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*Editor*

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**DIDÁCTICA DE LA ENSEÑANZA DE LENGUAS  
MODERNAS**

# **ACTION RESEARCH AS A MEANS OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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## **Introduction**

Teaching is one of the professions that has a far-reaching influence on the society. It is a complex and difficult mission. With their work teachers can have an influence on their student's life through their teaching of a subject, as well as through their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, passion and motivation. "Teachers... are a bridge, not an endpoint, for all the boys and girls (and men and women) who come into their lives...the teachers job is to help students build a self, to create the entity that will be constant company for life. That's why the best teachers listen to students and draw out their thinking, but don't try to solve every problem. That's why the best teachers empathize and care deeply about students as individuals, but never lower standards or expectations."<sup>1</sup>

"Teaching will be a better job when we recognize that the world has changed, and the job of a teacher is to help young people learn to ask good questions, not regurgitate answers. With the flood of information around them, young people need help separating wheat from chaff. And it's no longer the teacher's job to tell them the difference, but to give them the skills to inquire, to dig deeper."<sup>2</sup>

Preparation of a teacher who is able to reflect, plan and work towards an ongoing professional development starts at university where the teachers of tomorrow are shaped. This is where individuals become aware of the necessity of a lifelong learning as well as of individual work towards ongoing professional growth.

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<sup>1</sup> Merrow, J. *The Influence of Teachers: Reflections on Teaching and Leadership*. New York, LM Books, 2011, pág. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

## **The need for an ongoing professional development**

The secret of success in the profession of teaching is to continually learn and grow professionally. Professional development is defined as a continuous learning process in which teachers undertake voluntarily to learn how to match their teaching to the learning needs of their students. Professional development is not a single isolated event, but rather an ongoing process of professional reflection and growth which develops gradually and gives the best results when sustained over time and when focused on knowledge and skills matching the changing demands of jobs and occupations, workplace organization and working methods.

Today we need more different skills than we did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the educational system and institutions have a crucial role to play in developing those skills and preparing the people of tomorrow. Teachers aim at equipping learners with a wide range of skills that they will need to live, study and work in a world that is in constant evolution. Even high-quality initial teacher education cannot provide teachers with knowledge and skills necessary for teaching during their entire life. Thus, teachers are urged not only to acquire new knowledge and skills but also to develop them continuously.

The European Council held in Lisbon in March 2000 signaled an important moment for the direction of policy and action in the European Union. It concluded that "Europe has indisputably moved into the Knowledge Age".<sup>3</sup> The way people learn, live and work is changing very quickly. As a result at the Lisbon European Council it was confirmed that "the move towards lifelong learning must accompany a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society."<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the education and professional development of every teacher needs to be seen as a lifelong task. "To equip the teaching body with the skills and competences needed for its new roles, it is necessary to have both quality initial teacher education and a coherent process of continuous professional development to keep teachers up to date with the skills required in a knowledge-based society."<sup>5</sup>

"Furthermore, as with any modern profession, teachers have the responsibility to extend the boundaries of professional knowledge through a commitment to reflective practice, through research, and through systematic engagement in

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<sup>3</sup> *European Commission's Memorandum of Lifelong Learning*. Brussels 2000, pág. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibíd.*

<sup>5</sup> *Teachers' Professional Development, Europe in Comparison*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Union 2010, pág. 12.

continuous professional development from the beginning to the end of their careers.”<sup>6</sup>

There is a crucial characteristic of language which teachers sometimes fail to remember or underestimate; language is dynamic, fluid and changes continually. Thus, the best teachers are those who are also dynamic in the way they develop; always focusing on updating their knowledge of new teaching methodologies and approaches. These teachers are introduced to new methodology and theory to ensure they are kept informed of developments and take an active role in their own professional development.

Good teachers are, after all, students themselves.

### **How does action research contribute to professional growth?**

Action research is an expanding field which is commanding significant education attention. It is a methodology of paramount importance in teacher education programs as it offers an approach to introducing innovations in teaching and learning. Action research combines action with research; the term describes the integration of implementing a plan (action) with developing an understanding of the effectiveness of this implementation (research). “Lewin is credited with coining the term ‘action research’ to describe work that did not separate the investigation from the action needed to solve the problem”.<sup>7</sup> In education, action research is also known as teacher research. It is a method used by teachers to improve both their practice and their students’ learning outcomes. Kemmis and Mc Taggart argue that “to do action research is to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously than one usually does in everyday life.”<sup>8</sup> Action research is a way to grow and learn by making use of one’s own experiences.

