

*TEACHING:*  
EXPERIENCE OR QUALIFICATION?  
SAKEENA BIBI

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## **ABSTRACT**

Objective: The aim of the study is to examine the perceptions of the language teachers regarding teaching at Defence School of Languages.

Design: The design involved carrying out qualitative interviews with the teacher colleagues to record their views and perceptions. Five questions guided the interviews.

Results: Two main themes were generated from the analysis of the interviews. They were “teaching qualification “and “teaching experience”.

## **INTRODUCTION**

I am a civilian instructor and conduct language training for phase 2 and 3 students preparing them for the military operations as a linguist. All our language courses are designed according to NATO Standards. Here at DSL we have three departments: Pashto consists of eight tutors, Arabic has two trainers and Farsi five teachers. All of our teachers are native speakers of their respective languages and have a background of teaching language from back home.

The DSL has a role to train the MOD personnel in different languages of the world. Our language courses are intended for language beginners, intermediate and advanced level learners. Our courses focus on all four aspects of language learning; i.e. Speaking, Writing, Reading and Listening. The programme is delivered with the help and cooperation of University of Westminster under the umbrella of Defence School of Languages.

At DSL we are comprised of teachers, learners and the management. Within a dialectical perspective, nothing stands alone; there is no such thing as a simple unity. To understand a phenomenon dialectically involves the exploration of these relationships.

### **Reasons for Choosing this Area of Study**

Action research is a term which refers to a practical way of looking at our own work to check that it is as we would like it to be. Because action research is done by us, the practitioners, it is often referred to as practitioner based research; and because it involves us thinking about and reflecting on our work, it can also be called a form of self-reflective practice. Since I started my DTLLS programme this year in March I explored many areas in teaching practice such as principles of planning and enabling learning, assessments, creation of a syllabus, a scheme of work and CPD etc. I was then using these concepts in my teaching practice with my learners. All the time I was trying to incorporate them into my practice. There was another teacher who was sharing a class with me and who had a long experience in teaching from back home. However he

had a different style. Whenever I wanted to introduce a change to do a session differently, he never agreed with me. That behavior made me consider having it for my action research. My Action research is going to be of benefit to me in my own teaching practice because it will bring a change in teaching the upcoming classes. And because it will give us a clear picture of how to use and adopt the new approaches, those I have learnt from my course, therefore the action research was appropriate for this study. When I informed my line manger and other management regarding this, they were not only in agreement to carry it out but encouraged me to do so. They also appreciated that it would be helpful for the school to have such activities. Hopefully they will recommend that my research will bring a kind of change. As action research helps us to formalize our learning and give a clear and justified account of our work, so my work will be a continuing regular feature of our practice towards improvement.

### **What is action Research?**

Action Research is a form of research in which practitioners reflect systematically on their practice, implementing informed action to bring about improvement in practice. As one widely accepted definition describes it:

Action Research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations in which the practices are carried out. (Carr and Kemmis 1986)

In its focus on practice, action research is rooted in the concerns of practitioners in real-world settings and in disciplined self-evaluation and reflection. In empirical forms of research, the researcher does research on other people; in action research, the researcher does research on him or herself. In higher programs, participants use the action-research process to reflect systematically on their educational practice in order to bring about improvement and contribute to new knowledge. They define areas for improving learning, develop action plans, act on those plans, gather data, assess their learning, and redefine areas of further improvement.

Thus the main characteristics of action research are:

- it is cyclical;
- it requires separate but mutually dependent steps;
- it is participative—both the researcher and subject are active participants in the research process;
- it generates data that is generally of a qualitative nature;
- and it is a reflective process.

## **Literature Review**

In January 2005 the national training organizations, including FENTO, were replaced by sector skills councils. As a result responsibility for managing the national standards and endorsing qualifications for teachers in LLS was taken over by Standards and Verification UK (SVUK), the standards and verification arm of Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK). This body is also responsible for CPD of teachers in work-based learning and higher education.

In 2007, another change came into being to revise the set of national standards. These are known as Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) standards; and it is now a requirement that all teachers in the sector, whether full-time or part-time, must have, or be working towards QTLS. This can be achieved through a number of routes, including SVUK-endorsed higher education programmes such as the Certificate of Education (Cert Ed), the Postgraduate or Professional Graduate Certificates in Education (PGCE), or a teacher training programme at National Qualification Framework (NQF) level 5 or 6 offered by one of the commercial unitary awarding bodies.

This literature though explains the types of qualifications and their requirements but does not take into account the long experience or both experience as well as qualification, especially when the teaching experience is from abroad. To gain a qualification is good; however the experience is sometime better or vice versa. Most of the time both together can better improve our practice. The main question here is 'How do I improve my work?' this question contains a social intent. The intention is that one person improves the work for his own benefit and the benefit of others. If we can improve what we are doing (or at least improve our understanding of what we are doing), there is a good chance we will influence the situation we are working in. Therefore there was a need to formulate the hypothesis based on how to improve our teaching at our own Defence School of Languages.

