English translation)

Another important finding emerging from the work field was the topic of reflection, a key area in the field of AR. The interview revealed that through reflection teachers were able to evaluate their work and make changes to the course and the way it was run. As one participant claimed:

"The process of reflection was very important as our work is flawed and we don't see ourselves from a different perspective as outsiders. In my particular case, it was like a dash of cold water "look this is the way you are running the course, and there are other ways of doing it. I have been teaching this same level of English for some time, and reflecting about it gave me a very different understanding of what I am doing, and of the direction towards my course should be running to". (Teacher 1, English translation)

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The extract above corresponds closely with two AR definitions provided by Mcniff and Whitehead (2010) AR is "a process that helps you as practitioner to develop a deep understanding of what you are doing as an insider researcher, so it has both a personal and social aim" (p. 19), and McNiff (2013) affirming that "AR is a name given to a particular way of looking at your practice to check whether it is as you feel it should be (…) If you feel your practice needs action in some way, you will be able to take action to improve it, and produce evidence to show how the practice has improved" (p. 23).

As a result of the enquiry teachers were able to address important concerns related to the importance of collaborative work. One participant commented about this:

> "Well, the most I liked was collaborative work. The feedback provided by my colleagues helped me. We don't have enough opportunities to meet, because we all have very heavy workloads, thus working collaboratively is a good chance for me to keep learning and to share problems, concerns about specific situations of the class. The work sessions when we designed the syllabuses were enriching for me. Collaborative work is important. The groups view was fruitful and varied. It is always better to address the problems as a group, solutions are better".
> (Teacher 1, English translation)

The extract above highlights the importance of collaborative research. Collaborative AR "encourage participants to share common problems and to work cooperatively as a research community to examine their existing assumptions, values and beliefs within the sociopolitical cultures of the institutions in which they work" (Burns, 1999, p. 13).

The advantages of collaborative AR were broadly promoted by Stephen Corey (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009), an advocate of projects to improve the work environment identifying solutions often requiring teachers to work with other teachers in the school, making AR a cooperative endeavor.

4.4 Action Research Faces Challenges and Limitations

Despite the volume of claims presented above findings revealed that teachers have also experienced a lack of time to plan and reflect in order to develop the syllabus, lack of expertise knowledge, and understanding skills. They were not familiar with either with the concept of AR or with the basic techniques of research. This was acknowledged by Hodgkinson (1957) who claimed that teachers as well as other stakeholders like administrators, and supervisors lack of familiarity with the basic techniques of research. Ellis (2010) also suggests that much teacher-research has methodological limitations.

Halai (2011) presents a study to illustrate how teachers became action researchers and found that the most challenging situation for teaches was the fact that teachers needed to understand what AR was. This confirms what the interviews revealed concerning language teachers becoming action researchers. Interviews revealed that teachers would not begin an AR project by themselves because they did not feel confident to do so due to their lack of knowledge. They stated that they could do it, but it would probably take more time than someone who only dedicated his or her time to do research because they did not know AR and research methodologies. This implies that they do not feel capable of doing AR

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because they are not prepared to do so. This can be confirmed with one of the answers they provided stating that it is different to teach English than to conduct a research project; therefore they needed to be trained for that particular purpose. Perhaps one of the major arguments against AR is that it should be left for specialists who have the training and capacity (Burns, 2005). As Jarvis (1981) emphasizes AR is without academic reputation, and it should be left to academic specialists who have the experience and aptitude.

Another teacher said that it was better that a researcher conducted the project because practitioners, such as the case of language learners would be more confident while providing answers. Another reason is that a research project like this needed formality especially in the way of producing evidence, such as the report presented to them; in this regard Foster (1999) criticizes the reports written by teachers claiming that "in nearly all the reports insufficient evidence is presented to support key claims (…) there are significant doubts about the validity of evidence actually presented (…)" (p. 388).

Time is another limitation. Teachers repeatedly expressed that language teachers like them, with a workload such as theirs did not have enough time to do research. The issue of lack of time was discussed in chapter four as one of the main challenges to teacher involvement in AR. Chan, Ching, and Cheng (1997) revealed that the great majority of teachers involved in an AR investigation were worried about the amount of time spent on meetings and about the workload attached to the involvement of the project, especially for teachers whose schedules are already overloaded from teaching, who are usually not granted the time they spend doing the research (Block, 2000).

The challenges that AR presents are not only related to the lack of familiarity, or the capacity of participants to conduct it, or the lack of time but also related to financial issues. Involving teachers in AR usually requires teacher to participate in meetings "(…) during school hours to discuss their research, then the problem becomes financial as well as temporal, as substitute teachers must be hired" (Hodgkinson, 1957, p. 142).

5. Summary and Conclusions

Three key theoretical concepts of AR are examined with the purpose of informing this study. AR foster the participation of people (teachers) who are not researchers, AR leads to work environment improvement and AR promote the production of sound knowledge. The evaluation of claims made by scholars is illustrated with the analysis of several empirical studies, which broaden understanding and serve as a foundation for the data collection and analysis phases of the study. The study demonstrates that AR provides practitioners, teachers for example, with opportunities to reflect on problematic situations that affect their work environment, and collectively participate in learning processes to create change within their communities. The study also confirms that teachers can produce knowledge grounded in practice, and not only based on what experts propose. Despite the positive results concerning the involvement of teacher on an AR process, and the improvement of a language syllabus based on data gathered in the teaching context, the study also demonstrates that teachers face some

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challenges and limitations. For example, lack of time to plan, lack of expertise knowledge, and understanding skills, lack of familiarity with either with the concept of AR or with the basic techniques of research. Further research on teachers conducting AR by themselves could contribute to the understanding of this method, and probably suggest possible routes of development.

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