As Norton states “reflective practice is inextricably related to continuing professional development which, in the current climate in higher education, puts us firmly at the centre of our own learning and self-development. The action research process encourages academics to take control of their own professional development by being active learners”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Teachers’ Professional Development, Europe in Comparison*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Union 2010, pág. 12.

<sup>7</sup> McFarland, K.P., & Stansell, J.C. “Historical perspectives”. In L. Patterson, C.M. Santa, C.G. Short, & K. Smith (Eds.), *Teachers are researchers: Reflection and action*. Newmark, DE, International Reading Association, 1993, pág. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Kemmis, S. and Mc Taggart, R. *The Action Research Planner* (third edition) Geelong, Victoria, Australia, Deakin University Press, 1992, pág. 10.

<sup>9</sup> NORTON, L.S. *Action Research in Teaching and Learning. A practical guide to conducting pedagogical research in universities*. London, Routledge, 2009.

The report on European Profile for Language Teacher Education-A Frame of Reference, proposes that the foreign language teacher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should include certain elements of initial and in-service education among which, continuous improvement of teaching skills as part of in-service education (element 10) and ongoing education for teacher educators (element 11). As part of their in-service or continued education teachers should develop skills in action research, reflective practice, creative use of materials, resources and new learning environments and mentoring. "Qualified teachers benefit from keeping a "learning diary" to reflect on their experience and identify areas that might benefit from action research projects. Learning further skills in action research would be a key part of continued education, since it is easier to solve a problem if it is one's own."<sup>10</sup> Action research also encourages teachers to find new ways of doing things.

Teachers use action research because: it deals with their own problems, not someone else's; it can start immediately, or whenever necessary, providing immediate results; it provides them with the opportunities to better understand, and therefore improve, their educational practices; as a process action research promotes the building of stronger relationship among staff; importantly, action research provides educators with alternative ways of viewing and approaching educational questions providing a new way of examining their own practices.<sup>11</sup>

As action research is a process by which teachers work alone or in collaboration with colleagues to examine their own teaching and prepare their own plans and goals for self-development it is considered as an important issue to raise the quality of teaching in all levels of school. When teachers have the chance to prepare and participate in professional development activities which they create on their own or in collaboration, they develop ownership over the learning process and their learning is more likely to bring student success.

### **Action research compared to everyday actions and academic research**

- Action research is not just a simple way of thinking; it is not thinking about teaching in general. "Action research enables us to reflect on our teaching in a systematic way"<sup>12</sup> (Parker, 1997).

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<sup>10</sup> Kelly, M., Grenfell, M., Allan, R., Kriza, C., Mcevoy, W. *European Profile for Language Teacher Education-A Frame of Reference*. September 2004, pág. 39.

<sup>11</sup> Adopted from Metler, C.A. & Charles, C.M. *Introduction to education research*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, Mass, 2008 pág. 308.

<sup>12</sup> Parker, S. *Reflective Teaching in the Postmodern World: A manifesto for Education in Postmodernity*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1997.

- It is not just problem-solving. It does not only solve problems in a practical way. Action research involves problem-posing as well.
- The training you need to carry out formal research is extensive compared to action research which needs little training.
- Engaging in formal research means reviewing previous findings and extending them; in action research teachers deal with problems faced in a classroom or school. Action research is not carried to learn the reason why certain things are done; it is to investigate about the way how we can improve things.
- Results of academic research have theoretical significance; action research outcomes are practical. As Sagor has observed "The topics, problems, or issues pursued (in academic research) are significant, but not necessarily helpful to teachers on the front line."<sup>13</sup>
- Formal research aims at providing knowledge that may be generalized to a wider audience; actions research provides solutions or improves teaching performances and practices locally.
- Action research is not research done by other people; it is research done by certain people on their proper work aiming at improving their performance.
- Action research is conducted with the students and/or members of a school community; a formal research is carried with random representatives of large populations.
- An action research is quick; a formal research takes longer periods of time.

### **Case study: organizing project work**

The following research action was conducted in a group of 28 teacher students in the Master Program in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana. By comparing and contrasting the teacher's belief about organizing project work with the actual practice, we wanted to see whether there is a discrepancy between beliefs and classroom practices while organizing project work effectively. Students were appointed in groups of four to work in the class and they were given long-term group-based projects to carry out. Firstly, some reading on project work and organizing project work was done. Students were provided with a range of information resources and had face-to-face meetings with the teachers. Five university teachers were also involved in the research. They contributed by

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<sup>13</sup> Sagor, R. *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1992, pág. 3.

answering questions on organizing project work and their roles in organizing and conducting project work with their students.

