UNIT 4 ACTION RESEARCH IN THE CLASSROOM

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this unit are to familiarise teachers with:

- the concept of action research in the classroom
- various phases of carrying out research in the classroom
- what skills are required for action research
- how action research is useful in classroom teaching, and the teacher's own development
- a case study of research carried out by the teacher.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will discuss the ways in which the classroom teaching can be monitored, assessed and subsequently improved. And this monitoring helps in the long run to make the teacher a reflective practitioner — one who is learning from experience; understanding ideas more deeply and thus growing professionally. As teaching is a continuously evolving process, it is important that a teacher takes the reins of monitoring her teaching herself and develops strategies to improve her own teaching. This link of monitoring, analysing and developing methods (steps to improve) can be termed as action research.

There are various phases in action research. A teacher—researcher has to reflect, plan, act and observe her strategies during the course of action research. It is not necessary that the teacher has to have an expertise in research tools; with careful observation and planning she can obtain the desired result for improving her teaching, or modify her ways with regard to the teaching—learning process. A case-study has been given as a sample at the end.
### 4.2 THE CONCEPT OF ACTION RESEARCH IN THE CLASSROOM

The concept of action research is captured in the following statement of Kemmis and McTaggart (1982).

> "The linking of the terms 'action' and 'research' highlights the essential feature of the method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning. The result is a form of improvement in what happens in the classroom and school and better articulation and justification of the educational rationale of what goes on. Action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice into the whole: ideas-in-action (p.5)."

According to David Nunan "Action research is not simply research grafted onto practice. Rather it represents a particular attitude on the part of the practitioner, an attitude in which the practitioner is engaged in critical reflection on ideas, the informed application and experimentation of ideas in practice, and the critical evaluation of the outcomes of such application."

Before we move on to further the concept, it is important to draw a distinction between assessment, evaluation and action research. Assessment refers to the set of processes through which we make judgements about a learner's level of skill and knowledge. Evaluation refers to the wider process of collecting and interpreting data in order to make judgements about a particular programme. The data thus collected during the evaluation process will include learner assessment data and other information as well. However, the first step is obtaining information about what students have or have not learned. The second step will be to determine why particular results were or were not obtained. The third step will be to decide what, if anything, we intend to do about these results. The various steps to modify and improve the process is action research.

The words assessment, evaluation, monitoring do have connotations that these are undertaken by others - or by an external authority. However, there is another indirect way of monitoring - a very natural process in which teachers engage in, without "official" power to do so. For example, if out of forty students, only 13 have scored about sixty-five percent in a grammar test, the teacher immediately draws the conclusion that 37 students have not understood the concept properly. Hence, the result is the basis of action and this action relates to the teacher's own observations, plans and operations. Hence, the teacher is monitoring her own teaching and taking steps to improve it.

Action research is an important aspect of effective teaching. If a teacher has to be a successful educator, she/he has to be a reflective practitioner, only then can she/he take up self-monitoring in the classroom. Action research, then, is useful for two reasons. Firstly, it can have specific and immediate outcomes which can be directly related to practice in the teacher's own context. Secondly, the findings of such research will be specific. This kind of research is an extension of the normal reflective practice of many teachers.

**Check Your Progress - 1**

1. The direct result of action research is **immediate** in the teaching-learning process.

2. There is a distinction between assessment, **evaluation** and **action research**.

3. There are two advantages of action research
   - the first is that immediate, **specific** findings will be drawn;
   - the second is that the findings will be immediately relevant.

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4.3 VARIOUS PHASES OF CARRYING OUT RESEARCH IN A CLASS ROOM

As you are already aware that action-research refers to teacher-initiated classroom understanding of classroom teaching and learning and to bring about change in classroom practices. (Gregory 1988; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). Action research typically involves small-scale investigative projects in the teacher’s own classroom and consists of a number of phases which often recur in cycles.

4.3.1 Initial Reflection

As a reflective practitioner, you would be facing a number of issues in the teaching—learning process which need to be addressed by you. It may be a general concern, a perceived need or a problem with a class you are teaching.

For example:

1. The students in your 'oral skill' classroom seem to have great difficulty when you ask them to do oral “presentations”.
2. When students write compositions, they make mistakes in tenses, especially in the use of the perfect tense.
3. The answers given by students in tests in the literature class are mostly repetitions of the text book contents – it is obvious that the students have not used their own expression.

