

Action Research to Build TESOL Teacher Capacity in Vietnamese Masters Programs

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Abstract

This paper contributes to curriculum studies through its exemplification of applied action research as a pedagogical and curricular component of a Masters in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) in a Vietnamese-Australian transnational program. The study details how service teachers studying in this vocational, postgraduate Master of TESOL apply the principles and tenets of action research over the period of a year, during which three research-led units are taught. Drawing on reflective memoranda from their final assignments, the project identifies reported benefits from a curriculum focusing on action research for professional and curricular development.

Methodologically, the approach draws key benefits from a wider database of 40 learners using thematic analysis, but this report applies the principles of qualitative descriptive case study analysis to offer detailed insights into the action research journeys of four teacher/student/researchers. The action research stand of the program's real-world curriculum involves identifying a research problem specific to individuals' teaching and learning environments and designing an action research enquiry built around a pedagogical or curricular intervention they can viably and ethically implement and evaluate within their workplaces.

This curricular approach is a move away from the conventional theory/ discourse/ linguistics/ content-based curricula conventionally employed in MTESOL programs in collaboration with offshore providers. The study argues that real-world interventions such as those enacted during action research investigations are more impactful and meaningful in developing the capabilities TESOL-teaching professionals need in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century: willingness to innovate, freedom to evaluate reflectively, ability to act.

Action Research in a Master of TESOL Curriculum in Vietnam

This chapter exemplifies the benefits for service teachers of applying and enacting action research within their Masters-level TESOL program, integrated towards building capacities as researchers and agencies as new researchers. The study describes the core advantages ‘service teachers’ of TESOL in Vietnam identify as outputs of learning to apply action research in their teaching and learning institutions as a result of this applied curricular approach. Moreover, in an effort to bring the lived experiences of participants into focus, the chapter presents four narratives of teacher/student/researchers engaged in action research, starting with identifying research problems, leading to developing lines of enquiry and ultimately evaluating their projects reflectively. This action research-focused pedagogical approach not only foregrounds crucial needs for operating as a leading teacher in Vietnamese institutions; it also articulates the idea that the best people to know what innovations are required in Vietnamese educational contexts are the teachers themselves.

This research occurred within the context of a 20-year collaboration in teaching and learning TESOL between Vietnamese and Australian universities. Responding to changing student, institutional, local and national policy-defined needs while heeding the current impact of real-world pedagogies informed by problem- activity- and task-based communicative learning, the curriculum developed into one focusing on Vietnamese educators gaining the capability to become novice action researchers: curious, critical, reflective and, hopefully, agentic. This meant that not only did the students, who are serving teachers from tertiary, secondary and primary state and private institutions, learn to identify their student’s and institution’s immediate needs, they also acquired the research skills and reflective techniques to be able to implement further projects in their current and future educative environments. In the process, they drew on their own experiences of pedagogical and curricular problems and their perceptions of possible and viable interventions to generate new knowledge relevant to their contexts. The learning gains reported here spill over into professional gains. Some service teachers who are students on this program become research leaders, establishing practitioner-based action learning cycles for colleagues. It should be noted that ‘service teachers’ already have contracted jobs, while MTESOL programs in Australia tend to attract ‘practice teachers’ desiring job-readiness.

In the curriculum, action research is defined as “a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention” (Cohen & Manion, 1985, p.174). For the service teachers, the real world is their teaching and learning environment, the social situation to which they might bring improvement (Elliot, 1991). Improving practice, or at least taking a risk that may lead to better practice, at first locally, is key. Such risks, such small-scale interventions, lead, ideally, to the testing of new pedagogical and curricular innovations, such as those used internationally in TESOL, and the evaluating of their value and appropriateness to the institutional and, perhaps, national environments where our service teachers are employed. McNiff and Whitehead’s (2006) definition of action research allows for the reflective application that curricula demands:

Action research is a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work. They ask, ‘What am I doing? What do I need to

improve? How do I improve it?' Their accounts of practice show how they are trying to improve their own learning, and influence the learning of others (p.7).

The curriculum is motivated by a range of ideas focused on authenticity, criticality and reflectivity and the building of teacher agency. It draws on studies by international and local scholars and practitioners. Wyatt (2001) argued that empowering teachers in ELT contexts by enabling them to become action researchers and reflective practitioners is a key strategy in building criticality into the service teacher's learning trajectory. In applying action research, they develop situated knowledge about their professional work new to their personal contexts (McIntyre, 2005), often applying innovations that have worked elsewhere. Burns (2010) more broadly validated its value in English Language Teaching (ELT) education. Reason and Bradbury (2001) maintained action research contributes "to the increased well-being – economic, political, psychological, spiritual – of human persons and communities" (p. 2). This happens because the identification of the problem and the project are the result of local teachers working with local communities.

This application of action research as a situated pedagogy articulates the close connection between language curriculum and the language socialisation required to activate the learning meaningfully (Micklan, 2012). Crucially, the curricular delivery of the sort delivered in the context of transnationalism should not merely follow precepts from western practice. For interventions to have a chance of impact on learners in Vietnam, those closest to students need to identify the lines of enquiry. Le (2011) wrote: "without adequate understanding of what shapes their teaching practices, any coercive intervention to change teachers, including formal training, would be of limited impact" (p.238). There is consensus among modern action researchers that to equip professionals such as educators with action research skills is to invest in the future and ongoing improvement of the community, culture and organisation.

