# ACTION RESEARCH AND REFLECTIVE THINKING IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROCESS

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**Abstract**: A teacher who wants to be enthusiastic while teaching needs to control the class and to notice student progress. For doing this, implementing research procedures during the education process can be directive and useful. Thus, for teachers, conducting research in the classroom may build up a close relationship and contact with students and provide teachers with further opportunities to observe their own students in the classroom. Action research among such classroom research procedures is widely used to employ numerous teaching drills by taking the needs and expectations of students and to reflect on the teaching practice. Therefore, this study discusses the importance of action research in teacher training process for developing reflective thinking skills of student teachers, fostering their enthusiastic and autonomous attitudes towards action research, and putting the theoretical knowledge into practice in a creative and self-assured way.

**Key words:** action research, thinking skills, self-reflection, autonomy, teacher training

## INTRODUCTION

Teachers who are responsible for teaching issues in the classroom need to have the authority of classroom management endowment by building up a close relationship and rapport with students. As well as classroom management and having a good relationship, a teacher is responsible for conducting classroom research for creating further opportunities to observe their own students during the course and for formulating hypotheses on actual experiences (Bailey, 2001). Action research as one of the widely employed classroom research procedures gives opportunities teachers to reflect on their own teaching practice. Action research is a form of self-reflective and systematic enquiry that leads to improvement in practice and is a collaborative act that promotes improvement in education (Stringer, 2007; Creswell, 2008). Therefore, in this study, the significance of action research in teacher education process in terms of reflective thinking is discussed.

### Action research cycles

Common features and benefits of action research have been defined and evaluated by the practitioners and theorists. Action research has been considered as a way of developing practical decisions and judgements by putting theoretical ideas into practice (Nunan & Bailey, 2009). Methodologists have agreed upon a set of common characteristics to define the concept. Action research as a group activity and a form of self-reflective inquiry (Kemmis & McTaggert, 1998) may be viewed as a standpoint in which the teacher is engaged in the investigation of the outcome of the practice. Action research provides teachers with opportunities to reflect upon their ideas as well as putting the theory into practice.

Some methodologists such as Genesee and Upshur (1998), Bailey (2001), Dörnyei, (2007) proclaim that collecting and interpreting data involves a clear and repeated cycle of procedures in which the researcher begins by planning an action to address a problem, an issue, or question in his or her own context. Accordingly, Cohen and his colleagues (2000) outline eight stages of action research process as followings:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Develop a draft proposal based on discussion and negotiation between interested parties.
3. Review what has already been written about the issue in question.
4. Restate the problem or reformulate hypotheses.
5. Select research procedures, resources, materials, methods, and so on.
6. Choose evaluation procedures.
7. Collect the data, analyze the data, and provide feedback to the research team.
8. Interpret the data, draw out inferences, and evaluate the project.

After gathering the data and reflecting on the data, the data-driven decision directs the teacher to take some actions (Dörnyei, 2007). In this respect, action research is the process of collecting information about classroom events for implementing certain follow-up actions. Subsequently, by monitoring the effects of the action, teachers try to understand the impact of the follow-up actions and observe whether any constructive changes appear in the teaching/learning process. When the diagnosed problems are treated through the action research, teachers may develop themselves by looking for further practical considerations.

As for language teachers, there are a number of issues to be tested and evaluated or treated through action research such as teaching language skills, learner language development, learner attitudes, material use, classroom tasks, testing and evaluation, and using appropriate teaching methods /techniques. Therefore, in teacher training process, action

research procedures need to be taught to student teachers to increase their awareness on the significance of action research and to prompt their enthusiastic behaviors for conducting action research in their future professional lives.

### Action research for increasing enthusiasm for teaching

Individuals' needs, expectations, purposes, age levels, linguistic levels, background knowledge, motivation levels, cultural and social milieu, environment from which they come all affect their enthusiasm for learning (Brown, 2007; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2012). Such factors may be effective on their future occupation as well. In other words, student teachers as learners of teacher training may shape their teaching behaviors by their learning behaviors. The main concern of second language teacher education is to train teachers as learners of teaching. In this process, teachers' knowledge and beliefs are constructed through the normative ways of thinking, talking, and acting that have been historically and culturally embedded in communities of practice in which they participate; this means the normative ways of acting, the values, assumptions, and attitudes that are embedded in the classroom where teachers were once students and in the schools where they work, shape their students, design the activities of L2 teaching (Johnson, 2009). Allowing student teachers to create their own products in the classroom environment may expand the normative ways of thinking and may make them more enthusiastic and autonomous. In teacher training programs, increasing student teachers' enthusiasm has a dual impact on both their learning and teaching behaviors. If they are not enthusiastic enough for teaching, the potential reasons of unenthusiastic behaviors need to be explored and they need to be trained on how to be enthusiastic for teaching. One of the best ways of searching out the potential reasons can be designing classroom research procedures by giving much emphasis on the decisions of student teachers as learners of teaching. Doing action research may also lead to changes in the classroom practice for motivating student teachers and may provide further opportunities for them to design activities. Through constant reflection on the changes, practical solutions to the problems can be offered (Dörnyei, 2007). A key feature of language teachers who are committed to ongoing development and change is that they are prepared to monitor the success or otherwise of their teaching practices on a regular basis by recognizing that they themselves must be the judge of their own performance (Senior, 2006).

