Can Tho University Journal of Science

website: sj.ctu.edu.vn

# English lecturers' perceptions of improving English teaching quality through action research: What do lecturers of Can Tho University say?

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| Article info. | ABSTRACT |
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| <br><br>**Keywords**<br><br> | *Action research in English Language Teaching has played a significant role in improving teachers' roles as well as their professional development. However, in the context of Can Tho University, there are few studies of action research on foreign language teaching especially English language. Therefore, this qualitative case study is aimed to give deep insights into English language lecturers' perceptions of improving teaching quality using action research. The findings revealed the positive perceptions of English language lecturers of Can Tho University about the importance of action research. However, there were certain challenges faced by these lecturers with their action research practices in terms of internal and external factors. As a result, appropriate measures to tackle such challenges in the current teaching context regarding the roles of lecturers and administrators are proposed.* |

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Along with the overall educational reform in Vietnam in accordance with the trend of global integration, improving English language teaching (ELT) has been recently taken into consideration as one of important objectives of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) of Vietnam (MOET, 2014). In order to achieve such objective, several possible measures in ELT have been promulgated by the MOET of Vietnam in terms of the innovation of English teaching programs and textbooks, the changes of assessment procedures, the improvement of English teaching methodology, as well as the implementation of classroom research. As one of the instructional reforms, action research (AR) has recently been popularized by the National Foreign Languages Project 2020 in forms of training workshops for most English language teachers throughout Vietnam. The intention was for new

research knowledge gained from AR to help the teachers achieve improved teaching quality. In the Mekong Delta, nearly eighty English language teachers from thirteen provinces were involved in this kind of training workshop with a third of these participants who were English lecturers working in Can Tho University (CTU). It cannot be denied that the knowledge on AR has been proven to enhance English language teachers' capacities as well as contribute to their professional development (Burn, 1999) since it not only meets the needs of teaching practice but also enables teachers' research continuity (Freeman, 1998; Richards and Farrell, 2005). In the context of CTU, however, there has been little documentation on issues relating to AR in ELT. Thus, the co-researchers of this paper were motivated to explore CTU English language lecturers' perceptions of improving English teaching quality using action research, which addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent do lecturers of English in Can Tho University understand action research?

2. What are their perceptions of the implementation of action research in their teaching context?

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

AR means different things to different writers, but this paper is aimed to examine the views of AR underpinning ELT as the motivation behind this study. In particular, AR is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve their own practices (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). O'Brien (2001) asserted that action research has been defined by different names such as participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, action learning or contextual action research, but it is particularly referred as learning by doing. In other words, a group of people encounter a problem, and they do something to resolve it to see how successful their efforts are or to try doing again if they are not satisfied with the result. This view is then shared by Dick (2002) who discussed AR as a natural way of acting and researching at the same time, or a true reflection to achieve both action and research at the same time. Regarding AR as a broader concern, Lomax (1990) claimed that AR is a research that is related to curriculum reflection for the administration and management of institutional change. This view is shared by Calhoun's (1994) view on AR with respect to reflecting what is happening in the school context so as to make it better.

However, Nunan (1993) clarified that AR is not just a reflective process but the results of this process in forms of a print publication or a conference presentation. Specifically, Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, 2008) suggested the terms 'action' and 'research' to highlight the feature of this method. It means trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement, increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning. This is considered as a way that links theory and practice or ideas-in-action. They further identified the model of action research with four elements, namely plan, action, observe and reflect (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2008), as illustrated in Figure 1. In practice, they further explained that this model is not actually as its cycle process since the four elements can be combined or overlapped in accordance with particular situations.
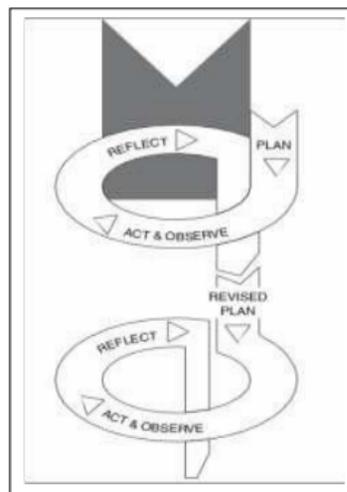