## **Purpose and Key Features of the Action Research Cycle**

Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggest action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices. Carr and Kemmis (1986) further explain action research aids understanding of practice, and the situations in which practices are carried out.

## **Action research step by step**

The basic steps of an action research process constitutes an action plan:

- We review our current practice,
- identify an aspect that we want to investigate,
- imagine a way forward,
- try it out, and
- take stock of what happens.
- We modify what we are doing in the light of what we have found, and continue working in this new way (try another option if the new way of working is not right)
- monitor what we do,
- review and evaluate the modified action,
- and so on ...

### **Benefits of Action Research**

Action research can be a worthwhile pursuit for educators for a number of reasons. Foremost among these is simply the desire to know more and to enhance for the future. Good teachers are, after all, themselves students, and often look for ways to expand upon their existing knowledge.

### **Quantitative VS Qualitative methods**

Some methods provide data which are quantitative while other provides qualitative data. Quantitative methods are those which focus on numbers and frequencies rather than on meaning and experience. Quantitative methods (e.g. experiments, questionnaires and psychometric tests) provide information which is easy to analyze statistically and fairly reliable. Quantitative methods are associated with the scientific and experimental approach and are criticized for not providing an in depth description.

Qualitative methods are ways of collecting data which are concerned with describing meaning, rather than with drawing statistical inferences. What qualitative methods (e.g. case studies and interviews) lose on reliability they gain in terms of validity? They provide a more in depth and rich description.

Quantitative methods have come under considerable criticism. In modern research, most psychologists tend to adopt a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, which allow statistically reliable information obtained from numerical measurement to be backed up by and enriched by information about the research participants' explanations.

### **Methodology Used**

Using the consent form I had gained the willingness of the entire fifteen participants. Further, I utilized the qualitative way of collecting data. My core research itself involved conducting

interviews with fifteen language trainers. As a research methodology, interviews were a means of generating discussion and eliciting synergistic insights into particular questions (Silverman, 2000). The purpose of a qualitative methodology such as interviews was not to test predetermined hypotheses, but rather to elicit the perspectives of every individual teacher. The methodology I used was fit to purpose as it provided me all I needed for my Action Research.

### Merits

As mentioned quantitative data is numerical and statistical information. On the contrary, qualitative method is descriptive in nature, definitions and explanations are included in that.

- Quantitative way allows for a broader study, involving a greater number of subjects, and enhancing the generalization of the results
- Can allow for greater objectivity and accuracy of results. Generally, quantitative methods are designed to provide summaries of data that support generalizations about the phenomenon under study. In order to accomplish this, quantitative research usually involves few variables and many cases, and employs prescribed procedures to ensure validity and reliability
- Using standards means that the research can be replicated, and then analyzed and compared with similar studies. Quantitative methods allow us to summarize vast sources of information and facilitate comparisons across categories and over time.
- Personal bias can be avoided by researchers keeping a 'distance' from participating subjects and employing subjects unknown to them.

### My Planning

The time I started doing my Action Research, I was reading books, surfing the internet, having discussions with others to find out their views about it, and consulting my teacher colleagues especially my line manager. I used to write my notes, storing key concepts and collecting relevant topics on my laptop. During that period I was asking myself the following questions time and again:

- Does the method I am using give a form of data which relates to my question?
- Is it feasible in the available time?
- Have I made myself aware of its strengths and limitations?
- Will it be an acceptable method for the other people involved?
- Will it disrupt normal routines?

During the planning stage a number of factors were considered such as resources, time scales, cost and especially the availability of the teachers. The research had a time scale of three months from start to finish. To effectively plan, I drew up a scheduling that identified every stage of action research cycle i.e. a spiral or cycle of planning, action, monitoring and reflection. I took