It is crucial for the work of Vietnamese researchers within Vietnam and overseas to inform the curriculum. In the work of these researchers, teacher-led research is described as progressive and informing. Pham (2006) wrote: "Research, especially classroom research...plays an important role as it can help generate classroom practices which are appropriate to the social, cultural and physical contexts in which they work" (p.2). Tran (2009) argued participatory action research allowed teachers "to learn about their teaching at the same time as they improve their teaching" (p.105). Tran maintained it allowed "teachers to learn about their teaching at the same time that they improve their teaching" (p.105). Utsumi and Doan (2010) argued that teachers *wanted* to change to meet learners' needs using collaboration, project work and discussions to stimulate "high order thinking" (p.14) and impact autonomy. More broadly, the aim is to foster professional development by enhancing service teachers' agency, hence transforming practice (Somekh, 2006). This means encouraging service teachers to analyse their initial iterations, translating learnings into "modifications, adjustments, directional changes, redefinition, as necessary, so as to bring about lasting benefit to the ongoing process itself" (Cohen & Manion, 1985, p.178).

To be truly impactful, a curriculum revolving around action research needs to give the service teacher autonomy and enable them to become agents of their own research and contributors within their pedagogical communities. The feature of action research Kemmis (2007) emphasised most was its bottom-up potential to place control over

reform, or at least communication about its potential, in the hands of those close to the action. The action research-focused curriculum negotiated by the Vietnamese and Australian English Language Teaching professionals encourages students to consider what might both aid and constrain them in achieving their aspired classroom innovations before designing a project, and to evaluate the success of their interventions after its first cycle, with a view to implementing improvements iteratively. The focus is less on introducing new teaching methodologies, but on embodying capability and fostering a reflective and agentive ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1988). Huang (2010) warned: “During...training courses, Vietnamese teachers show great interest in new methodologies, but after they return from those courses, they continue teaching in old methods” (p.22). The gap between “intended” innovations in TESOL teaching “and the realized version” is real (Barnard & Nguyen, p.77). Teaching them ‘what’ may lead to slippage, teaching when ‘how’ and enabling them to ‘become’ fosters capability. And in Vietnam, the pressure of the old ways cannot be underestimated.

Curriculum

This study occurs in a volume on curriculum, so a curricular overview is appropriate, opening out themes that give this volume unity. The curriculum was delivered over three 36-hour courses in the course of a calendar year. Units were delivered every four months. For logistical reasons, curriculum delivery used a fly-in-fly-out model with international and Australian lecturers supplemented by local teachers who would ideally, in time, gain the capacity to lecture themselves.

The first unit, notionally an educational research design and methods module, enabled learners to write literature reviews and scope out a potential and ethical project. This was taught practically in such activities as learning to summarise literature where innovations were implemented in other contexts and applying needs and stakeholder analyses. The program embodies a strong emphasis on reflection on, in and for action.

The second unit, notionally revolving around the theory and practice of curricular and pedagogic innovations and their practical applications, uses innovation theories to define what is innovative about the project and justify its need. Innovations, ideas or practices “perceived as new by an individual or individuals”, are intended to bring about planned and deliberate improvement in relation to desired objectives (White, 1988, p. 114). Innovations can be entirely new, re-workings of old ideas or an embedding of an old idea into a new context (Markee, 1997). In the contexts of some of the service teachers, particularly rural ones, using vocabulary games or dictogloss to enhance lexical acquisition may indeed be new; and in others, perhaps private universities with transnational programs, the role of peer intervention in assessing writing, the use of blogging to enhance critical thinking or employing authentic YouTube or Ted videos to enhance spoken awareness may be appropriate. In this unit, students designed the procedures of data collection and analysis and assess the project’s viability, practicality, suitability and ethical integrity. They learned to position themselves within the body of learning and to partake in the academic conversation, developing an integrated proposal and research instruments, delivering them in oral and written forms. They implemented their studies, gathering data and envisaging its analysis and presentation in a way that articulated their line of enquiry. Think (2006) wrote of a strong need for institutions to “help learners identify their learning objectives and needs and employ various tasks to stimulate learner motivation” (p.8).

The final unit, highlighting the reflective and evaluative dimensions of the action research cycle, occurred after the students had implemented their project. It took the student from being collector of raw data to potential author of a reflective paper on an action research intervention. Students acquire the skills needed to work with and present data learning how to evaluate a range of interventions in TESOL and how to analyse data using tools such as open coding and thematic analysis. The emphasis is on evaluation and reflection; in particular on identifying aspects of the research process that were or were not successful. Valuable learning emerges from such retrospection; learning not just about research but about the individual's capacity and the practitioner's drive for continual improvement. The final report not only captures the academic literacies demanded of professional research writing in TESOL, but also represents a service teacher's initial trajectory as an action researcher. The reflective memoranda accompanying their reports serves as data in the study reported here. Before we consider the impacts reported by service teachers, we need to survey the opportunities for such curricula as this in the Vietnam of the 2010s and the aspirational 2020s – and the constraints.

Contexts for Innovation in TESOL in Vietnam

London (2011) wrote that for the last 25 years Education in Vietnam has registered significant 'improvements': "Education in Vietnam...has long been viewed as a pathway to a better life; an avenue to social mobility" (p.2). Education, then, becomes capital, to revisit Bourdieu (1988), in accessing a better life, both for individuals and organisations. London (2011) observes, though, that "the pressure on education to serve as a vehicle of individual and collective advancement is more acute than ever as society becomes more complex and globally integrated" (p.3). Hence, Vietnam's education system resembles "a vast social field in which aspirations and constraints collide" (p.3). In this "collision". we see the gap between macro-level intention and micro-level implementation Wedell (2009) identified as a barrier to innovation.