**Fig. 1: Model of action research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2008, p.278)**

Along with the model of AR with the four steps discussed by Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1988, 2008), Goodnough (2011) presented the AR model in relation to reflection that involves in all steps of the model, as indicated in Figure 2:



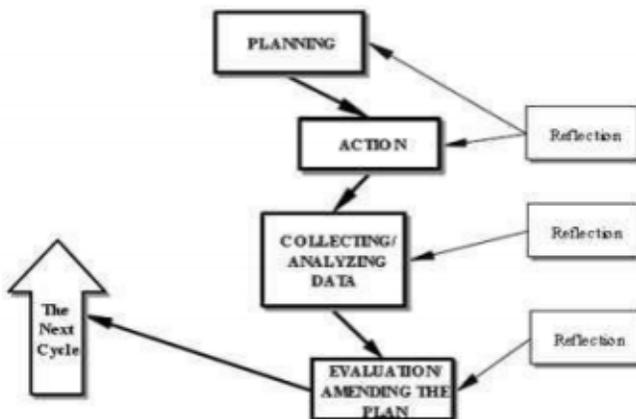**Fig. 2: Model of action research (Goodnough, 2011)**

As Goodnough (2011) explained, 'reflection' should be constantly presented in each step from planning, action, collecting or analyzing data, and evaluation or amending the plan. Goodnough (2011)

not only emphasised reflection in one cycle of AR but also in followed cycles which were further developed to strengthen the research findings.

Regarding the effect of AR model in English language classrooms, Nunan (1993), Burn (2000), Koshy (2005) and Kis (2014) indicated that through conducting AR, teacher researchers can gather information about how they teach and how well their students learn. This can help them develop reflective practice and create positive changes in their teaching through AR as a professional development activity. In particular, Koshy (2005) pointed out five important aspects of AR in improving teaching quality: (1) AR is not separated from specific research context, and researchers can be participants; (2) AR can be continuously evaluated and reflected, so changes are temporarily considered; (3) there can be more chances for forming theory from research rather than following the previous formulated theory; (4) the study can start from open-ended responses; and (5) the researcher in AR can bring his own story to life. As a result, the researchers can be always in a position of thinking and seeking solutions to enhance their critical thinking, better tackle challenges emerged during the teaching process and improve their teaching professional development. In other words, it is apparent that AR is confirmed to play an important role in professional development generally and teaching quality improvement in particular with respect to teachers' growth in teaching efficacies, self-awareness, problem-solving skills as well as autonomous learning (Fareh and Saeed, 2011; Cabaroglu, 2014).

Despite such undeniable benefits of AR in professional and teaching quality development, there are certain challenges to the implementation of AR. The first to be challenged are teachers who are considered to have important roles in the AR implementation. These challenges can be named as the internal factors namely fear of being revealed as an incompetent teacher, fear of publication (Burn, 2000; Nunan, 2006; Pati, 2014). The next concern comes from challenges from external factors which AR researchers may face such as heavy workload, time constraints, lack of research knowledge, lack of motivation, lack of on-going support, and so on (Rainey, 2000; Nunan, 2006; Pati, 2014).

# 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Research methodology

The current study employed a qualitative case study design (Creswell, 2013, Yin, 2013) to explore English language lecturers' perceptions of improving English teaching quality using action

research. The qualitative approach seems more appropriate for this study since it is a form of in-depth interpretive enquiry which attempts to describe, explain and discover more about the world under investigation than was known before (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2013). Particularly, case study research allows investigators to conduct in-depth analyses, produce a rich account of each case, obtain a thorough understanding of the effects of different contexts on the phenomena being studied; especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident and illustrates (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2013).

Survey questionnaires and individual interviews were utilised in this study. For the survey, this study used the researcher-developed questionnaire with both closed and open sections, because questionnaires are considered as useful tools for collecting data from a large number of respondents (Hinds, 2000). The closed section of the questionnaire follows a five-point Likert scale (Scale 5- strongly agree, 4- agree, 3- moderately agree, 2-disagree and 1-strongly disagree). The questionnaire consisted of four parts. Part I addresses the demographic profile of participants while Part II describes teachers' knowledge. Part III examines the teachers' perceptions, and Part IV explores the readiness of the teachers to conduct action research along with the challenges hindering its implementation.