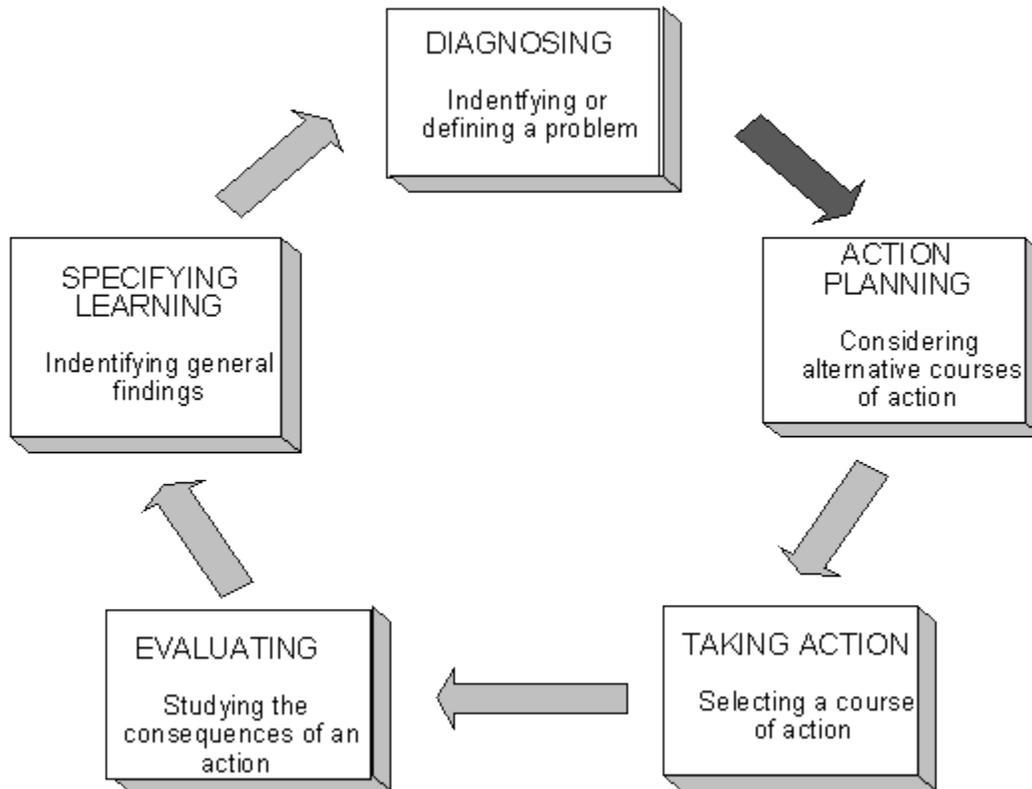
into account our school policies, for example the use of data collection, ethical and political considerations and the issue of confidentiality. During my action research I did consider to have respect for any persons involved in the research I was undertaking. I treated them fairly, sensitively, with dignity, and within an ethic of respect. The willingness of the participants was highly appreciated and vital in this respect.

### **The Process**

Emphasizing the individual nature of action research, Jack Whitehead (1985) puts forward a simple representation of how the process feels:

1. I was experiencing a problem when some of my educational values were negated in my practice;
2. I was imagining a solution to my problem;
3. I acted in the direction of the solution;
4. I evaluated the outcomes of my actions;
5. I modified my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations.

Gerald Susman (1983) gives a somewhat more elaborate listing. He distinguishes five phases to be conducted within each research cycle. Initially, a problem is identified and data is collected for a more detailed diagnosis. This is followed by a collective postulation of several possible solutions, from which a single plan of action emerges and is implemented. Data on the results of the intervention are collected and analyzed, and the findings are interpreted in light of how successful the action has been. At this point, the problem is re-assessed and the process begins another cycle. This process continues until the problem is resolved. Here is his diagram.



**The set of questions for interviews**

Please write your initials (Optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Q1-For how long have you been teaching Pashto language?

Q2-Do you have any formal or relevant qualifications?

Q3-What types of Continuous Professional Development do you currently do?

Q4-Do you have any plans to get a Teaching Qualification?

Q5- Are you a member of a professional body?

**Recording and Monitoring Data**

To record and monitor my data I was using my diary, notebook, a set of five questions for interviewing and a consent form. Every time I had a piece of work, I used to feed that on my laptop. I had to book every single teacher to see him/her in the office. Interviews were to last for about 20 to 30 minutes with each individual teacher. At the same time I was taking notes in brief.

After each interview I had to sit back, elaborate the data, calculate and then enter into my A R. I was storing my data upon a computer from time to time so it was simple for me to organize them. One of the interviews was cancelled due to unpredicted circumstances for which I made arrangements later on; my fellow teacher was very kind to spare some time from her busy schedule. Sometimes I had to wait as a few exams were under progress at that time.

### **Analyses and Presentation of Data Collected**

Analysis in action research is the spur to reflection and the planning of new action. Analysis within action research is about possibilities, not certainties. It is not about why things have to be as they are, but rather what possibilities for change lie within a situation. Action within a complex social world is not static; it is dynamic and forever evolving.

The following table is a short description of data I had collected.