### Method

In this study, action research that is expected to improve enthusiasm in teaching practice

was designed in the Methodology courses of a teacher training program. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis procedures were used in the study. To collect the qualitative data, introspective procedures such as observation reports, think aloud protocols to scrutinize the current thought processes, and talk aloud protocols to inspect additional thoughts and information were used. To collect the quantitative data, as elicitation procedures, a questionnaire was designed.

### Participants

The participants of the present study were the third year student teachers attending English Language Teaching –ELT- Department at a Turkish University. Thirty four student teachers participated in the study. The participants were recruited from the same class. The action research procedure continued for six weeks.

### Data Analysis

The qualitative data were reviewed and revisited many times during the data analysis process in order to allow the modifications of the preliminary conclusions. For quantitative data analysis, statistical programs were used.

### Action research steps in the present study

Step 1. Identify the problem

The action research cycle was initiated by identifying the problem "Enthusiasm of student teachers towards learning teaching is not satisfactory in the Methodology course."

Step 2. Design the action plan

The action plan was designed regarding the needs of student teachers and they were directed to take part in the course design through investigation and discussion sessions rather than being exposed to the pure theoretical lecture by the teacher trainer. During the action research cycle, the student teachers were invited to think aloud sessions to reflect on their current thoughts about the implementation. They were also invited to talk aloud meetings in order to encourage them to reflect their additional thoughts on their own practice.

- After completing the course sessions designed through action research, a questionnaire which was designed by the researcher was administered to the student teachers to elicit their ideas on the course design and their improvements.
- To elucidate probable ambiguities in the former data collection procedures and to gather verbal data at the end of the research cycle, the student teachers were interviewed through semi-structured interviews.

Step 3. Action procedure

In the methodology course, the student teachers were given opportunities to put the theoretical knowledge into practice. In this respect, action research provides a space for student teachers to practice in the classroom environment (Mertler, 2006). Thus, they would gain insights about how to focus on the teaching issues, diagnose the possible problems, and find out solutions to the problems. After each presentation session, they discussed the topic with their classmates. At the beginning, they had hesitations while reflecting their ideas and discussing the issues, but they gradually felt themselves more comfortable and became more confident without having any hesitation for making errors or mistakes in oral tasks.

Step 4. Collect the data

During the research process, think aloud and talk aloud protocols were used to learn about the participants' willingness to do research and the probable troubles they had. If they had any problems, solutions were offered by the classmates as well as by the researcher. Think aloud reports were collected in written form in the exam session. To verify the written think aloud data, a questionnaire developed by the researcher was administered to the participants.

Step 5. The Reflective practice

As mentioned above, by conducting action research, teachers can be involved in a constant reflective process in the teaching practice. The reflective practice in this study led to some modifications of the pre-designed activities and learning materials regarding the feedback from the student teachers' reflection reports. Talk aloud reports were collected via 5-minte pen and paper reflection tools. At the end of the process, the student teachers were asked to reflect their negative and positive views about the course design and the lecturer of the course. The purpose was to gather extra data for better understanding their expectations, their problems, learning preferences, and their learning needs as prospective teachers. The student teachers' progresses were reported regularly, and when they had any troubles with any topic, solutions were sought with the participation of all class members. Such efforts led to collaborative and cooperative learning.

**Think aloud protocols, talk aloud protocols**

Most of the participants had positive attitudes towards the classroom practice. They thought they increased their own confidence level throughout the process, and being an active member of the course motivated them to work eagerly. At the beginning, they were not so eager to participate in discussion sessions. However, they felt themselves more confident

while discussing the topics with their classmates throughout the process.

### Questionnaire

Another form of reflective inquiry was the use of questionnaires. The questionnaires comprised items about the benefits of the course in which action research was designed. In other words, it was used to judge the quality of the work. The data from the questionnaire were used to evaluate the motivating factor of the work and how self-confidence and autonomy were developed. The participants' comments were evaluated with percentile values.