This section considers how the curriculum fits into the culture of improvement, enhancing capital, harnessing the opportunities. Throughout, it keeps in mind the problematic nature of this "collision", this "gap". Because of it, any curricular or pedagogical innovation – including the interventions promised by action research as a capacity builder – runs the risk of running aground (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016).

In light of Vietnam's social and individual aspiration via improvement, an impetus evoked in the rhetoric of the 2020 policy (National Foreign Languages Policy, NFL2020, 2008), the curriculum described above evolved in response to a range of drivers from Vietnamese (1, 2, 3, 4) and Australian (5) perspectives.

1. The notion of education, and of foreign language, as avenues to social mobility;
2. The desire for Vietnamese to possess a foreign language under the 2020 policy;
3. Understanding that, in Vietnam, 'collective' motivation at any level is now contingent on and inseparable from the investments of aspirational individuals;
4. Vietnamese universities' drives for self-promotion by means of prestige transnational associations;

5. The urge for TESOL providers to move beyond approaches considered communicative language teaching (CLT) methods into ones better equipping students for real world contexts, namely action research as a task-based, process-led approach.

Further, there are policy imperatives from both the Australian and Vietnamese governments. The action research-focused curriculum absorbs the necessity to inform the curriculum with theory - critical, post-structural, social constructivist – as a result of changes in the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) regarding the research rigour of a Masters ‘level 9’ program, even though it is the practice (not the theory) that the Vietnamese service teachers seek. Specifically, the program is bound by the outcome “to qualify individuals who apply an advanced body of knowledge in a range of contexts for professional practice or scholarship and as a pathway for further learning” (AQF, 2018).

To better situate the curriculum and the choice of action research as an empowerment strategy within it, we need to reconsider the Ministry of Education and Training’s (MOET) foreign language policy. The Government Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg, the report *Teaching and learning foreign languages in the national education system, period 2008-2020* (2008), set a future-focused goal for language education

To renovate thoroughly the tasks of teaching and learning foreign language within the national education system, to implement a new program on teaching and learning foreign language at every school level and training degree, which aims to achieve by the year 2015 a vivid progress on professional skills, language competency for human resources, especially at some prioritized sectors; by the year 2020 most Vietnamese youth graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities are to gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently (MOET, NFL2020, p.1).

The action research-inflected curriculum outlined here aims to provide the kind of ‘vivid progress’ the policy outlines and to empower its students to work on ‘professional skills’ ‘independently.’ Policy puts teachers at all levels under the spotlight and on the spot. Decree 140, speaks, too, of the intention “to review and assess the pool of foreign language teachers” and “to supplement teachers and standardize their training levels” (MOET, NFL2020, p.3). English language teacher education programs need to operate in this space. However, if the MTESOL program improves English proficiency, it is just a felicitous by-product; it is a research not an *English-for-teaching*-style language program.

Further, the 2014 iteration of the Vietnamese Language Proficiency Framework (VLPF), benchmarked to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), sets out minimum levels of language proficiency required by teachers at different levels in primary, secondary and tertiary education, with the MTESOL service teachers striving to reach, and remain at level C1 or, even better, C2, ‘Advanced’. As well as being an instrumental spur, this is also a national motivation since, as Nguyen (2017) maintained, the quality of English teachers remains a critical issue for the effective implementation of NFL2020, and many teachers currently operate below the expected level of competence, though the trend is improving. A factor here is that access to ‘foreign language’ (‘English’) is a crucial integrative motivator in terms of students’ desires for

future recognition, promotion, leadership opportunities and other forms of social and cultural capital.

The emphasis on a central action research project as curriculum and assessment vehicle involves investigation into learners' power to act and their ability to work critically together. It is important, Pham (2006) maintains, "to investigate how English language teachers think the context in which they work shapes their aspirations, research practices and outcomes" (p.8). In collaboration with lecturers and with their peer community, students design an initial research question, which is developed into a line of enquiry. This draws on critical friends group (CFG) protocols (Vo & Nguyen, 2009) and Le's (2011) belief that the best approaches harness "Vietnamese collectivism" (p. 244) and the desire for "social harmony" (Nguyen, 2011, p. 26). Vo and Nguyen (2009) write: "Through the social interaction of discussion, active learning evolves, and each participant interprets, transforms, and internalises new knowledge as a result of collective thinking" (p.207). From this dialogic, community-based position, students design and propose an innovation that can be implemented ethically and manageably within their workplaces. Throughout their projects, they frequently discuss the general process and their own roadblocks and triumphs as the urge for social harmony means each individual wants his or her peer to succeed.

There are, then, opportunities in offering students access to a bottom-up system of practitioner enquiry via action research, but there are also constraints. Pham (2006) noted there is difficulty in resisting top-down, power-coercive structures in institutions: Chiefly a combination of an assessment system so immersed in positivist summative assessment that there is no room for innovative pedagogies; and deans unable to tolerate much more than grammar translation, unwilling to allow teachers agency to teach what they know would motivate their student to achieve the communicative interactivity seemingly demanded by the policy. Our service teachers, like those known to Hamid and Renshaw (2016), appear empowered by the possibilities for teacher identity and innovative pedagogy. This is supported by the policy rhetoric but not by local educational managers for whom the adoption of more student-centred and process-focused modes and media of teaching and learning remains threatening (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016).