The objectives of the interviews used in this study was to allow for an exploration of issues and to gain insights into the research questions. As Merriam (2009) stated, interviews are the best way to find out what other people think. The researchers conducted qualitative semi-structured individual interviews with teachers to find out their perceptions of the readiness and challenges of AR implementation in different contexts. The interviews were conducted after initially analyzing the survey questionnaire results.

## 3.2 Participants

The participants were 60 English teachers from three different departments in School of Foreign Languages, CTU. They include 16 participants from Department of General English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), 15 participants from Department of English Language and Culture, and 19 participants from Department of English Teaching Methodology. A third of the participants attended the training workshop on AR organized by the National Foreign Project 2020 at CTU in September 2015. Their teaching experiences varied from five and to more than 15 years. Administration

and distribution of the research instruments were done by sending email and asking for their voluntary participation. The interviews were conducted with six English teachers equally distributed to 03 departments.

# 4 FINDINGS

This section summarizes the teachers' overall perceptions of improving English teaching quality using AR. The questionnaire data were categorized into three groups based on the research questions, while the results of the interviews are presented in the key themes identified in the survey results and the literature review.

## 4.1 Results of the survey questionnaire

The first part of the questionnaire revealed the level of teachers' perception in action research knowledge, as indicated in Table 1. The figures disclosed that most teachers showed their positive views on the knowledge of AR. In particular, over 80% of them agreed with the explanations of AR concepts, stages of AR process and its aims. This indicates that the teachers do understand what AR means, how to conduct it, as well as what its outcomes can be.

**Table 1: Level of teachers' perception of AR knowledge (N= 60)**

| Knowledge of AR | Agree (%) | Neutral (%) | Disagree (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| AR means learning by doing | 94.5 | 0.0 | 5.4 |
| AR requires teachers to collect information systematically for changes and improvement | 97.3 | 2.7 | 0.0 |
| AR is connected to English teachers' professional development | 81 | 13.5 | 5.4 |
| AR is a spiral process including planning, acting, observing and reflecting | 86.4 | 8.1 | 5.4 |
| Mean | 89.9 | 6.1 | 4.0 |

The second part of the questionnaire indicated the level of teachers' perceptions of the influences of AR on the teaching quality improvement in terms of its value to learners. In general, the table shows that most participants highly agreed that AR can enhance their teaching process through taking deep consideration into their learners' development so as to adjust their teaching methodology for positive outcomes (Table 2). In particular, most teacher respondents agreed that AR will help teachers change their teaching techniques to make their lessons more interesting to students, accounting for 94.5%. The next concerns responded with positive attitudes were AR will help teachers adapt their syllabus to meet the students' needs, which received nearly 90% of agreed responses, followed by approximately 80% of responses to AR allowing teachers to create interactive classes for learners to be more actively involved. Nearly the same number of teacher respondents also agreed that AR is a good way for learners to be more involved in teaching and learning activities as well as for teachers to keep up with their students' academic progress (70.3% and 73%). Compared to other agreed responses, that AR encourages teachers to develop their higher expectations on their learners' capacities received fewer responses, but this number was not very low (64.8%).

**Table 2: Teachers' perceptions of the influences of action research on their teaching quality improvement in terms of its value to learners (N= 60)**

| The influences of AR on teaching improvement regarding learners | Agree (%) | Neutral (%) | Disagree (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| AR will help teachers change their teaching techniques to make their lessons more interesting to students | 94.5 | 0.0 | 5.4 |
| AR will help teachers adapt their syllabus to meet the students' needs | 89.9 | 10.2 | 0.0 |
| AR allows teachers to create interactive classes for learners to be more actively involved | 78.4 | 18.9 | 2.7 |
| AR helps teachers to keep up with students' academic progress | 73.0 | 18.6 | 8.4 |
| AR motivates teachers to involve learners in making decisions in classroom affairs and curriculum issues | 70.3 | 27.0 | 2.7 |
| AR encourages teachers to develop their higher expectations on their learners' capacities | 64.8 | 32.4 | 2.8 |
| Mean | 78.6 | 17.8 | 3.6 |