If these are the concerns of your teaching then you need to make each concern more concrete, so that it becomes susceptible to change or improvement. You need to outline a specific course of action, which you can try out to see if it affects your original concern. You could rephrase these concerns like this:

1. What changes could be made to the spoken English curriculum to give students the language inputs that are needed for oral presentations?
2. Is there any other teaching strategy that would better prepare students for using perfect tense in writing compositions?
3. How can the test questions be changed so that students have to use their own expressions in writing rather than reproducing the answers from the book?

This kind of preliminary observation and critical reflection is usually needed to change broad concern to a planned action. A concern does not often directly suggest the remedy and educational problems are not simple. Through action research, you try to promote changes to modify the existing practice.

Check Your Progress - 2

1. A reflective practitioner has to rephrase her concern _________
2. The initial reflection is changed to a _________
3. Action research is aimed at _________ and modifying _________
4.3.2 Planning

The most important outcome of the planning phase is a detailed plan of the action you intend to take or the change you intend to make. Who is going to do what and by when? What are the alterations to the curriculum? How do you intend to implement your revised teaching strategies? Try to work out whether your plans are practical and how others will react to them. You also need to make plans for observation or monitoring your changes.

The following tools can be used at the action stage, hence you have to plan the tools.

* Lesson reports

A lesson report is a structured inventory or list which enables teachers to describe their recollections of the main features of a lesson. The purpose of a lesson report is to give the teacher a quick and simple procedure for regularly monitoring what happened during a lesson, how much time was spent on different parts of a lesson and how effective the lesson was. Whereas a lesson plan describes what a teacher intends to do during a lesson, a lesson report describes what actually happened from the teacher's point of view.

Check Your Progress – 3

A lesson report is different from a ____________.

* Surveys and questionnaires

Some aspects of teaching and learning can be investigated through carrying out a survey or administering a questionnaire. For example, a teacher may wish to investigate students’ attitude towards group work. A questionnaire is administered to the class which asks students to indicate how useful they find group work activities, what they think they learn from them, and for what content areas or skills they think group work is most appropriate.

Surveys and questionnaires are useful ways of gathering information, collecting data.

Check Your Progress – 4

1. Planning stage in action research entails a detailed ____________
2. Surveys and questionnaires are useful ways of ____________

* Audio or video recording of lesson

A lesson can be recorded in an audio cassette or it can be video recorded. This will give a clear picture of the classroom situation. One of the advantages is that the recording can be specifically targeted at an area which the teacher wants to investigate. And this can be done by the teacher herself during various phases of investigation. The audio and video recording are objective tools of investigation.

* Observation

Observation involves visiting a class to observe different aspects of teaching. Many teachers hesitate to get their classes observed because it involves a bit of evaluation. The observer’s function should only be of recording and not of evaluating.

Check Your Progress - 5

1. Audio and video recording of lesson is ____________ in nature.
2. Observation of a lesson at this stage should not be ____________, but peer observation or observation by an outsider or head of the department, etc.
4.3.3 Action

After the planning stage in which all the procedures of investigation have been determined – comes the action stage. This stage is time bound. You have to administer tools to collect data and information. Systematic analysis has to be done. Results have to be recorded.

4.3.4 Observation

During 'action research', observation of tools has to be done cautiously. Observation has to be objectively done without any presuppositions. The detailed observations, monitoring and recording enables you to report your findings to others. Those involved in action research should also keep a detailed diary or journal.

4.3.5 Reflection

Once the results have been obtained and analysed and conclusions drawn, you are ready to initiate changes in your teaching strategy. This change or modification in the style of teaching is the result of action-research aimed at improving the teaching-learning process. It is also aimed at adopting a new method. You would also reflect on the efficacy of the changes you are trying to make? The answer to the last question or two will usually lead you to a further cycle of action research.

Check Your Progress - 6

1. During the "action" stage _______ has to be done of the data collected.
2. A _______ should be maintained of all the actions taken up in action research.
3. Reflection initiates ________

4.4 SKILLS REQUIRED FOR ACTION RESEARCH

The term 'research' in action research, does not mean a detailed knowledge of the literature or high levels of proficiency in the skills conventionally required by testing and survey research. What is required of teachers of schools and of the school system is a range of other skills, usually in relation to an immediate issue in one's own institution (Walker 1985:3-4).