There are also shadowy vested governmental, institutional and pecuniary interests. Deliberately allusively and elusively, Nguyen (2011) signalled: "The issues of research as well as the values of research are not determined by the researcher but instead by the sponsor" (p.242). Many teachers are still fearful of changing their methods (Tomlinson & Bao, 2004). They are unwilling to emphasise the spoken and aural skills demanded for communication in a transnational world; they prefer to adhere to curricula tested by national college examinations (Canh & Bernard, 2009). London (2011) writes: "quite often, entrenched interests, bureaucratic rigidities, and ideological functionalism seem only to promote continued organisational inertia" (p.3). With the inertia generation's imminent retirement, for they are impeding progress, there is to be a new wave of opportunity.

The innovations students implement within their action research can clash with this 'inertia'. These top-down constraints, students reported, came from primary and secondary contexts from "didactic" textbooks (Canh & Barnard, 2009, p.23), layered with pedagogical methods that are communicative in principle but may not be in

practice (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010). Barnard and Nguyen suggested this could be due to teachers' inability to implement the intended curriculum. Those lecturing on the MTESOL, however, consistently argue it appears due to the kinds of bureaucratic rigidities London (2011) pinpoints and not either teacher fear or lack of agency. Service teachers want to supplement and complement the curriculum with their innovations. For them, the challenge is, to cite Pennycook (2001) "finding possibilities of articulation" (p.130). Defining the limits of possibility is a negotiation between student, teacher and researcher within their environment and depends upon a willingness to improve students' learning for integrative reasons – access to their imagined future communities and identities, as well as the cold instrumentality of exam-passing. Action research offers some of those possibilities for articulation.

Methodological Approach

This paper reports microcosmically from data of a larger naturalistic, interpretivist project involving 40 graduated students from the MTESOL investigating the impact of the action research pedagogical approach on the students' current and future spheres of endeavour and their developing identities as teacher/researchers. These 40 students comprised 32 women and 8 men, aged from 25 to an undisclosed age 'close to retirement', and those included in the study were tertiary-level educators, often in specialist universities. All were from Hanoi, in the north of Vietnam, and its surrounding provinces and smaller towns.

Theoretically, the study is informed both by people-centred capacity building via educational development (Sen, 1999), second language and teacher identity construction (Norton, 2000; Phan, 2008) and theories of socially situated language socialisation (Duff, 2007; Micklan, 2013). Language socialisation approaches combine insights from the social turn in language education of the early 2000s, the ethical turn of the 2010s which brought reflexivity and positionality into teacher research, and the situated learning of Discourses (Gee, 1991). It is the Discourses of and ways of being in action research that socialise the service teachers into becoming researching 'actors' in their environments, making spaces there as potential change agents, all the while understanding the situatedness of their action research projects, and hence the constraints. This engages with language teaching at three discursive levels: ideological (e.g. policy, belief systems), institutional (e.g. university regulations, affordances of the workplace) and classroom levels (e.g. the range of resources, repertoires, pedagogies), while allowing the service teachers to harness and develop their own professional histories as language educators.

Because case studies offer a nuanced yet holistic view of context-dependent experience while focusing on service teachers-as-researchers' learning (Flyvbjerg, 2006), the broad approach is a case study. However, this is a broadly interpretivist species as it draws on narrative and reflective autoethnographical data in the manner of Nunan and Choi (2010), to validate the service teachers as genuine contributors to discourse, locate them in time and space as those best placed to research within their own known contexts, and engage critically in their own trajectories as emerging action researchers, potentially empowered to share and teach others within their teaching and learning communities.

The main sources of data are the service teachers' narratives: Reflective memoranda that serve as evaluative commentaries on their work in the second and third units.

In the next section four descriptions of pedagogical interventions undertaken by students/educators/researchers in their contexts are outlined using reflections from two units written 4 months apart. All students gave consent for their reflective memoranda to be re-narrated. Although the names are pseudonyms, there is little risk if the students are identified through their functions and their institutions, both central to their topics. All students believed others can learn by considering their cases. The first-person narratives I have woven, like those of Nunan and Choi (2010), are reflective and evocative of the voices of the learners whose stories are retold, and inflected by the small changes they made when they re-read them. The authors of the reflective memoranda approved the narratives constructed from their work, four of which appear in the next section.

This micro-study within the larger project adopts a form of maximum variation sampling from a sample of 40 and acknowledges this number as a limitation. While the discussion above demonstrates the crucial complexities of political and cultural background and curriculum, this naturalistic enquiry neither works on preselected variables nor has an *a priori* commitment to any theoretical view of a target phenomenon. I wanted the stories to speak for themselves, in light of early findings about the value of action research as a curricular element in this context.