The next part of the questionnaire presented the findings of the teachers' perceptions of the influences of AR on the process of teaching and learning in terms of its value to teachers themselves. The data revealed that most respondents shared positive views on AR as a valuable form for themselves in the process of teaching and learning. The mean value was higher than that of their perceptions of AR as a valuable form for their learners (86.7% and 78.6%) (Table 2 and 3). In particular, most teachers agreed that AR helped them to look at teaching in a

more analytic and focused way with nearly 95 % of agreed respondents. The results further indicated that 54 teacher participants (90%) agreed that AR helps them adjust teaching techniques to classroom reality, and none of them disagreed with this concern. Many respondents agreed that AR helped to develop teachers' confidence along with only 5.4% of disagreeing. The responses to "action research helped develop collaborative work among teachers" represented the lowest percentage of agreed respondents (78.3%) in comparison with other agreed answers.

**Table 3: Level of teachers' perceptions of the influences of action research on the process of teaching and learning in terms of its value to teachers themselves (N= 60)**

| The influences of AR on teaching improvement regarding teachers | Agree (%) | Neutral (%) | Disagree (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| AR helps teachers to look at teaching in a more analytic and focused way | 94.5 | 0.0 | 5.4 |
| AR helps teachers to adjust teaching techniques to classroom reality | 90.0 | 10.0 | 0.0 |
| AR helps to develop teachers' confidence | 83.8 | 10.8 | 5.4 |
| AR helps to develop collaborative work among teachers | 78.3 | 21.7 | 0.0 |
| Mean | 86.7 | 11.9 | 1.4 |

The results indicated that the teacher respondents also raised their concerns about their readiness for implementing AR and meeting its challenges. In other words, the respondents shared that it was quite possible to conduct AR in their classroom contexts, accounting for 70% of agreed choices, followed by 20% of neutral responses and 10% of disagreed answers.

The results of the survey questionnaire further pointed out internal and external factors identified as challenges for conducting AR. Regarding external factors, the most significant factors were the heavy workload and the time taken to undertake action research hindering action research implementation. Some other difficulties included lack of students' readiness to AR implementation, challenges to find out appropriate research topics, inappropriate school policies, shortage of facilities for carrying out their research, lack of financial support, and changes of teaching curriculum and syllabus. Concerning internal factors, the teachers revealed that there were some issues stemming from themselves such as limiting problem solving skills, lack of experiences in implementing individual AR, and limited knowledge of conducting AR as a major cause of their being less confident in conducting AR.

### 4.2 Results of individual interviews

#### 4.2.1 Teachers' perceptions of the implementation of action research in classrooms

The six individual interviews emphasised the teachers' perceptions of the readiness and challenges of

action research implementation. In particular, the first question is aimed to discover participants' *views of the possibility of AR implementation,* or "*Do you think it is possible to implement action research in your school context?*" The results showed that all of them shared the same view that AR could be conducted in the university contexts with responses like *"Yes, of course", "quite possible", "I think it's possible", "possible to implement"*.

The participants further revealed their experiences in AR implementation with the question *"Have you ever conducted action research in your context? In what ways?"* Interestingly, these responses were commented by the teachers:

Teacher A said "I often change my teaching methodology to adapt to the class situation…to meet the lesson content, make students interested…but I don't think it is an action research because I need to collect and analyse data".

Teacher B expressed "I have tried by conducting action research by reading research papers on my research topic, then applied new teaching methods, and asked students' feedback of such the new methods."

Teacher C mentioned "I have applied problem-based teaching method many times, but I have not collected data and write the report on that"

And Teacher D said "I have implemented by a survey on my students' views and propose appropriate measures to do it better."

The results of the individual interviews indicated the teachers' views on the possibility to implement AR in particular classes of English. Two of them commented AR implementation which could be easily done in any classes. Two of them agreed to apply AR in linguistic skill classes as the most appropriate implementation. One interviewed teacher did not show any particular classes for AR implementation. The last interviewee suggested that there was cooperation between the teacher and students for any AR implementation

### 4.2.2    Challenges to implement AR

The results pointed out two main factors influencing the implementation of AR, namely internal and external challenges.

