

# The Application of Action Research in the Teaching of Extensive Reading

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**Abstract.** Based on the author's own Action Research conducted in extensive reading class, this paper introduces the plan development, describes the action process and the implementation of the plan, reflects on the effect of the teaching, and discusses the practical significance of Action Research in foreign language teaching. During the research, the author took a self-reflective, critical and systematic approach and a questioning stance to explore the whole teaching process, aiming to better the quality of the teaching of Extensive reading as well as search efficient ways of improving English teachers' professional competence.

## Introduction

How to improve the professional competence of English teachers and the effect of classroom teaching have been the key issues discussed by foreign language teachers. Chinese English teachers involved in higher education need to work hard on the improvement of their professional competence, the ability to apply the educational theories to their teaching practices and the subjective initiative in developing their own professional ability. Action Research (AR) is a broad movement that has been going on in education for a period of time. It is related to the ideas of "reflective practice" and "teacher as researcher". AR aims to enable teachers to observe and reflect on their practical teaching systematically and discuss the new teaching ideas and methods to better the quality of teaching, which at the same time helps to enhance teachers' professional competence. AR has been appreciated and advocated in normal training class and foreign language teaching in the world.

## Action Research

### The Definition of AR

According to Burns (2011), AR involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts.[1] While teaching, teachers should take a "problematising" attitude towards their teaching as if it is ineffective and full of problems, which means teachers choose an area they think they could improve by questioning, developing new ideas and teaching approaches. They become investigators and explorers of their own teaching, at the same time being one of the participants in it.

One of the main aims of AR is to identify a "problematic" situation that should be discussed and studied deeply and systematically by people involved in education. And the key idea of AR is to intervene deliberately in the problematic situation in order to make improvement in English teaching. It is necessary to point out that all the improvements happening in AR are those based on data collected systematically by action researchers. In this case, adjustments made in the teaching situation arise from data-based information rather than from teachers' hunches or assumptions about the way they think things are.

## **The Steps in AR**

AR typically involves four broad phases in a cycle which recur until the action researcher has achieved a satisfactory outcome and feels it is time to stop.

### **1) Planning**

You identify a problem or issue and develop a plan of action, you consider: i) what kind of investigation is possible within the realities ..... ii) what potential improvements you think are possible.

### **2) Action**

The plan is a carefully considered one ... ..you question your assumptions about the current situation and plan new and alternative ways of doing things.

### **3) Observation**

You observe systematically the effects of the action and document the context, actions and opinions of those involved. It is a data collection phase.....

### **4) Reflection**

You reflect on, evaluate and describe the effects of the action in order to make sense of what has happened and to understand the issue you have explored more clearly.....

(Adapted from Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998, pp11-14) [2]

Kemmis & McTaggart's model for the steps in AR is probably the best known because it summarizes very clearly the essential phases of the AR process. Therefore, this paper structured the discussion of AR in the teaching of extensive reading based on the model put forward in above.

## **The Application of AR in the Teaching of Extensive Reading**

### **Planning**

#### ***Problem Detecting***

In the teaching process, the author (teacher) found out that most students read materials slowly and understood poorly. The reading habit cultivated in middle school led students to deal with different reading materials in a same way. Reading comprehension accounts for a large part in TEM 4 (Test for English Majors Band 4) and TEM 8 (Test for English Majors Band 8), which is also the weakest point of Chinese students for English major.

To solve this problem, the following what-if analyses were proposed:

- 1) Students developed a bad reading habit in previous English study.
- 2) Students didn't acquire relevant reading strategies.
- 3) Students have a poor vocabulary.
- 4) Teachers paid too much attention to grammar rather than teaching students relevant reading skills.
- 5) Teachers didn't spend enough time to tutor students' reading practice after class.
- 6) The reading materials are too difficult, which do not tally with students' real English level.
- 7) The class hour arrangement for extensive reading is far from enough.

#### ***Plan Making***

Based on the above-mentioned factors, the author planned to take the following steps to improve students' reading ability.

##### **1) Enlarge the Vocabulary.**

Limited vocabulary hinders students from making obvious progress in reading. Acquiring a large vocabulary is a challenging task for most students, which is usually, regarded consuming learners' great effort and time. Teachers can figure out effective ways for vocabulary teaching. Etymology is an interesting subject that could be introduced to vocabulary teaching. The introduction to the origin of words and the way in which words meanings have changed throughout history may arise learners' curiosity and interest in word learning. During which teachers can lead students to learn the word root, prefix and suffix, helping students understand the structure of words and acquire new

words efficiently. In addition, teach students to make associations between words and different images. The richer the association, the more vivid the image and the more specific the psychological process of remembering the target words, the better the memory to the word will be. Meanwhile, there should be enough corresponding practices designed to consolidate those newly learned words in the teaching process.

### 2) Reinforce the Training of Reading Strategies.

Students have mastered some basic reading skills like skimming and scanning. But in most cases they tend to adopt some unfavorable ways like pronouncing words, reading word by word or rereading words and phrases for the fear of losing comprehension. English teachers should help students overcome all those bad reading habits through reinforcing the training of the reading skills already known and teaching students new strategies they seldom apply in reading. For instance, reading by drawing inferences, paying attention to the context and direction words like “furthermore, however, yet, on the contrary”, etc.

### 3) Recommend Reading List and Supervise the Extracurricular Reading.

The insufficient extracurricular reading is another reason for students' poor reading ability. Therefore, teachers can recommend students a reading list according to students' English level. Students need to choose 2-3 books to read in each term, being required to write book reports and make the presentation in class time. Teachers can lead students to have a discussion on the book being read, explaining and analyzing some difficult points if necessary. Students' performance in this aspect will be included in their final exam in order to stimulate them to attach great importance to extracurricular reading.