**Table 1.**

**Student teachers' reflections about the Methodology course designed with action research**

| *In the methodology course, I think* | Agree % | no idea % | disagree % |
|---|---|---|---|
| I was able to carry out my tasks more efficiently | 86 | 4 | 10 |
| I was able to further my ideas | 72 | 3 | 25 |
| I was aware of my personal development | 51 | 7 | 42 |
| I took the control of my learning | 91 | 1 | 8 |
| I liked integrating in classroom discussions | 96 | - | 4 |
| I improved my proficiency in English during the classroom discussions | 86 | 5 | 9 |
| I spoke in English during the course time without hesitation | 81 | 9 | 10 |
| I could conduct teaching practice on my own | 55 | 17 | 28 |
| I felt myself more autonomous | 90 | 2 | 8 |
| I could freely reflect my ideas | 93 | 2 | 5 |
| I could find solutions to the problems I faced | 67 | 15 | 18 |
| I found the courses more enjoyable | 94 | - | 6 |
| My creativity got increased in due course | 88 | 3 | 9 |
| I learnt novel things day by day | 98 | 2 | - |
| I shifted from passive learner to active learner | 73 | 12 | 15 |
| I always looked forward the day when we had methodology courses | 88 | 10 | 2 |
| I got rid of bad-tempered mood | 76 | 8 | 16 |
| I was somehow anxious in the classroom | 19 | 9 | 72 |
| I did not want to participate in discussion sessions due to my English | 16 | 10 | 74 |
| I felt good because I know I did well | 72 | 20 | 8 |
| I felt disappointed when I did nothing | 71 | 12 | 17 |
| I gained self-confidence | 81 | 5 | 14 |
| I liked interacting with my classmates | 95 | 5 | - |
| Being in collaborative and cooperative learning context increased my self-efficacy | 88 | 2 | 10 |

As displayed in the table, the responses of the participants were mostly in positive

manner. At the end of the action research process, the participants' responses confirmed that most of them or nearly all benefited from classroom activities in terms of task implementation, classroom discussions, carrying out group work, interactive involvement in the classroom procedures, being a member of cooperative and collaborative learning, and selection of appropriate course materials. Additionally, they believed they developed their English competency by participating in discussion sessions, although a few declared their hesitation because of their English level.

As for the feelings of the participants about the course, they declared that the course was enjoyable and they were eager to participate in the course tasks. Nearly all participants declared that they looked forward the day when they had the course, though a few were anxious in the classroom. More than half stated they felt disappointed when they did nothing. Most declared they became aware of their personal development by taking the control of their learning in an autonomous manner; they felt they were able to reflect their ideas freely and further their ideas on novel things they learnt. Thus, they believed they shifted from passive mood to active mood in the course by increasing their level of self-confidence and creativity. The overall responses of the participants displayed their enthusiasm in the course participation.

### Discussion and Suggestions

In this study, action research was designed to assist the student teachers who lost interest towards the methodology course on the basis of the diagnosed problem. The findings of the study showed a connection between the research aim and the activities chosen to achieve those goals. They became more enthusiastic and worked cooperatively and collaboratively with their classmates. In the discussion sessions, the participants had the opportunity to reflect their ideas on the theoretical issues. Thus, they also got the opportunity of oral practice in English; and in some occasions, when they failed to continue in English, they used their mother tongue, Turkish. During the discussion sessions they negotiated their ideas and got feedback by both their classmates and the lecturer. In some cases, the action plan was not implemented well due to a few reluctant participants.

Many participants experienced intragroup and intergroup difficulties. However, discussions, individual participation, oral performance in English, and providing a space for reflecting their ideas and expectations on the course increased their awareness on the course topics. Additionally, they could evaluate themselves properly. They learned a lot by thinking about the course topics. All the findings from this small scaled research project display that

action research is a renew process for both students and teachers as well as a deep inquiry process in which innovation and renovation can be supplied through the self-reflection. The increase in self-confidence led to enthusiasm to increase and prompt autonomy. All those focused points could be evaluated as the necessary guidelines for a good practice in action research.

As for the implications of this study for teacher education courses, numerous benefits can be pointed out. The hallmark of a teaching professional is self-study. The student teachers in this research process were offered some occasions for implementing self-study. All those mentioned encouraging outcomes indicate that the courses in teacher training departments can be designed in accordance with such research projects to impose the sense of being autonomous on participants.

### Conclusion

To conclude, action research can allow the student teachers to learn by learning and develop professionally through reflection on learning and teaching as well as collaborative and cooperative participation. Thus, for teachers, conducting research in the classroom may build up a close relationship and contact with students and provide teachers with further opportunities to observe their own students in the classroom. The results of this study displayed the importance of action research in teacher training process for developing reflective thinking skills of student teachers, fostering their enthusiastic attitudes towards action research, and putting the theoretical knowledge into practice in a creative and self-assured way.

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