According to Walker, skills will be needed for:

- reviewing practice, performance, and policy in teaching and administration;
- evaluating practice, performance, and policy in teaching and administration;
- providing evidence and analysis of the school's programme for management purposes;
- interpreting and assessing information coming to the school from a variety of sources, including examination boards, assessment and performance units, and the academic world.

Needless to say, a practising teacher involuntarily or voluntarily keeps doing all the above in the teaching process. It is a matter of formalising the action, reflection and outcome. Once the results are documented, it is easy to implement them to modify the teaching methodology, curriculum or any other aspect of teaching.
45 A CASE STUDY

Action research case study

Given below is an action research case study of a class.

Grouping arrangements in the classroom

This action research project was carried out by a teacher in a school where English was taught as a second or third language. This first language taught was the mother-tongue.

Initial Reflection

The teacher taught a class of mixed abilities students. She was worried about the amount of oral practice that less able students were getting during lessons. The students were generally shy and did not come out openly in the class. They were reluctant to use English. Many of them became embarrassed as well, if they made a mistake when they spoke in front of the class. She wanted to find out some way to boost the students’ self-confidence and thereby improve their fluency. She had a firm belief that using pair work was a good way of providing students with opportunities to practice English. She regularly used pair work in her class, but she was unsure about who the less able students should be paired with. She thought that if a less able student had a partner of better ability, the more fluent student might be able to help the other one during pair work. On the other hand, the less able student might feel embarrassed talking to such a student and might feel more comfortable working with a partner of the same ability. I decided to explore the effects of various types of pairing arrangements.

Planning and Action

I began by giving students a questionnaire about their learning preferences and observing how much the less able students actually said in English during pair work. For two weeks, I noted and compared their performance in three different situations:

- a less able student working with a fluent student;
- a less able student working with a student of the same ability;
- a less able student working with the teacher.

I also audio recorded the voice of a less able student when he was doing pair work in each of the above situations.

Observation

I was not surprised to find that students spoke the least amount of English when working with the teacher. However, I was very surprised to find out that the less able students spoke three times more English when working with a student of the same ability than when they had a more fluent partner. I concluded that the students were motivated to speak English, but perhaps felt intimidated when working with someone of much better ability.
While listening to the taped conversation of two less able students, I observed that they generally took turns to speak, that no individual was dominant, and that they helped each other with vocabulary. The conversations were quite fluent and accurate. However, the tape of the less able student paired with the more fluent student indicated that, although the better student was very cooperative and tried to help his partner, he tended to dominate the conversation and overcorrect his partner without giving his partner much change to practice.

From my questionnaire, I found out that students have more confidence to use English when they can help each other, when they have to be self-reliant, when the teacher is not always present, when they are not being corrected all the time, and when they are not being tested or monitored.

Reflection

During this investigation I learned a lot about my students' attitudes and abilities in using English. Gathering information from the students about how they use English was important to me. I discovered a way to deal with a class of mixed abilities and found a way to motivate and encourage my less able students. This project confirms my beliefs about the value of using pair work and has reduced my anxiety about pairing less able students together.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

We have tried to explain the concept of action research by a classroom teacher on various issues which concern the teaching-learning process. Since teaching and learning is a constantly evolving process, planned action research can improve and modify the process. Action research initiates change for betterment. A reflective practitioner has to have certain skills to carry out her investigations. This will lead to improved classroom pedagogy. In this unit we have given you the tools to conduct action research in your classroom.

4.7 KEY WORDS

| Action research | Research carried out by the teacher herself in her classroom or school. By conducting this research, the teachers critically look at their own classrooms for the purpose of instruction. |
| Practitioner research | |
| Monitor | Systematic observation and explanation of classroom processes. |
| Self-monitoring | The practice of teachers themselves observing and reflecting on what takes place in class with a view to bringing about desirable changes in teaching and learning. |

4.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

ANSWERS

Check Your Progress - 1
1. improvement
2. evaluation, action research
3. outcome/result, specific

Check Your Progress - 2
1. more concretely
2. planned action
3. promoting change and modifying the existing practice

Check Your Progress - 3
1. lesson plan

Check Your Progress - 4
1. plan of action
2. collecting/gathering information

Check Your Progress - 5
1. objective
2. evaluative

Check Your Progress - 6
1. systematic analysis
2. record
3. future action

Check Your Progress - 7
1. evaluating
2. analysing
3. assessing