Methodologically speaking, the paper presents a descriptive qualitative analysis (Sandelowski, 2000) or “interpretive description” (p.335), informed by reflective autobiography (Nunan & Choi, 2010) and subjective academic analysis (Arnold, 2011). It is subjective because epistemologically and ontologically this author’s own story is inseparable from those of his students. I am there in how I represent and retell their stories, as I reconstruct elements of their reflections into more integrated tales. With Riessman (1993), I admit interpretation is inevitable because narratives are by their very nature “representations” (p.2), or *re-presentations* (my emphasis). I follow the ethos of Ellis (2000), imparting in my research stories the qualities of balance, flow and experiential authenticity while portraying a real-life likeness, capturing the voice of the service-teacher-as-action-researcher whose story I retell. Mindful, too, of Richardson (2000), I aim for a dialogical, accessible, and truthful relationship between myself as researcher-writer and the service teacher-participants, without claiming epistemological generalisability.

In this methodology, “the description in qualitative descriptive studies entails the presentation of the facts of the case in everyday language” (Sandelowski, 2000, p.336). Summarising and ‘re-presenting’ the informational content of the data is, in this methodology, itself a means of analysis. Data for the study is kept in a password protected file and is annotated according to participant numbers, Action Research (AR) 1-40. Before presenting four reformulations of service teachers’ learnings from their involvement in action research, I briefly describe some key thematic findings emerging from the ongoing project. This is useful, as these themes share resonance with the narratives.

Qualitative, situated research approaches provide authentic, reflective, evaluative insights into real experience. The methods used in analysing 40 participants’ reflective memoranda are congruent with Sandelowski’s (1995) in nursing. She described scrutinising the data, identifying key storylines to understand practices and ways of doing, underlining key phrases because, she wrote, they make “inchoate sense” (p.373).

In reading, I used a holistic, instinctive, multiple-technique method to bring out what Patton called “indigenous themes” (1990), themes immersed in the culture of learning of the service teachers. This method employs word-based and scrutiny-based techniques of observation (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Other analytic techniques are querying the text to locate specific kinds of topics that can indicate social or cultural themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). These detailed ways of unpacking text owe much to Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant comparison method.

Table 1 presents ten emergent themes regarding what service teachers learned or regarded as necessary in their design, implementation and evaluation of pedagogical or curricular innovations introduced in the form of action research interventions. These themes are presented here as guiding themes, though the list is far from exhaustive.

- 1 Learning about research by becoming a classroom researcher is empowering, validating, motivating for service teachers.
- 2 When working with students, clear pre-teaching of any aspect of the target intervention is critical.
- 3 If there is a reflective dimension in the action research, ‘reflection’ needs to be defined, modelled, clarified.
- 4 Acculturated features of students’ socio-cognitive behaviours and expectations are a major challenge in implementing an innovation.
- 5 Accommodating an innovation based on perceptions of student needs is complex in curricula crowded with required bookwork and assessment.
- 6 The stages of the action research intervention need meticulous time planning; that is, the project needs to be assessed as doable and practical early on.
- 7 Innovations related to productive skills, to Speaking, Writing and pronunciation, are seen as the most necessary and impactful.
- 8 Teachers are afraid of implementing innovations as students and teachers may see them as wilfully deviating from set curricula and pedagogies.
- 9 While principals in general approve and support service teachers’ implementations, other teachers may be jealous of afraid of the service teachers’ opportunities.
- 10 Increased interest in the educational affordances of technology has forced resisters to yield and recognise the educational potential of technology-mediated language teaching and learning.

Table 1: Learnings about becoming an action researcher in Vietnamese tertiary contexts

Implementing Action Research: Four Narratives

Narrative 1: Phuong (AR-3)

I chose as my topic ‘Improving the English-speaking competency of low-level adult students using task repetition: A case study at Vietnam Air Defence and Air Force Academy’. With this broad topic in mind, I decided my research question should be: ‘In what ways can *task repetition* improve my learners’ accuracy and fluency in their English oral performance?’ I designed and carried out a qualitative action research study focusing on corrective feedback because it was an intervention pertinent to my specific context. It’s relevant because my research problem is, I wrote in my reflection,

“although various solutions were suggested in...articles, only *task repetition* is believed to be able to possibly minimize these two major facets of my EFL students’ oral imperfection”. I believe that, given Vietnamese traditional ways of learning, the rote learning of repetition is unlikely to be resisted, and, although it is a pedagogical innovation in my context, it still reflects something of acceptable ways.

Let me describe the implementation of my study. I have my students narrate a story and video-capture them, with full ethics permissions. My students then transcribe their stories, correct their errors autonomously, peer correct with other students, and finally the I correct the transcription myself. I believe this process allows for both individual learning and for critical friendship, and the fact that I have the final say gives the students confidence in the process.

In the next stage, I have the students repeat the process, this time attending to self-correction, a skill I had attempted to describe by using a YouTube video of an L2 speaker and stopping it when there was an error and asking ‘What should she have said?’ To enhance students’ awareness of task repetition as a strategy linked to self-correction, I encouraged them to keep a reflective e-diary all the time, detailing the times they had observed or used task repetition. I wish I had given them a clearer layout for this diary in advance.

I believe that my awareness as a researcher has developed. For instance, as I write now, I realise that I wasn’t sufficiently prepared for the technophobia and unfamiliarity with what ‘reflection’ looked like. I can now see these problems needed proactive pre-teaching, and as a researcher in the future I can think through the process more rigorously, and create a map for myself. I can also see that there was a need for me as teacher to model both the speech and transcription and also what the text of the ‘reflective’ journals might look like, and how deep it needed to be.