## Action

In the first phase of AR, the plan was made clearly. Then teachers should take actions to test whether this plan is efficient in the practical teaching. According to the plan, vocabulary, reading strategies and extracurricular reading are three points teachers should focus on. Therefore, the author arranged corresponding activities in the real class time without affecting the normal teaching progress. At the beginning of each class, the teacher introduced one or two reading strategies to students, and then 5 short reading materials in appropriate degree of difficulty and length selected from BBC or VOA news were presented on the screen. Students were asked to finish each reading by applying the strategy learned just now within the given time, and then concluded the general idea of each material or answered certain questions related with the material. During the Unit study, stories of certain words appeared in the text would be shared by teacher. After the study of each unit, the author listed all the new words in each passage and required students to paraphrase all of them. Furthermore, every two weeks, students would have a discussion on the novel they were reading, the teacher illustrated on certain detailed or difficult points to help students have a better understanding on the book. In the middle of the term, every student made a presentation about one novel he had read in five minutes. And at the end of the term, they handed in a book report on another book they had already read. During the teaching process, the author made necessary adjustment to the plan made in the first phase based on students' performance in class, in their homework and daily conversation with students. In the end, the questionnaires were finished by students to help the author collect information needed.

## Observation

AR is a recursive spiral or cycle of action and reflection, and that means you start examining and analyzing the data in a dynamic way right from the very beginning, so looking at a mountain of information at the end of a month of collecting data can be a hopeless process. (Burnaford, 2001) [3] In this sense, the author kept making observation from the very beginning of the research. The objects for this research are 19 students in author's English class. Through categorizing the data collected and analyzing the talk between teacher and students, the factors constraining the improvement of students' reading ability detected in the first phase of the research are proved to be true, including the undesirable reading habit, limited vocabulary, unscientific reading strategies and lack of corresponding tutoring and supervision.

## Reflection

### *Students' Learning Effect*

This AR aims to improve students' reading ability from the following three aspects: vocabulary, reading habit and strategies, and extracurricular reading.

#### 1) Vocabulary.

Vocabulary is a big obstacle for students in English reading; different methods have been applied to overcome this difficulty. The most frequently employed way is guessing words meaning according to the context or the analysis to the root or affix. For those with a sound English basis, this method is effective, but for other students, it is hard to guess the word meaning by associating the target word with the context, the root or the affix. Some students even lose their self-confidence gradually when they are always in confronting with the difficult reading materials. In the questionnaire survey, some students wrote "I can read materials with plot, but I am annoyed by the articles related with science and technology", "It's a great headache for me to read long articles", etc. In this case, choosing appropriate reading materials seem to be critical important in helping students enhance their reading ability. They should start out the simple and get progressively the more difficult ones because the accumulation and the development of knowledge is a process step by step.

The author also found out that students get used to remembering words mechanically. For example: copying a same word in their exercise book for twenty to thirty times, or reading that word for infinite number of times. The fact is that they forget that word the next morning. Jenkinson (1973) suggested teachers paying attention to the following aspects while teaching vocabularies: First, the extensiveness of words; Second, the implication of polysemes and metaphorical words; Third, the combination of vocabulary teaching with the teaching of listening, writing and speaking. [4] His idea will make the word learning easier and more effective.

#### 2) Reading Habit and Reading Strategies.

Knowing reading strategies does not equal to a good master of those strategies.

Students have been told to overcome the habit of pronouncing words while reading to avoid regressing, to develop a wider eye span, and to focus on the meaning of thoughts unit rather than on single word. But it is hard to apply those methods in real reading. Cognitive psychology divides knowledge into declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. The former answers the question of "what" and the latter answers "how". The aim of language leaning is to transform declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge, helping students know how to put what they acquired into use, which will cost lots of time to achieve.

In addition, student's psychological pressure plays a part in influencing their improvement of reading ability. Since some students are afraid of failure, they would apply the old methods after trying the new one for once or twice, which makes the bad habits reinforced. The acceptance of the new reading skill is the prerequisite for the cultivation of the new reading habit. In this case, teachers should design specific and systematic training programs, taking students' English level and their psychological condition into consideration, and move on step by step.

#### 3) Extracurricular Reading.

Students in author's class were required to read three original works. One was discussed in groups in class time under teacher's guidance, another two were checked through students' book report. For the group discussion, the degree for students' participation was different. Some students were very active while some were silent from the beginning to the end. Some of them did not fully devote to their book reports either. Therefore, it is urgent for teachers to make a new set of evaluation system to supervise and urge students to work hard.

### *Teacher's Professional Competence*

Through planning, action, observation, reflection and the timely adjustment made in the teaching process, the author found out the ways for self-improvement and some practical problems in the research.

1. AR should be pertinent with certain teaching object. The research content could not be too

broad.

2. Different research methods should be applied in AR. This research adopted the way of questionnaire, interview, observation, ect. The data classification and analysis to the abundant data will ensure teachers a deeper investigation on students' condition.

3. The plan for AR should take students' English level, learning style and individual differences into considerations.

4. The effectiveness of the AR is decided by teachers' flexibility and creativity in dealing with all kinds of conditions in teaching. Although the plan is usually made before taking action, certain adjustment could be made during the teaching process.

5. The active cooperation among teachers is the guarantee for a successful AR. Education is a social activity, which not only aims at improving students' learning, but also clarifying the nature of teaching. Through this AR, teachers shared and discussed new teaching ideas and methods, helped each other work out problems in the research process, achieved a better understanding on AR, and improved their professional competence together.

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