



Professional development through action research: Impact on self-efficacy



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study that adopted a mixed method research design to explore the impact of action research on English language teacher candidates' self-efficacy beliefs in a 14-week course in which action research was utilised. The course was designed to help prospective teachers understand and improve their classroom practice and adopt an inquiry-based approach to learning and teaching while contributing to their knowledge base. The participants were given the opportunity and encouraged to take a more active role in their professional development. The study involved the use of self-efficacy scales, reflective journals and a course evaluation form to collect data about the participants' self-efficacy belief changes and learning experiences in the course. The results showed that the participants experienced growth in teaching efficacies, increased self-awareness, improved problem-solving skills and enhanced autonomous learning. These results show that action research is a valuable tool to develop pre-service English language teacher candidates' self-efficacy.

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1. Introduction

One of the major concerns in teacher education is improving the quality of prospective teachers' learning experiences. [Korthagen \(2010\)](#) states that, "in order to learn anything during teacher education, student teachers must have personal concerns about teaching or they must have encountered concrete problems" (p. 671). It has been well established that learning takes place only if the learner has personal goals ([Skemp, 1979](#), as cited in [Korthagen & Kessels, 1999](#)). A growing body of international research advocates that teachers should engage in inquiries about their teaching practice ([Zhang, Lundeberg, McConnell, Koehler, & Eberhardt, 2010](#)). In addition, it has been suggested that involving teacher candidates in researching about their own practices is an effective way to enhance their professional development as it promotes reflection ([Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999](#)). The view of teachers as reflective practitioners suggests that by doing research, candidates become active knowledge producers while they continuously address problems encountered during field experiences in order to meet the learning needs of their students ([Darling-Hammond, 2006](#)). Action research has been found to be an effective professional developmental tool that can promote the necessary active involvement, reflection and development of problem-solving skills that lead to change ([Carr & Kemmis, 1986](#)).

While the importance of action research has been widely acknowledged in general teacher education research, there has been a growing body of studies on its use in English language teacher education research ([Barkhuizen, 2009](#); [Borg, 2006](#),

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2007, 2010; Borg & Liu, 2013; Burns, 2010, 2011; Gao, Barkhuizen, & Chow, 2011). However, Barkhuizen and Borg (2010) note that much of the work has been weakened by ill-defined research agendas and lack of a programmatic approach to conducting research. In addition, it has become necessary to examine the impact of research on teachers' professional development in different social and cultural contexts (Borg, 2006; Borg & Liu, 2013). For these reasons, we reported on a study that examined impact of action research on Turkish pre-service English language teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in a 14-week course in which action research was utilised. In this paper, the idea of self-efficacy is used as a window through which to examine the impact of involvement in the action research experience on the professional development of student teachers in the context of language teacher education.

2. Action research and self-efficacy

Action research is a methodology that encourages teachers to ask questions about theory and practice and to evaluate their teaching through systematic inquiry (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995). Multiple models of action research exist (Rearick & Feldman, 1999) sharing the same core elements (Goodnough, 2006). The process begins with the identification of a concern. Then, the practitioner investigates issues related to the concern and plans and implements a change designed to address the concern. At the heart of action research is reflection: practitioners involved in action research are expected to explore what they are doing, why they are doing it and what the impact has been after doing it (Mertler, 2012). The teacher research model used in the present study (based on the approaches described by Carr and Kemmis (1986)) is practical action research. In this model, teachers are actively engaged in the process of critically exploring their own classroom contexts and working toward established classroom-driven goals.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) view this type of research as “a different knowledge base; one that is not designed so that teachers function simply as objects of study but also as architects of study and generators of knowledge” (p. 2). An important aspect of action research is that it helps create personally relevant and meaningful knowledge (Kennedy, 1997). Furthermore, it contributes to the enhancement of teachers' understanding of their own practices (Kincheloe, 2003). An increasing number of studies on the impact of action research in teacher education show significant positive benefits. Teachers become more reflective, critical and analytical about their practices in the classrooms (Keating, Diaz-Greeberg, Baldwin, & Thousand, 1998; Rock & Levin, 2002). They recognise and become better equipped to articulate their personal theories of teaching, explaining what they are doing and why (Chant, Heafner, & Bennett, 2004). Furthermore, they develop greater awareness of and appreciation for systematic inquiry, reflection, action and change (Kitchen & Stevens, 2008). They also become more aware of the diverse learning needs of students (Goodnough, 2011), build their confidence and gain stronger knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum (Goodnough, 2011; Rock & Levin, 2002). Moreover, they develop the judgement and inclination needed to employ their skills and knowledge in the classroom (Lattimer, 2012). Finally, their beliefs in themselves as teachers improve, and their general and personal teaching efficacies grow (Henson, 2001).

Teacher efficacy is a construct that stems from Bandura's social cognitive theory and can be defined as “beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). The conceptualisation of self-efficacy has evolved over time. Recent research generally divides it into two areas: outcome expectancies (i.e. teachers' beliefs about the effects of specific teaching actions on students) and efficacy expectancies (i.e. teachers' beliefs about their own ability to conduct certain teaching actions) (Wheatley, 2002, p. 6).

Bandura (1986, 1997) suggests four possible sources of teachers' sense of efficacy. First, mastery experiences (i.e. failures and success) refer to actual teaching accomplishments with students. While successful experiences tend to strengthen teachers' beliefs, failures tend to weaken them (although some researchers (e.g. Wheatley, 2002, 2005; Wyatt, 2011) argue that it depends on the degree of task specificity). Second, vicarious experiences involve observing others perform the same task and conducting self-evaluation based on those observations. Third, verbal persuasion refers to receiving realistic appraisals from others. Positive appraisals increase a teacher's self-efficacy while negative appraisals can lower it. Finally, psychological and emotional arousal refers to the feeling of joy or pleasure a teacher derives from conducting a successful lesson. Teachers' sense of efficacy is found to influence a variety of areas, for example, student achievement and motivation (Gibson & Dembo, 1984), teachers' classroom management strategies (Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990), teachers' openness to adoption of innovation (Guskey, 1988), the effort teachers invest in their teaching and the goals they set (Woolfolk Hoy & Burke-Spero, 2005), teachers' resilience in the face of setbacks (Gibson & Dembo, 1984), teachers' use of group work (Wyatt, 2010), and teachers' being less critical of students who make errors (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Furthermore, within the context of EFL teaching, a relationship has been found between teacher self-efficacy and English language proficiency (Chacon, 2005) and instructional skills (Goker, 2006).

Self-efficacy building experiences then clearly can contribute to teacher candidate professional development. Correspondingly, using action research in the classroom with its many attendant benefits can be viewed as a powerful teaching methodology to help enhance self-efficacy beliefs. Of note, Henson (2001) states that teacher efficacy can be cultivated through the use of action research while Bruce, Esmonde, Ross, Dookie, and Beatty (2010) claim that participation in professional learning opportunities increases teacher candidates' personal level of competence.

A point worth mentioning here is that, in fact, a great majority of the previous studies on self-efficacy have assumed that self-efficacy beliefs are a fixed trait, and thus, have measured them only once. Very few studies (Henson, 2001; Mulholland & Wallace, 2001; Ross, 1994; Wyatt, 2013) have explored changes in student teachers' beliefs by measuring self-efficacy beliefs more than once over time as the current study does.

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