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Language Teachers as Researchers in Action: knowledge and research as a transformatory process

Yamith José Fandiño Parra*

«To meet the challenge (of developing new ways of thinking) we need to recognize the integrated nature of mind, body and spirit within the individual, and also find ways to integrate communities. A particular difficult task if we remain stuck in old ways of thinking *which* emphasize fragmentation and domination».
(McNiff, 2000)

RESUMEN

Este documento examina el compromiso que los profesores de inglés tenemos por considerar las teorías, los procesos, las percepciones, los valores, los intereses y los objetivos que poseemos para entender efectivamente el porqué y el cómo lograr hacer investigación y producir conocimiento con base en nuestro trabajo diario. La investigación acción se propone; no tan sólo como una herramienta para observar e investigar sistemáticamente temas o problemas que enfrentamos en nuestras clases; sino ante todo para entender el conocimiento y la investigación como un evento transformacional relacionado con los diferentes intereses de nuestra experiencia humana; el cual, en últimas, nos permite explorar y compartir nuestra humanidad común. El texto resalta y ejemplifica la planeación para la acción de Whitehead (1993) como principios organizadores y como metodología para un efectivo proceso de reflexión.

Palabras clave: EFL, profesores de inglés, investigación, conocimiento, Investigación Acción (IA).

LANGUAGE TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS IN ACTION: KNOWLEDGE AND RESEARCH AS A TRANSFORMATORY PROCESS

ABSTRACT

This reflective paper looks at the need for us, English teachers, to consider the theories, processes, perceptions, values, interests and purposes we hold in order to understand why and how we can do research and produce knowledge from our teaching practices. Action Research (AR) is proposed not just as a tool to systematically observe and investigate issues or problems we confront in our classes but more importantly as a way to understand knowledge and research as a transformational event that deals with different interests in human experience and that ultimately can enable us to explore and share our common humanity. It highlights and exemplifies Whitehead's (1993) Action Planning as organizing principles and methodology for our action reflection process.

Key Words: EFL, English Language Teachers, Research, Knowledge, Action Research (AR).

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As language teachers, learners, teacher trainers and researchers, we assume that language development can and does occur in classrooms. At times, however, this is little more than an assumption, and it is necessary to gather evidence to substantiate it. This evidence can be found as Van Lier (1998) states in the classroom itself, and teachers ourselves can play a decisive role in the investigation that, after all, is crucial to our profession. Nunan (1992) also suggests that we, language teachers, need to systematically observe and investigate issues or problems we confront in our daily work in order to understand our classrooms' realities. Similarly, McKernan (1991) says that we, as teachers, can become reflective practitioners by observing and analyzing systematically and critically our own actions and discourse. Thus, doing research in our own territory allows us, as teachers, not only to ensure that it commands the respect it deserves, but also to deepen our understanding of our own classrooms.

However, when thinking about doing teacher research or classroom research, we have to carefully consider the different elements at play because the way that we investigate issues and our reasons and intentions are often influenced by underlying considerations. There are different theories of knowledge creation and acquisition (epistemologies), there are different ways of doing research processes (methodologies), and researchers have different reasons and intentions for doing research, depending on how they perceive their own realities (ontologies). Some believe knowledge to be objective and value-free stripped of ethical considerations; others believe knowledge to be subjective and value-laden, conducted with social intent. Also, doing research is a political process. There are often many behind-the-scene decision-makers: policy makers decide that an issue needs to be investigated; a researcher is appointed to do the job; accounts allocate research funds. In consequence, it is vital for us to consider

the theories, the processes, the perceptions, the values, interests and purposes we hold in order to understand why and how we do research and produce knowledge.

Knowledge, as Habermas (1974) claimed, is definitely not a neutral activity done by an external mind; knowledge is always a product of a knowing subject who is driven by particular desires and interests. As a result, we language teachers doing research need to weigh up how our personal-social practices may reflect any of the three major sets of interests that Habermas developed: the technical, the practical, and the emancipatory. The technical concern is based on control of the environment through the production of technical knowledge. The practical interest focuses on understanding, meaning making and interpretation of others and their lifeworlds. The emancipatory interest helps us free ourselves from dominating forces, which control our knowledge and actions. We as knowing subjects need to reflect about the underpinning values and intentions that drive the research we want or need to do.