Serial no	Nationality	Number of teachers	Gender	Teaching Experience	Teaching Qualification
1	Afghani	4	Males	Short	No
2	Pakistani	4	Males	Yes	No
3	Iranian	5	3 Males + 2 Females	Long	Initial only
4	Arab	2	1 Male + 1 Female	Yes	Yes

One of my colleagues is fully qualified teacher who has a PGCE and he has up to date IFL membership as well as experience of eleven years. Two of them have the initial CELTA qualification. They have teaching experience in the range of four to six years while only one of them is in possession of a TEFL qualification. The rest of the eleven trainers have no formal professional qualification from the UK. Three out of the eleven claim that they got Bachelor degrees in Education from their respective countries. I think that is good but these are formulated according to the needs of the learners of their respective countries not for the English learners in the UK. Even if we accept that, the remaining eight people are still currently teaching without qualifications which is more than fifty percent. Their foreign teaching experience i.e. from Asians countries is between 11 and 35 years. They have different styles of how to make the students understand. The use of their activities is totally different. Language in fact is a live phenomenon. It needs active participation of the teacher and those being taught. I have realized a big gap when I shared my class with a few of them. When asked, they always claimed that they

have teaching experience. Most of them had the honor to be teachers in their own countries. In reality, they had a chance to teach there where professional qualifications were not the requirement, or they were teaching because they had to, regardless of professional qualifications. Now they apply the same knowledge and their previous experience that they had from back home to our learners here in the UK which I think simply doesn't work. Furthermore, that is not a suitable fit for the needs of English learners.

### **Technical rationality suggests that:**

Altricher et al. (1993) says;

- there are general solutions to practical problems;
- these solutions can be developed outside the practical situations, in research or administrative centres;
- the solutions can be translated into teachers' actions by means of publications, training, administrative orders, etc.

### **Results Achieved**

- ❖ My Pashto department has decided that all our teachers will have to go through observations. Our observer will be the most experienced and qualified trainer of our Pashto Branch. Then he will provide us with constructive and prompt feedback.
- ❖ Five of my Teacher colleagues are enrolled for DTTLs, while two are going to register for PGCE very soon.
- ❖ Three of them expressed their desire to become members of IFL. Thus, they will go through the professional formation and will have a good opportunity to improve.
- ❖ Some have the intention to at least take the opportunities to carry out some sort of CPD.
- ❖ My department invited someone from IFL regularly to go with us through Profession Formation and CPD etc. His first visit was scheduled for 28<sup>th</sup> of October this year. It was evident from my learned colleagues' feedback that they have benefited from that. They were extremely enthusiastic to participate in those activities.
- ❖ Our subcontractor also promised us to give us some training and refresher workshops every fortnight. They will also observe our teaching sessions and will provide us with a prompt feedback for where and how we need to improve.

- ❖ Some of the others consider teaching as a part time job and currently carry out their businesses alongside. Therefore they don't consider teaching as their permanent career.
- ❖ I have learnt that both teaching experience and teaching qualifications produce a good teacher. Experience gives me a practical solution for any issues. On the other hand, a qualification provides us with new approaches to modify our existing practice and how to improve in future.

### **AREA FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT**

I carried on working in this new way because it seemed to be better than the way I was working before. It is more in line with the way I wished things to be. I think this is what makes action research a powerful methodology for personal and social renewal. Following my research I would like to recommend that though my fellow teachers have great passion for and dedication in teaching, however they need to polish up their styles. If they use their experience plus some sort of qualification here from the UK, they will be able to deal with many types of teaching learning processes easily. For this they may chose to gain a basic qualification or carry out at least some CPD hours just to enhance their approaches. This will definitely improve their knowledge and will enable them to teach in a better way. As result they will fulfill their learners' needs accordingly.

### **FURTHER STUDY**

In fact being teachers the continuation of professional development is must for all of us. It gives us opportunities on finding out how to teach a session differently in the light of self-reflection. However, this study does not answer the question of how to carry out CPD or PDP here in our Defence School of Languages. At present many organization have some programmes in place to train their own trainers, however I have never seen this happen here since my teaching career from 2006. Anyhow, if given a chance I would like to research the area of CPD at DSL next time.

In order to be an active member of the teaching community, my next step is to join the Institute for Learning. There, I will have to go through professional formation which will enable me to get QTLS. Being a member I will use its online resources to support my continuing professional development (CPD) which will keep me up-to-date with the latest developments in my subject specialism as well as my teaching practice. Their resources will also help me find links to CPD opportunities and across the further education and skills sector.

As far as my strengths are concerned, I am confident in using a qualitative method of research rather than quantitative. I can apply many approaches to explain, describe or elaborate issues

provided that they are non- numerical. On the other hand, I do not feel comfortable with Quantitative research. The only reason is it generates numerical data or data that can be converted into numbers for statistics. I think I have to develop this weakness which is my need at the moment. I would like to take up life skills numeracy level 2 assessments in the near future. Hopefully that will enhance my basic knowledge to some extent. As a result I may even be able to teach simple maths if needed.

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