



Teacher Action Research in Foreign Language Classrooms: Four Teachers Tell Their Stories

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As a profession language educators are paying more attention to teacher-driven research to help clarify and explain those phenomena occurring in our classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to explore the following question: What happens when teachers apply a teacher action research (TAR) strategy for improving their classroom practice? I will start with a definition and then outline a set of steps for conducting this type of research. Next, the four teachers tell their own “stories” and share reflections on growth and development. Finally, I posit the importance of this kind of research in making contributions to language teaching and learning inquiry.

For many foreign and second language teachers professional development opportunities take place at once-a-year conferences and sometimes during a one day staff development. Is it any wonder these “try it out on Monday!” workshops are limited and quickly fade from memory? As a profession language educators are paying more attention to teacher-driven research to help clarify and explain those phenomena occurring in our classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to explore the critical question: What happens when teachers apply a teacher action research (TAR) strategy for improving their classroom practice? I will start with a definition and then outline a set of steps for conducting this type of research. Next, the four teachers tell their own “stories” and share reflections on growth and development. Finally, I posit the importance of this kind of research in making contributions to language teaching and learning inquiry.

The concept of action research can be traced back to the early works of John Dewey in the 1920s

and Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, but it is Stephen Corey and others at Teachers College of Columbia University who introduced the term action research to the educational community in 1949. Teacher action research is referred to in the literature as action research, practitioner research, teacher-as-scholar, practical inquiry, interactive research, classroom inquiry, or practice-centered research (Downhower, Melvin & Sizemore, 1990). This type of self-driven, individualized research is a tool teachers can use to develop, reflect, and improve their teaching styles and pedagogical practices. The authors of this paper feel that many teachers fear that this type of work would require too much additional time that they do not have. Examining more closely exactly what TAR is and discovering how it can be a part of your daily routines as a teacher can minimize this fear. In order to reveal the facility with which one can implement a TAR project, to demonstrate the crucial value of results obtained from such work, and encourage more teachers to view themselves as researchers, four

foreign language teachers, as a part of a graduate course I teach on Foreign Language methods, participated in Teacher Action research projects with elementary and middle school students. The TAR project was a requirement for all in-service teachers enrolled in this course. There were four in-service teachers (in a class of 18) and all four projects are presented here. As part of the course agenda, I helped students identify and conceptualize the puzzlement they wished to investigate. They were initially told to “look” at their teaching and make a list of phenomenon that occurred that might be interesting to investigate. Throughout their research projects the four teachers provided weekly updates to me both electronically and during in-class discussions. Further, I met individually with the teachers to discuss data analyses and provided assistance with interpreting results. These studies were subsequently presented as poster sessions at the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Their research findings as well as their methodologies depict the type of valuable information that teacher action research can provide to benefit teachers and their students. The results and subsequent reflections by each teacher can ultimately help them modify their daily teaching methods and strategies to create an optimal learning environment in their classrooms. The names of the teachers and school identities have been changed in order to insure anonymity.

Some of the most beneficial things about teacher action research are that it is small scale, contextualized, localized, and aimed at discovering, developing, or monitoring changes to practice (Wallace, 2000). Therefore, every project can take on the needs of the specific situation while following a relatively similar format as a guide. What differentiates action research from other types of social study is that it results in concrete actions that can be implemented. Each of the following teachers’ projects began with a set of guidelines that can be used in any teaching situation to open a research process.

These are the guidelines typically used in teacher action research:

- Identify a puzzlement/inquiry
- Decide in a systematic way how to go about answering that question
- Develop a timeline to carry out the project – one week, a month, a grading period or even a full academic year.
- Decide how data will be collected and analyzed
- Implement study – data collection and analysis

- Report and share findings

Literature on Teacher Action Research and Language Teachers

While the literature contains a respectable amount of studies conducted in foreign and second language classrooms, clearly there is a need for additional research. A few educators have discussed the possibilities of teacher research for foreign and second language education (Johnson, 1992; Nunan, 1992; Nunan & Lamb, 1996) but very little has been published in journals on teacher action research, i.e., teacher as researcher. Richard Donato (2003) reported on a one-year-long, innovative professional development project for Texas’ Languages Other Than English (LOTE) in which teachers explored action research as a tool for deepening professional knowledge and improving foreign language instruction in the context of their own schools and classrooms. All the studies maintain an area of focus on *learners* and the relationship of the learner to a particular teaching or assessment practice. In some cases, the learners became co-researchers with the teacher during the action research project and were asked to self-assess, provide input on lesson content and assessments, and rate instructional strategies for overall effectiveness (p. 18).