With regard to *external challenges*, these English lecturers claimed heavy workload, class size, teaching facilities and publication as the most challenging factors hindering their AR implementation. These comments were:

Teacher A expressed "The implementation of action research takes a lot of time, I must teach many different courses in one semester and I do not have time to implement action research."

Teacher stated "I can implement action research if I do not have difficulties with my classroom…the class is too crowded… I cannot manage it… my classes often have 40 to 50 students. Sometimes it also lacks facilities for teaching such as TV or projectors."

Teacher C mentioned: "I am afraid of doing it because I do not how to publish my study after implementing action research… otherwise it consumes a lot of time and energy"

Teacher D said "I worry about the procedure for publication to share my research results…I do want to implement action research, but it's better to be able to publish my research then."

And Teacher E said "I think action research takes more time than other kinds of research."

Regarding *internal challenges*, the findings indicated particular concerns stemmed from the teacher participants' situations. For example:

I do not feel confident enough to do action research because I was not trained about this before (Teacher B)

Although I have been motivated a lot from the managers in the School, it is very hard for me to find an appropriate research topic… (Teacher C)

I need more training on action research, possibly I need experienced people to show me how to do action research (Teacher D)

I am not familiar with the steps of action research and feel unsure of what I am doing (Teacher E)

I think I should cooperate with other teachers in the School to do better since I do not feel confident to conduct action research alone (Teacher F)

## 5  DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current study is aimed to explore to what extent English language teachers in CTU understood AR. The findings showed that most teachers surveyed thought that they had a good knowledge about the nature of AR mentioned earlier by Kemmis and McTaggart (1998, 2008), Burn (2000), and Goodnough (2011). This can be concluded that these teachers may have gained the knowledge from inservice training courses or from their master's program.

The study also revealed that most teachers agreed that AR would help them improve their teaching quality. This view is in line with previous studies by Rainey (2000), Koshy (2005), Nunan (2006), Fareh and Saeed (2011), and Pati (2014). On the other hand, the results from the study shared the same findings indicated by previous researchers in terms of external and internal challenges namely heavy workload, time pressure, limited support from administrators, and limited assistance from researchexperienced people, lack of research experience, and lack of confidence in research implementation.

After a careful review of the findings, the following recommendations are offered. With regard to *external factors*, the following concerns are recommended. First of all, it is recommended that School administrators implement supportive policies on the use of AR. In particular, the school administrators should consider balancing teaching hours among staff in order to encourage them to spend their time implementing classroom research. For the high school context particularly, forms of AR reports in English should be adapted. Further, regular rewards for AR implementation or action publication should be offered to teacher researchers to motivate their research continuity. In addition, regular staff meetings should be held. In particular, there should be a meeting among teachers and teachers with the School Head every fortnight or every month to enhance staff collaboration, to share the experiences on action research implementation among staff. Furthermore, international cooperation development needs to be established to offer teaching staff more training workshops and conferences of research

generally, and AR particularly. Thanks to such the international cooperation, researchers can easily seek appropriate sources for their research publication.

Regarding *internal factors*, the researchers recommend these following issues for the teacher researchers. First of all, ELT teachers are recommended to raise their awareness of the importance and the influence of AR in their teaching process so as to enhance their passion for the implementation of AR. Secondly, it is also required that teachers need to recognize their responsibilities with regard to continuing professional development to increase their motivation in conducting AR. Besides that, teaching staff should be encouraged to confidently express their needs for the implementation of AR projects. Moreover, teachers should be encouraged to work collaboratively in order to gain their confidence for action research involvement.

Further research also needs to be undertaken to increase the number of lecturer participants who have deep understanding of how AR can influence teachers of English in different tertiary contexts of the Mekong Delta. In addition, follow-up research should be undertaken to propose appropriate models that can enhance the implementation of AR for teachers not only at in the Mekong Delta universities but also for those in other tertiary settings in Vietnam.

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