INNOVATION AND CHANGE IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

Abstract

We suggest the introduction of Action Research and Case Studies as a regular practice in schools to help teachers adapt to innovation and change. We describe the impact of change on a given school culture and the reaction of teachers and students. The results of an Action Research project and a Case Study carried out at a private secondary School are presented. They highlighted the importance of collaborative research as a tool in teacher development, student success in language learning and alignment with school culture.

Aims and Background to the Research

The fast speed of change at every turn and also in the field of education calls for practitioners ready to adapt successfully to the constant demands of the world around us. We can not solve this problem but we can learn to live with it. We will suggest using research as a regular feature in schools so that we face problems and they become our friends. Teachers should be re-trained and further developed to keep up with the demands for autonomy and the challenges posed by educational reform and the constant addition to the load of theories and new educational trends used.

The aim of research was to find the relation between a minor bottom up innovation in the classroom - changes in technique, approach or task - and the factors which enabled the teachers involved to deconstruct and reconstruct their practice successfully and purposefully applying change and researching on it. In this way research becomes a part of the system and it is a tool for teacher change and long-term development. This seems a new approach to the problem of professional development, a search that is crucial at the moment.

The questions that triggered research were:

1 Is it possible to start teacher change from a minor innovation in classroom practice?

2 Can this change be effective and long lasting?

3 Can change in approach and techniques grow into a more encompassing innovation at school level?

4 Will the change thus started affect school culture and produce positive results in the long run?
Trying to find answers to these questions was the aim and focus of this study. That is, apart from researching change, we were also researching the use of research as a tool to implement that change. The project went all the way into creating a loop, research being the means to development and knowledge. Researchers have concluded that it is essential for teachers to develop the capacity to take control of change, which in turn is closely connected to school improvement.

A second question investigated was teachers’ awareness of the principles that inform their practice - the intangible - and the bearing this may have on actual classroom presentation and evaluation techniques, behaviour and results. Several authors (Dalin, 1998; Morrison, 1998) insist on the value of research as a professional development tool that helps identify teachers’ agendas - their own theory of practice - and integrate their teaching and learning with professional growth.

Another very important issue underlying research was harmonising individual and organisational goals which are an integral part of school culture. The more teachers and students align to it the better the results. Focusing on change directed to the teaching learning process and informed by school culture - values and beliefs that underpin it, as recognised in most of the literature - raised students’ achievement.

Educational research can be carried out by complete strangers to the school environment, in which case results will be eventually communicated to teachers and if they decide to adopt the suggestions, change will be imposed top-down. Or it can be done by the staff and the principal, as researcher and then the process itself will be beneficial for all the people involved.

Innovation in the classroom can never be just a question of implementing a recommendation derived from research. It is always a process of negotiation, involving the teacher's overall educational ideology, the learner's expectations and local constraints that determine what is feasible. (Ellis, 1990: 68)

This process mentioned by Ellis develops naturally in the course of an Action Research project or in the development of a Case Study. In the particular case we are referring to here the headteacher started the project and four members of the staff accepted the challenge - and the extra work load - and embarked on an eight month period of data gathering and analysis.

Research Methods
Each one of the research methods used, during before and after the trial period - audio and video recording, interviews, questionnaires, group discussions, photograph analysis, stimulated recall, diary writing, class observation and the triangulation of some of these - meant acquiring experience of the proper handling of research tools and observing results through constant analysis for the teachers involved.

At this point students' collaboration had been requested and they all seemed to understand the purpose of research and were ready to help. They enjoyed being interviewed or observed because they felt their opinions were valued and their reactions counted for the teachers and the authorities.

This type of research is called insider research. One of its advantages is that the head's knowledge of the bounded system, and her access to every possible school facility and resource is crucial for the success of research since both researcher and participants work together through the different stages of the project. Thus every step in the process produces insights and a growing awareness of the students' needs and motivation, of the characteristics of the members of the group, differences and similarities with other staff members, and of the constraints or possibilities inherent to the school culture. As Fullan says (1993: vii) “when you go deeper, you go different.”

In this Case Study we addressed the problem of change both as applied to experimenting with new materials and to developing new habits and cognitive perspectives. The practitioners consciously adopted new techniques in their classes over two periods of three months each, during which they received training and support to carry out the research. In the first period each chose a different technique, in the second they all used a 'Focus on Form' perspective with all the groups, which would affect the quality of the information obtained and act as a test on the first set of results.

Data Analysis

The data analysis led us into shifting focus from the use of innovative materials or techniques in the classroom to a growing awareness of other problems and possibilities connected to teachers' beliefs and assumptions or with school culture, which had a direct bearing upon student's language acquisition or exam success, and ultimately with the handling of change. One of the crucial issues was teacher reaction to change, its bearing on teacher classroom practice and on school culture.
Little by little questions of class management, teacher language and metalanguage, learner motivation and response, the learning environment, learning aims, lesson planning, openings and closures, patterns of interactions, timing and pace and evaluation arose after watching the class videos. Teachers noticed certain mannerisms, unnecessary repetition, irrelevant recurrent expressions or movement in the classroom they would definitely like to change.

Likewise a number of apparently minor issues related to school environment - constant noise from defective fans, desks screwed to the floor which impeded group work, big boys in small desks - affecting learning negatively became apparent and were solved almost immediately. As a result student concentration and commitment increased, teachers were able to focus on real language acquisition problems. Without specifically working on it we were tapping on the problem of best practices.