Marjorie Hall Haley’s (2004, 2001) work examined foreign and second language teachers engaged in action research to explore the impact of Multiple Intelligences-based teaching. In the first two phases of this ongoing research, Hall Haley enlisted the help of primary and secondary language teachers from around the country and from Australia, Hong Kong, and Germany (2004: 167-169). These educators collaborated with each other and with Hall Haley to develop ways to apply MI theory to both instructional strategies and assessment practices. Data showed that “learner-centered instruction from the perspective of multiple intelligences... demonstrated students’ strengths and weaknesses can be affected by a teacher’s pedagogical style” (2004: 171).

The following four investigations were conducted in the fall of 2002. The individual cases demonstrate how action research can be used to improve teaching instruction in the foreign language classroom. These teachers undertook the studies in an effort to improve methods of classroom management, address student attitudes, and augment impact on learning. It is important to note that these teachers are attempting teacher action research projects for the first time. The four studies presented each address a particular phenomenon that was occurring in the teachers’ classrooms. These four teachers are not only the subjects of this paper but also collaborators in analyzing the impact that this work had on their

teaching and growth as reflective practitioners. Specifically, these four teachers examined (1) effective ways of working with Heritage Language Learners; (2) Cooperative Learning and Peer Tutoring in a foreign language in elementary schools (FLES); (3) homework; and (4) attitude and motivation toward studying a foreign language.

Foreign language teachers often find themselves with a heterogeneous group of students. Terry Richards is a high school Spanish teacher in a suburban school in an area that has a large Hispanic population. Because most of her educational training and previous teaching efforts centered on students who were focused on learning a new or foreign language, the placement of heritage language learners (HLLs) in her regular Spanish III classroom presented unexpected opportunities and challenges. Richards was faced with the new task of managing and meeting the needs of two very different student populations in the same classroom. She used an action research study to find instructional strategies and approaches that would best serve heritage students who are placed in regular Spanish classes and to develop curricula and activities based on the specific needs and motivations of these students.

Note: In order to distinguish between the teachers' stories and the methods' professor's narrative, the sections of the text have been identified accordingly.

Teacher # 1

Working with Heritage Language Learners

Terry Richards

High School Spanish Teacher

Introduction

My research was conducted with native speakers of Spanish (called heritage language learners (HLLs) who were placed in my regular Spanish III classes. To my surprise, Spanish native speakers were placed in two of my classes in a school that offers a special program for Spanish native speakers with classes such as Native Speakers I and II, International Baccalaureate for Native Speakers I and II. This program was implemented at the school due to its large Hispanic population. When asked to switch classes, my students requested to stay in my classes to improve their writing skills.

Puzzlement

As a first year teacher, I found myself dealing with a series of questions about how to make my own teaching career meaningful, how to best reach students and how to keep them focused and engaged in the process of second language learning. Since I had a few Spanish native speakers in class, these reflections and questions became even more difficult to resolve, since this specific group of

students was challenging. I am Latina and have great empathy for my heritage language students. I knew that their speaking and listening skills were highly proficient but their reading and writing skills were lacking. And I also knew that I needed to provide activities that were relevant and interesting. Therefore, I decided to concentrate my research on answering the question: *How can I reach my heritage students and keep them motivated?* I wanted to effectively keep heritage students engaged in my regular Spanish classes and needed to customize the learning experience for their special needs and areas of weaknesses and strengths.

Methodology

I collected students' scores from previous years and their current writing samples to examine their language proficiency. I began to tailor lessons and activities as well as to develop alternative curricula to better fit their individual language needs. During this time I kept the regular program of studies for the rest of my students. I learned soon enough that I needed to adopt and change some approaches to fill gaps in the native speakers' grammar and spelling.

To fully understand the goals and challenges of teaching Spanish to Spanish speakers, it was important to understand the diverse backgrounds of students who participate in Spanish courses and their motivations for studying a language they appear to effectively use for communication. Heritage students can be divided into several groups:

- Third- or fourth-generation U.S.-born Hispanic students considered to be *receptive bilinguals*: They are English dominant and understand almost all spoken Spanish, but they have limited speaking skills in Spanish and do not read or write it.
- First- or second-generation bilinguals possess different degrees of proficiency in English and Spanish. In most cases, these students have received their education in English and have developed few if any literacy skills in Spanish.
- Recent immigrants to the United States are Spanish dominant : their level of English proficiency, the amount of formal education they have had in Spanish, and their literacy skills in Spanish vary (Valdes, 2001).