Similarly, research as a human practice to generate knowledge can be understood from the three-paradigm view that has emerged in social scientific and education research based on Habermas's typology of human interests. The three paradigms are the empirical, the interpretive and the critical theoretic, all of which hold different purposes and commitments as forms of enquiry. The empirical paradigm aims to test a hypothesis by demonstrating a cause-effect relationship. The interpretative paradigm aims to produce descriptions of what happens in a particular situation. The critical theoretic paradigm aims to explore freedom and power and find ways towards emancipation. A particular research approach would be used depending on which interest is prioritized. Thus, we language teachers as researchers need to disclose the particular paradigm we are using depen-

ding on which interest we want or need to prioritize in our research.

So far, it has been stated that language teachers doing research need to analyze and evince our theories of knowledge, our research processes, our perceptions of reality, our knowledge interests and our research paradigm. This analysis can certainly help us be reflective and critical when trying to make sense of our complexities of teaching, but it will not be enough. McNiff (2000) proposes we regard all the different and apparent separate ways of knowledge and research as aspects of a wider evolutionary, transformational process that widens from an instrumental focus on technicality to participatory forms in the practical, and then to forms of freedom in the emancipatory. Not only does this process need to continue to an interest of human relationship, but also it needs to recognize the aesthetic, the compassionate, the spiritual and the sacred. In other words, we need to aim to understand knowledge and research as a transformational process that deals with different interests in human experience and that requires an approach to enable us to explore and share our common humanity.

But, how can we language teachers start developing transformational process in and through our educative relationships? Following McNiff's ideas, it can be said that transformatory processes need an epistemology of practice that provides justification for our reasons and intentions, and a living out of our values and purposes as a conscious practice. This epistemology encourages people to offer explanations for what they do in terms of their own values and intentions. People are positioned as active knowers who are responsible for coming to their own insights about the nature of their lives and acting on that knowledge. Thus, this new paradigm entails ideas to do self-reflection and to work out action theories to explain how knowledge is experienced and produced in and through practice in everyday contexts.

Self-reflection and action theories can be done according to McNiff through action research (AR) mainly because it aims to find ways of improving social situations by improving all participants' personal understanding in order to take appropriate action collaboratively. Stenhouse, Whitehead and others also link the idea of AR with the idea of educational processes: action researchers show the process of the growth of their own understanding, and how that then has a potential influence in the lives of others. While AR, like all learning processes, begins in the individual mind-brain, it is always socially embedded. AR is always work with others. Those others' situations must be catered for, their opinions sought, and their sensitivities respected. Because of all these characteristics, AR can definitely help language teachers as researchers understand knowledge and research as a transformational process that deals with different interests and experiences through which we can explore and share our everyday practices and contexts.

But, how can we language teachers become action researchers to start developing transformational process in and through our educative relationships? McNiff(2000) advises us to adopt Whitehead's (1993) action planning as organizing principles and methodology for our action reflection process. This action planning consists of the following set of questions:

- ◆ What is my research interest? The main idea is to identify an area that we want to investigate because we feel at unease with it or because we want to give a solution.
- ◆ Why am I interested? We need to be reasonably clear about why we want to get involved in this area by basing our reasons for our actions on our values base, the things we believe in. Doing AR helps us identify the beliefs we have, check that we are justified in holding these beliefs, and then

work systematically towards doing our work more consciously.