As people talk, try things out, inquire, re-try, - all of this jointly - people become more skilled, ideas become clearer, shared commitment gets stronger (Fullan. 1993: 31)

This is what teachers have experienced in the process of designing materials, delivering the classes, evaluating results, attending meetings, analysing data and drawing conclusions. When we started we did not foresee we would end up in a different place.

Unanticipated outcomes seemed to be a normal part of the scene at the end of the process. The more teachers invested the more satisfied they were, because commitment and pride go hand in hand. Trying new techniques, designing new materials and methods of assessment to capture what students had learnt, getting together to discuss what we were doing broadened our repertoire of instructional strategies and engaged us in a process of knowledge creation. Producing changes at an individual level and above all developing the ability to start a change when needed is a top priority.

Participants had a very different outlook on the techniques employed to design materials, on the results of the project, even on the relevance of theoretical constructs. Still diversity proved valuable. A tolerance for trial and error seemed to develop and to be accepted. A heightened awareness of the importance of planning and problem-solving and a focus on outcomes arose at the very end. Morrison (1998) insists that if change is the result of a need, it is welcome by practitioners and students alike.

The description of the impact of research on teacher and researcher change as well as on student and school environment shows implications, insights and drawbacks. One of the disadvantages of insider research is that as the
headteacher is the authority staff and students are accountable to, she may find it difficult to use certain research methods without unduly influencing participants' behaviour. Besides being part of a problem makes us lose perspective.

However being conscious of drawbacks is the first step towards finding possible solutions. On the one hand the application of clear ethical principles and a careful delegation of tasks became necessary. Peers exercise beneficial pressure and in this way participants do not suffer what might be felt as management control. On the other if we notice that students do not feel at ease when the head is observing a lesson, we can arrange for other participant teacher to observe or even an outside researcher or another teacher who is not part of the research group may be called to collaborate. Then by using triangulation we can check the results of the observation with a taped lesson of the same group of students. Likewise an outsider can go over questionnaires or even help in the final process of data analysis and interpretation, if we feel we need a more objective observer. Sometimes these decisions are hampered by financial problems that are beyond the power of teachers or researchers to solve.

Documenting change in language acquisition is undoubtedly a lengthy process. However growing awareness, constant reflection and the implementation of innovations was definitely an end product and a spin off of this Case Study. Introducing controled innovation is in itself beneficial; a change of technique when students seem unable to understand a point, a change of attitude when we fail to communicate, doing things different is enlightening. And this research project helped teachers become aware of the value of introducing new techniques and of changing the focus of information to obtain better results, to enhance motivation or to produce insights. Simultaneously the participants developed further their skills of observation and analysis. The value given to collaborative work and open sharing leading to awareness of secret agendas and mental constructs marked possitive changes in their classroom practice.

Results

We realised that what we started as a minor technical innovation had a bearing on a multiplicity of elements inherent to teaching and learning. Needs analysis and teaching objectives became central in our findings. Action was the result of concentrating on problems, designing original materials to cope with them and eventually success was the result and with it came shared dynamic interaction between teachers and head. For we agree with Derek and Glover (2000: 8) that
In fast-changing educational settings, both teachers and managers need the synergy deriving from an interplay of skills, knowledge and judgement to determine how students and staff might maximise their potential.

In this respect it was like an Action Research project. In a Case Study we set out to document a Case that can later on be used by other practitioners to shed light on their own practice. In an Action Research project we start from a problem and by doing research try to find a way to possible solutions.

The part of the process that can be measured is the set of strategies we have developed to fit our practice to school culture and to student's needs. In the same way a few key elements related to language learning have been highlighted. Besides simply combining strategies that were being used by different participants individually constituted a major change.

In turn sharing ideas about teaching and learning yields shared commitment. This deeper communication results in successfully helping students reach their learning goals. Adolescents perceive integration and feel supported. Besides having taken part in a process which took into account their opinions and ideas helped them develop greater autonomy, become more self-assured and trust their teachers more. Although second language acquisition is an individual process and progress can not be measured in whole groups, in this case the networking of effects was made apparent by a collective change of attitude toward school teachers and authorities. This positive change undoubtedly helped to improve student's academic performance.

What we are actually doing is researching research. We see researching research as a starting point which will continue to evolve as long as participants are supported, encouraged to build strong relationships, capable of designing effective and innovative teaching materials adapted to student's needs and of evaluating results accurately. These are some of the skills and capabilities the research work developed in the participant teachers simultaneously helping the researcher confirm through a hands-on experience the potential of research as a tool for change.

Dealing with issues of change implies presenting a creative, transforming picture of reality in the parties involved. The implementation and research of a classroom change produced changes in the participants' vision which in turn provided input for further change.

As you follow a process of continually converting your tacit knowledge about change into explicit change knowledge, refining and marrying it with insights from the change literature, you begin to craft your own theories of change. You become a critical consumer of innovation and reform as you increase your capacity to manage the
change process, including tolerance of certain degree of uncertainty, and greater trust. (Fullan, 1999: 29)

Bibliography


Biographical Note

María Inés Artigas de Cambiasso is a graduate teacher of English from the IES en Lenguas Vivas 'Juan R. Fernández and holds an Advanced Diploma and an MA from UEA, UK. She has been engaged in teacher development in private and state schools and colleges. She is Head of the English Department at Champagnat School and holds a chair at IES en Lenguas Vivas (Translator Training College) and at School of Lenguas Vivas 'J. F. Kennedy' (Teacher Training College).

Presenters
María I. A. de Cambiasso
Luciano Camio
Josefina Blanco de Ocantos
Miriam Ozores

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