I feel my work as a researcher was valuable. Specifically, I aimed to analyse the sets of transcripts and read the reflective logs thematically, applying constant comparison and reading for synonyms. I was continually aware of applying the theory from the classroom to my practice. I can see that these methods helped to add rigour and made the work more valid. Yet, I’m also aware of the limitations of such an approach because my students’ data was largely self-reported. The limitations and complexities were increased by the fact that the students in my class were multi-level and all male, and here am I, a female, younger teacher, hoping they will value task repetition.

When I return to my own evaluative reflections on my study over these two semesters, I can feel my growth as an action researcher. I had written: “The influence of task repetition on accuracy could have been more effective if the students had been presented [with] and had practiced those linguistic features more profoundly earlier in the course”. This directs me as to what to change in my next iteration. I also evaluated, “some minor decrease in anxiety was also observed, yet there should be more similar practice in the future in order to achieve significant improvements in this affective variable”, and realise how nervous my students were at first when faced with a teaching innovation; next time I’ll prepare them better. I can also see how strongly invested I was in my own possible future as a capable researcher within my university. The hopes that I wrote of are both for my own identity and those of my students:

It was hoped that this small-scale study would set foundations for my future innovations, and that by means of gaining such little changes over the course, my students would consequently make substantial gains in the foreign language.

I enjoyed this dual role of teacher and budding researcher, and feel myself ready and willing to learn from this action research sub-cycle and to work as a teacher/researcher with future interventions to improve the spoken accuracy of my students.

Narrative 2: Duc (AR-11)

In my reflections, I describe an innovation, characterize a goal, specify a context and identify a target group. My topic outlines all of these aspects quite specifically: ‘Using group work with peer assessment to improve the English-speaking skill of second year non-English major students at [City] University of Business and Technology’.

I’ve learned that research questions have criteria too: they result from contextual analysis; are related to my practice; are contextualised by recent literature. I’ve come to understand the importance of communicating with the full range of stakeholders in the project, including those in power in my institution, and have learned that research projects should be potentially generalizable, though I recognize mine is specific. It is also very typical of contexts in my city, and, indeed, Vietnam.

My research question focuses my line of enquiry for my action research: ‘In what way does group work with peer assessment affect sophomores’ participation and interaction?’ To address this enquiry, I used an initial action research sub-cycle to understand both the people and the phenomena with a focus on the impact of peer assessment. My choice of question emerged from my observation of a problem among my students: Students lack critical or reflective insight into the metalinguistic aspects of lexical and phonological improvement and exhibit passive behaviours.

As I reflect on two semesters’ action research implementation, let me describe how I implemented this action research. I observed weekly group work activities – either case studies or role plays over a five-week period, and after each session I interviewed students who had volunteered to take part and who had signed consent forms.

In the next stage, I organise the students to participate in peer assessment using a specially-designed form commenting on other students’ engagement, speaking time, turn-taking and other forms of involvement. While I was implementing this intervention, I became aware that one problem was the difficulty of ‘investing’ individuals in group work when the assessment structure was necessarily individual. As a teacher, I found I needed to encourage my students to be natural and not forced during interviews.

In my role as a researcher of action research around a problem detected in my context, I aimed to analyse the sets of observation data and read the interview transcripts thematically. To ensure ‘interpretative validity’, I organised for a colleague to check my questions. I was positive and passionate about the possible impact of the intervention, but feared my current class may have been lacking in linguistic proficiency, partly

because they are non-English majors. Specifically, I feared a backlash against against me, a concept we call “*tôn sư trọng đạo*”, *respect for elders*.

My main fear was that students may experience difficulty in generalizing from my sample. At the same time, I was profoundly aware of the possible perceived ethical conflict of teacher as interviewer and assessor. Because the students had been brought up to expecting teachers to be in total charge of marking, I feared these learners may not be equipped for an intervention that may lead to autonomy. This fear is cultural-historical rather than related to teaching and learning. Nevertheless, I want to stay positive in my evaluation of my intervention, while at the same time showing a learned awareness of what I need to do differently next time.

I want to share verbatim three observations from my reflective writing:

1. Using peer assessment in group work solved my students’ problems of disengagement, poor interaction in group work and increased students’ English talking time.
2. If I have a chance to do the research again, I will analyse the data as soon as I collect them or analyse them weekly instead of waiting for all data to be collected.
3. In order to create and increase students’ interest in taking part in activities, the activities should be interesting, familiar to real life and appropriate to students’ level.

These are three of my learnings about myself as an action researcher, and about what I learned during the first iteration of my action research cycle.

Narrative 3: Miriam (AR-24)

I am a non-Vietnamese teacher teaching in a bilingual tertiary institution in Hanoi. I chose as my action research topic, ‘Educational games: One answer to the vocabulary teaching and learning problem in an Urban Bilingual School.’ As a cultural outsider, I felt I was able to work on an intervention for my action research that was based on a research problem I was as being related to the Vietnamese mind-set that learning cannot be ‘fun’ and in opposition to principals in my college who were not familiar with language socialisation and social constructivism. During this study, I realised that my major beliefs as a teacher were related to students learning communally, in a space that goes beyond communicative language teaching and learning. The key problem I identified was the students’ lexical shortfall, and I realised that this was a major obstacle to speaking. This resistance is also cultural, as it was mirrored in the attitudes of other teachers. I felt this ongoing resistance to new pedagogies limited the nature of appropriate innovations.

My action research was informed by theory. Communicative games replicate a Vygotskian sociocultural context where safe learning can occur. I posed two questions, both of which were open to what I learned was ‘naturalistic’ qualitative enquiry:

- In what ways do games impact vocabulary teaching and learning?
- What are the students’ perceptions of the use of games?