- ◆ What kind of evidence will I gather to show why I am interested? There are many different data-gathering methods available, but data is not evidence. Data is just the initial information that shows the situation as it is. To show evidence of improvement and to support claims to knowledge, we need to identify criteria that will act as clear indicators about how the situation might have improved through action.
- ◆ What will I do about the difficulty? We need to choose one way we think is most appropriate to tackle our research interest taking into account what we can reasonably expect to achieve given the time, energy and other resources at our disposal.
- ◆ What kind of evidence will I gather to show that what I am doing is having an influence? We need to monitor our practice as we go, gathering data about what we do and how it seems to influence others. By doing it, we can show how an earlier scenario transforms into a later one, and how the later scenario then changes again, and so on.
- ◆ How will I explain that influence? We need to remember that we are the first focus of the enquiry we are doing because we are basically aiming to change ourselves and, in turn, to influence the situation we are part of. To determine the potential impact of our change on a situation, we need to check others' responses and reactions to us. By determining this impact, we are not saying, «These changes are happening because I did x, y, z.» Instead, we are saying, «I can show that certain changes took place and different relationships evolved as I changed my practice.»
- ◆ How will I ensure that any judgements I might draw are reasonably fair and accurate? We can

produce reasonable evidence to suggest that what we changed really did change, and that we are not just making it up. In saying that we have changed our work situation for the better, we are making a claim to knowledge that needs to be validated by others who can agree with us that our claim is not an empty one.

- ◆ How will I modify practice in the light of my evaluation? We could carry on working with the new change(s) we implemented because we would be working closer to our values through our work. However, an AR approach is not a path to a final solution, but a path to ongoing personal and social renewal and we would definitely keep on thinking and researching how to attend less than satisfactory situations.

In order to exemplify most of what I have said in this paper, I will consider the research project I am going to do at the Centro Colombo Americano this year, based on the master's seminar reflections at Universidad de La Salle in Bogota, Colombia.

First, I need to analyze and evince: «my theory of knowledge.» I would say that knowledge exists in a multiplicity of forms in and out of ourselves, but difficulties arise when we regard certain forms as more valid than, others. Just as McNiff(2000), I think we all interrelate and overlap propositional knowledge (the objective and value-free information about things and facts), procedural knowledge (the practical information base of personal-social interaction that refers both to procedures and capabilities), and tacit knowledge (the practical knowing-in-action that is embodied in dispositions and forms of life) to generate new and better forms of knowledge.

My perception of reality, as McNiff calls it, is linked to an ontology of becoming, but I have to admit some of my practices still are linked to an ontology

of being (reality as a frozen moment of structured time, the here and now, in which people are simply fixed entities with fixed interpretations of life experiences occupying personal-social roles and physical spaces in predetermined routes). With McNiff, I verify that reality is in a stage of flux, a constant process of becoming. Whatever is, it is constantly transforming into newer versions of it. There are no final outcomes, for any experience in any moment is already in a process of change; any answer is transforming into new questions.

McNiff states that the focus of scientific enquiry needs to shift from propositional forms of theory that deal with facts and information to dialectical forms of theory that show how people can offer explanations for what they do in terms of their own values and intentions. Consequently, *my research interest, research paradigm, and research processes* should help me make sense of the generative transformational processes of my experiences in real life. They should help me systematically and critically reflect and evaluate what I can do in order to change or improve. They should provide me with opportunities to develop personal theories, to participate in collaborative action enquiries, and to live out ideologies of democracy and equality. In brief, they should have potential for my own renewal and also for wider social renewal.

For the time being, I believe *my research interest* moves back and forth between the practical interest (understanding, meaning making and interpretation of others and their lifeworlds) and the emancipatory interest (freeing ourselves from dominating forces, which control our knowledge and actions). I can also see that *my research paradigm* tends to be interpretative-oriented (producing descriptions of what happens in a particular situation), but sometimes gets distorted by the empirical paradigm (testing a hypothesis by demonstrating a cause-effect relationship). My *research processes* are definitely

qualitative-based because of my undergraduate formation in human sciences. I believe ethnography and action research are very appropriate research approach in language education because they enable participants not only to reflect on their own educational culture and problematic or unsatisfactory situations but more importantly to gain critical insights into personal and social practices, behaviors, and beliefs in order to interact successfully and to improve collaboratively.