As action research is considered to be a cycle of investigating including certain steps, we started the work by:

#### 1. Identifying the issue

Each research cycle begins when we ask a question on an issue that is of our interest. The question should be a higher-order question, not a yes/no question. We were interested to know about the new roles a teacher has to adopt in organizing project work. Answers to this question will directly contribute to teacher's professional development. Having focused on an area of interest then we moved to the next step

#### 2. Review literature and read on the topic.

Reading similar project as well as professional reading on the same topic was useful. Then we proceeded with the

#### 3. Collection and organization of data

During this action research we utilized data-collection methods such as classroom observations, teacher interviews, student interviews, collection of writing samples of students' work, performances, learning diaries/journals for individual work, teachers' plans and journals.

#### 4. Interpretation of data

We made observations on our practice and evaluated its effects. Evidence was analyzed and the findings were collated. This was followed by a discussion of the findings with colleagues for further interpretation. The results of the observations indicated that educator's role in project work should be less dominant. Teachers are facilitators and not the only source of knowledge or provider of all solutions. Teachers should assist project work as fellow learners, as coordinators.

#### 5. Reflection

The final step taken was reflecting on the results drawn from the previous stage; a kind of evaluation of the first cycle of the process. Implementing the findings and the new strategies discovered is what followed. It is important that only one variable be changed; if several changes are made at the same time, it is difficult to determine which action is responsible for the outcome.

The following table presents that part of the questionnaire which is related with the role of the teacher in action research. It shows the students' answers before the action research and after.

Table 1: *Transformed teacher roles*

<b>Role of teacher</b>	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>
Designer	20	9
Leader	5	0
Listener	28	28
Catalyzer	6	25
Facilitator	18	22
Observer	22	27
Teacher	15	3
Planner	23	5

This action research proved to be helpful to both the university teachers and the teacher students participating in the research. They acquired practical skills of organizing and participating in a project work. Working in groups was one of the problems that the action research helped being identified. There were noticed disagreements about task divisions, dominance of some students over the others as well as a feeling of competitiveness. We concluded that as teachers we have to clarify it better to the students that project work is directed towards cooperation rather than competitiveness. And it is our job to foster a friendly atmosphere. The other teachers shared with us strategies they had used to solve this problem successfully.

Engaging in action research influenced our collaboration with other teachers. It raised our willingness to communicate with colleagues and exchanging experiences, ideas and practices helped to better understand the role the teacher has in organizing project work. They suggested abandoning traditional roles and taking up new ones. Action research is credited with motivating the teachers to change the context of their teaching, in this case by putting the students at the center of attention by providing conditions to make them more autonomous. Being involved in action research influenced our thinking by becoming more flexible and open to new ideas which enabled us to solve new problems. We arrived at the conclusion that at all stages of project work the teacher should suggest ideas, provide references, provide alternatives to a situation or stimulate students to think. The research showed that great importance should be given to the first phase of the

project, that of the preparation. Being used to the teacher's traditional roles, that of the main authority in class, students appeared to have trouble to adjust to the new situation where the teacher is only a catalyst. It was suggested by the teachers that the transition should be performed slowly and smoothly.

## **Conclusion**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century offers new challenges to all of us. Students and teachers are faced with a vast range of information which relates to the rapidly changing nature of the educational environment. Teachers strive to prepare students who will be able to survive in a world which is in constant change. But there is no such teacher education which can provide skills and knowledge necessary for teaching during an entire life. As a result, there comes the need for developing those skills and knowledge constantly, the need to become life-long learners and to grow professionally continuously.

"Action research is continual professional development and provides a direct route to improving teaching and learning."<sup>14</sup>

Action research aids teachers as researchers and students as receivers of the change resulting from the findings of an action research, a lot in their efforts to improve. Engaging in action research is a way to grow professionally from pre service training to career end. We showed that through action research we achieved positive changes in the learning environment; teachers become lifelong learners because they learn constantly through action research and students experience success in learning because teachers reflect students' needs in their teaching. Thus, we would recommend action research to be widely used in teachers' teaching practices as well as its inclusion in Teacher Education Programs as a practice which leads to professional development of teachers by developing new methods of learning, improving their teaching skills, increasing their abilities of analysis and increasing their self-awareness. And as Stephen Corey states: "We are convinced that the disposition to study...the consequences of our teaching is more likely to change and improve practices than is reading about what someone else has discovered of his teaching."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Calhoun, E. *Action Research for School Improvement. Educational Leadership*, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Corey, Stephen, *Action Research to Improve School Practices*, Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1953, pág 70.