I aimed to use a consistent methodological approach. My methods involved qualitative analysis of observation sheets, student reflections and interview transcripts from interviews on two days of game-intensive lessons.

As a researcher, I aimed to analyse transcripts applying the insights from grounded theory covered in our Research Methods classes. Specifically, I read the reflective logs using the constant comparison method, and elicited different perspectives from the perceptions of colleague teachers who had agreed to act as observers and interviewers. In my analysis, I was very concerned about interpretative validity, and so I maintained a focus on a “highly contextualized understanding of the phenomena.” This was a phrase that circulated in my head from my lecturer, and I knew it was achieved via triangulation and using my colleagues as interviewers. All the while, I was aware of ethical distance between the researcher and the participants, and of the common limitation of working with participants preparing for college. I was aware they might say what they believed I, the teacher/researcher, wanted to hear. With my researcher hat on, I triangulated this over-reliance on insider perspectives by using my colleagues as interviewers.

I was methodological about the procedure for the implementation of my project and expected it to be straight-forward. Let me explain what I did. Across lessons addressing all skills, I, the teacher introduced two periods of games-rich sessions over an 8-week period and collected contrastive data. Simultaneously, students kept journals as homework in response to narrative frames I had made and distributed. To prepare the students, I provided a pilot lesson to demonstrate the purpose of games and explained the procedures.

The reflective task demands that I draw both contextual and general conclusions from my study. I want to quote from my reflections here, to help me evaluate the intervention and my own work as an action researcher.

1. The innovation was a success because games created a potential change in the students’ mind-set from English language classroom and vocabulary lessons as boring to being interactive classroom.
2. Educational vocabulary games are capable of enhancing a learner’s motivation in vocabulary acquisition.
3. Using vocabulary games in the classroom creates a relaxing, exciting and conducive atmosphere for learning.
4. The research tools used were not very effective, as it was hard to take notes as a participant observer and observe facial expressions in informal talks as well as write.

I realised I had proven something to my school about the value of fun in learning vocabulary, but I found that to observe and to write is complex. I had insufficient practice as an ethnographic researcher, I would use colleagues next time. I feel proud that my empirical findings bear out what literature on the use of games has long known. To me, and to my school, seeing the students engaged in a ‘funny’ activity changed perspectives on the line between study and play.

Narrative 4: Thang (AR-29)

Vietnamese people love singing, and song is one of the primary ways our culture has been transmitted through history and is a key way of communicating to foreigners. I wanted to implement an action research project exploring how English songs might be used to promote student learning motivation and oral production in the English-for-Specific-Purposes (ESP) classroom at Hanoi University of Business and Technology (HUBT), a large private university in central Hanoi, Vietnam, with more than 40 thousand students.

Grammar translation is the prevailing teaching approach at the university; communicative teaching is strongly promoted, but like in many other Asian countries, it does not seem to work effectively on the whole in Vietnam (Le & Barnard, 2009). To help boost student motivation and oral production, I thought songs might be an interesting solution. My literature review revealed a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere can boost L2 motivation and I thought it was feasible to use songs to supplement the main ESP course book and change class dynamics after much time on grammar. My pedagogy involved song listening, lyrics pronunciation practice, ESP pronunciation practice, singing along, and song content discussion. Ninety-seven students from four classes took part over 18 days, and on the final day I administered a semi-structured questionnaire to help me evaluate the intervention. During the intervention, I encouraged students to write e- or paper journals and appointed a monitor to collect this data. This part of my design was unsuccessful: few students wrote reflections and even fewer wrote deep reflections. Next time I will incorporate short reflections into the central curriculum as an integral part of the assessment, and next time I will demonstrate what I mean by 'reflection'.

I felt I had followed the patterns of action research in my procedures and data collection, aimed to use triangulation, and employed the constant comparison method in my data analysis and deduced themes linked to potential changes in student learning motivation and potential changes in oral English production in the ESP classroom. These research themes showed that particular instruction activities based on songs could significantly promote and enhance students' learning motivation, engagement, and oral English production in the ESP classroom at HUBT. I found that students in the three classes I did not directly teach were less enthusiastic, because they were unable to see how the intervention fitted into the assessment-based curriculum. I also found most students enthusiastically engaged in song listening, singing along, and lyrics pronunciation practice, which they found enjoyable and relaxing. This did depend on how likeable the chosen songs were, as I chose clear and lyrical songs rather than complex rhythmic ones they might ordinarily listen to. Furthermore, I found most students developed positive attitudes towards and better engaged in ESP instruction before and after particular song-based activities. My evidence also suggests it can enhance confidence at pronunciation, but I realise I need to design a more detailed study to investigate this line thoroughly.

While the students in general were enthused by song in the classroom and reported confidence in their speaking, few enjoyed the part of my intervention involving analysing the songs, in fact 80% said they disengaged. This was disappointing. The activity could have brought about significant oral English production in an interesting way as suggested in literature. Also disappointing were complaints about the noisiness of my students, and some students disliked singing in stuffy rooms.

In terms of my learning as a researcher, I realised I had been over-ambitious in my scale and scope. Next time I would involve colleagues more closely as observers, and, perhaps, organise the song activity as a large group event to avoid complaints. I could also prepare the students for the task by sharing lyrics in advance of the class exercise. Most of all, I need to 'sell' to the class better the ways in which song has the potential to enhance their spoken capacity and their pronunciation.