What is my research interest? I want to investigate an integration of Socio-affective Language Learning Strategies (SLLS) into classroom contents and everyday learning and see how SLLS help teachers and beginner students communicate and interact more and better.

Why am I interested? When analyzing language teaching process, researchers commonly try to explain the origins, consequences and variation in teacher/student activity, teacher/student interaction and student learning outcomes by focusing on characteristics of the learning/teaching environment that primarily concern content and methodology. I want to address socio-affective aspects that can have an effect on language learning/teaching (aspects that concern why and how we teachers and our students engage and perform in communicative-based activities), I want to investigate what consequences familiarity and use of socio-affective learning strategies may have on the development of speaking ability, and ultimately I want to see how we teachers and our students' practices, behaviors, and beliefs can change when we improve our engagement and performance in communicative-based activities (CBA).

What kind of evidence will I gather to show why I am interested? First of all, I want to characterize how CBA are worked with in the textbook that we use at the Centro Colombo Americano. I would

do an analysis of the type of exercises, objectives, procedures, and outcomes. Also, I would try to characterize through non-participant observation how two groups of beginner students normally engage and perform when doing CBA. Additionally, I would get an idea about students and teachers' use and awareness of SLLS through a semi-structured interview format and inventory. I would then characterize the CBA proposed by the book and done by the teachers. Next, I would identify strengths and weaknesses in the students' engagement and performance in CBA and I would try to determine how teachers' familiarity and expertise with SLLS influence or determine students' communicative engagement and performance. Finally, I would analyze and question the data as a professional collective with my supervisor or members of the academic department at the CCA to determine priority area(s) for action in SLLS and to start classifying factors that enhance or hinder the use of SLLS.

What will I do about it? I will craft collaborative SLLS sessions and activities for teachers to implement when working on CBA. I will use as instruments detailed collaborative SLLS activities and sessions plans for teachers to implement and student-friendly worksheets about SLLS for self-assessment. I will then implement collaborative SLLS sessions and activities with two different groups to assess the implementation of the selected actions and try to find similarities and differences in teachers and students' perceptions and practices.

How will I explain that influence? Building on theories of communicative language teaching, strategy instruction, social constructivism and learner-centeredness, I will explain through collaborative language teaching how the teaching of socio-affective learning strategies may enhance the speaking ability development of beginner students, but I will mainly show how collaborative activities

and sessions change and/or improve students and teachers' practices, attitudes, and understanding of engaging and performing in CBA.

How will I ensure that any judgements I might draw are reasonably fair and accurate? I will make an effort to include different types of data. These will include my researcher journal entries based on non-participant observation techniques, students' and teachers' interviews, inventories completed by the student and teacher participants. In addition to the researcher, two colleagues will be involved with implementing and assessing the project. They will write personal journals, complete inventories and answer interviews sporadically to supply additional information so that their perspectives on similar group performances can be compared and included in the research. Additionally, I will work under the guidance and support of my supervisor and the academic staff of the Adult English Program of the Centro Colombo Americano so that I can get as many perspectives and suggestions as possible. This would hopefully be just the beginning of an ongoing project that could include in the future other kinds of language learning strategies and other kinds of language learning approaches.

To conclude, I can say that we, language teachers as researchers, need to investigate our own practice in action. We need to become involved in understanding the influences that shape our teaching lives and resolve to position ourselves where possible as strategically thinking agents in relation with others (first, our students; next, our co-workers, and finally our teaching community). Our new understanding and position can then lead to significant personal growth and such growth could certainly have the potential to influence the personal growth of others with whom we are in relation with, and this commitment to shared growth has an exponential quality that can strengthen a sense of community to meet social renewal. The

transformative research element of action research provides a disciplined framework for helping us make sense of our own learning. We can monitor our actions and we can reflect on them (and learn). This monitoring and reflecting on practice can generate a theory that will be our personal theory of

practice; which will ultimately inform our future actions. This new epistemology of practice invites us to free ourselves of stereotypical behaviors and mental models, and really see ourselves as being full of amazing potentials and capacities to change and improve our teaching realities.

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