Discussion

Phoung, Duc, Miriam and Thang were not asked to nominate the advantages and drawbacks of an action research-focused curriculum or even to comment on them. Their stories, recreated to *show* not *tell* in the manner of Ellis's autoethnography (2000), illustrate and substantiate the proposition that a language teacher training curriculum involving an action research trajectory can be empowering and professionally valuable as well as being an assessment mechanism within the curriculum. Because of this act of showing, it is superfluous to unpack the themes of the narratives in a formal discussion; they speak for themselves. It can be seen that some of the themes emerging from my larger study appear in the four narratives of service teachers becoming action researchers: All, to an extent, articulate the need to be explicit about reflectivity and meticulous in planning, and all are concerned with productive skills and most specifically speaking. Phoung emphasises the value of pre-teaching and Thang wishes she had supplied lyrics in advance of the song intervention; Duc, Miriam and Thang deal with acculturated factors, resistance to the unusual and 'space' in the crowded curriculum; Duc faces the very real fear of losing face.

The stories show, too, how teachers explicitly put theory into practice, with each narrative making clear links to theoretical contexts and each researcher positioning themselves ethically and epistemically. They are, effectively, finding spaces for articulation (Pennycook, 2004). The four narratives chart trajectories that touch on service teachers' agency, but always within a context of constraint. Each story encounters Weddell's (2009) gap between intention and implementation, but each service teacher, in the drive to be an action researcher, finds work-arounds by gaining a principal's permission, enlisting collegial support, or patiently explaining potential benefits to students.

What these four retold narratives show are service teachers' reflections on and for action. They create interventions based on their perceptions of student needs within contents of environmental and stakeholder analyses. They are aware of the scale and scope of their action research, and show a measure of evaluative skill in relation to their interventions, always believing a second cycle would be done differently. Their action research contributes to a process of generating classroom practices appropriate to their social, cultural and physical contexts (Pham, 2006). They learn about teaching in general and their own identities as teachers (Tran, 2009). Their interventions, themselves applications of innovation theory, enacted Cohen and Manion's description of action research as "a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention" (1985, p. 174). The situated nature of the projects makes them authentic as exercises in professional practice and development. The curriculum's built in criticality and reflectivity enables the service

teachers to see their improvement as meaningful and to gain a sense of contributing to the shaping of action research practices that can be used in their futures. Further research, of course, is required to learn if these participants did, in fact, implement further action research cycles, and to evaluate the impact of their interventions on both students and the shaping of their curricula. Likewise, we need to implement a program of observation to investigate any distance between the rhetoric self-report and reality (Burton & Micken, 1993).

Conclusions

This study showed the value of an action research-led curriculum within a transnational Master of TESOL program where service teachers learned about their potential capacity as reflective practitioners and action researchers while they examined teaching and learning practices reflectively and evaluatively. Some of the intrinsic features of action research – its potential to be authentic and its ability to provide possibilities for criticality, reflectivity and evaluative capacity – mark it as a valuable way of encouraging service teachers not just to create situated knowledge but to apply it in a way that may take risks, yet is pedagogically and contextually appropriate. It is non-coercive and bottom-up. It respects the idea that those closest to knowing the interests, discourses and aspirations the learner are those best placed to recommend and implement curricular changes and pedagogical innovations (Pham, 2006).

The study supports the need for Vietnamese teachers to gain access to enhanced agency, not merely to implement the word of policy, but also to add to their own professional capital and their students' learning trajectories. Teachers' desire for self-betterment (London, 2011) is completely compatible with enhancing their role as innovators in pedagogy and curriculum. It is also compatible with Vietnamese collectivism, that ethic where "human relationships are at the core of the care orientation" (Phan, 2008, p.7) and where "belonging" (p. 13) is about having the power to create better classroom communities and communities of practitioners. The power of critical friendships can thrive in this pedagogy. Consciousness of duty to students, colleagues and stakeholders is clear in each story. By better aligning the present and future needs of students, educators, institutions and the wider nation, there is a better chance of reducing the gaps between rhetoric and action, intention and implementation (Thin, 2006). Certainly, "the recognition of agency at the local context is critical for the implementation of macro-level policies and policy goals" (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016).

This chapter exemplified what can happen in Vietnam when we step outside conventional, instrumentalist, non-authentic modes of assessment such as examinations, and unite TESOL curriculum with authentic professional practice. It outlined a possibility for a Masters level TESOL curriculum in Vietnam that goes beyond the content-based programs generally regurgitated within Transnational education. It articulates a method that can be tailored to the needs of individuals, institutions and indeed potentially to national policy. To re-evolve NFL2020 (2008), the four stories are narratives of "vivid progress" in professional practice towards independence.

This chapter also contributed rare insight into what happens in TESOL classrooms in Vietnam, a need identified by Barnard and Nguyen (2010) and offered rare first-hand narratives of service teachers touching, yet never reaching, autonomy, agency and

indeed the “independence” espoused by NFL2020 (2008). As Vietnam moves to the future, there are opportunities to stop blaming the under-training of teachers and harness the energies of global movements (Canh & Bernard, 2009) and the aspirations of teachers and students alike. There are opportunities to support such initiatives as the *English-for-Teaching* programs with professional development opportunities fostering action, agency and indeed independence. This paper offered one possible pathway to achieving this.

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