My students were all third-generation U.S. born Hispanics with advanced speaking skills, but very limited writing skills.

Data Collection

I collected the following data: performance on oral presentations based on rubrics, posters, multiple intelligence surveys, videos, journal entries, essays tailored for my HLL students, and grammar

and reading comprehension activities for Hispanoblantes (Spanish speakers). I began recording my thoughts and reflections about my students on post-it notes, loose paper, anywhere I could find space during my class with them so I would not lose momentum. I did not keep a record notebook but I did transcribe my small notes into an electronic file at the end of the day during the entire school year.

Data Analysis

I used the data to determine answers to the following questions:

- What instructional strategies engage my Heritage Language Learners?
- When do they feel motivated to learn and participate?
- What approaches are helping fill in their grammar gap?

My HLL students practiced several writing strategies to improve areas such as spelling, grammar, and syntax. First, they created pre-writing maps or “brainstorming webs”, as they liked to call them. This helped them facilitate their flow of vocabulary, generate words, and shape their thoughts before they started writing. Secondly, they worked on different drafts in class. They were given different writing prompts to practice and to start developing their maps into more complex sentences. This part of the process is my favorite, because it gives me a chance to truly assess students on a daily basis thru informal observation, as they display their train of thought in paper and interact with their partners for feed-back. The topics were developed for them using situations that they could relate to, such as living in bilingual homes, facing migration status, being second and first generation Americans.

Once students completed their drafts, they worked in pairs to edit each other’s work and make corrections on grammar, punctuation, and spelling. This helped them improve their own proofreading skills and be more acute in realizing their mistakes. I noticed that this practice built independent learners and self-esteem. After getting feedback from peers, I collected their draft papers and revised them. I provided them with constructive feedback to improve their skills in grammar, spelling, and mechanics.

I used an analytic rubric (Appendix A) which I discussed with them ahead of time. I also provided them a checklist that “mirrored” the rubric in friendlier vocabulary. This was done to insure comprehension. This way, students were able to review their writing prompts and quickly check if they met the required criteria or not. I created a simple rubric in the target language with four domains: task completion, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics.

Results

Throughout their various writing samples, it was clear that they possessed solid cultural understanding of ideas but they lacked grammar knowledge, spelling and literacy skills. They also had limited colloquial vocabulary. For example, I found out in their journals that they constantly exchanged the “c” for “s” and they did not use “z” at all. Sometimes they wrote sentence fragments without verbs or subjects. In some cases, they even wrote English words if they lacked the Spanish vocabulary. By providing them with materials that tap those grammatical and syntactical needs, through practice, they were able to improve their writing. They also became more engaged in class discussions because they felt their experiences were valid and that they had a voice in class that students respected. It seemed to me that once my HLL students achieved a certain level of confidence in their reading and writing, they were more willing to participate in open discussions because they seemed to feel that their opinions were respected by their classmates.

Conclusion

As with all students, HLL students respond well to environments that draw them into constructive learning. In my classes, I found that music, laughter, and positive feedback help all students respond better to learning. This was especially true with HLL students who responded to this teaching style with great enthusiasm. During my study, my HLL students changed their negative attitudes and responded more often and favorably to oral and written assignments when they felt more confident and self assured of their abilities. Any time we learned a new colloquial term, for example, I would ask them what term they would use in their countries. They enjoyed making contributions and sharing experiences with the class when the learning environment was safe and supportive. They shared their music preferences; they brought lyrics to class so other students could learn some special songs. They brought pictures of special holidays in their countries and shared them with the class. They felt that they could explore the language and enrich their lexicon and grammar through analysis of language, literary readings, and essay writing. From the data collected, I noticed a developmental improvement in their essays. The more they read their literary pieces, the better lexicon they adopted in their own writing and speech. Sometimes teachers feel intimidated to teach native speakers or they just segregate them from the learning core and make them feel unwelcome.

Implications

Teachers can provide critical strategies for success for heritage students by recognizing and

welcoming the varieties of language. Heritage learners can share their cultural connections to the language to enrich the learning experience for all students. Furthermore, it is pivotal to acknowledge differences of speech, to ask students to share colloquial terms, and to keep them engaged in cooperative activities.

Reflections

A direct result of my research was that I learned that heritage students can benefit from being in foreign language classes if activities and strategies are tailored to them. By using teaching strategies that engaged Heritage Language Learners' prior knowledge and experience, the entire class benefited. In addition, I feel that my future research will give me more information as well as additional ideas to continue developing and better organizing my data collection and analysis methods.

End of Story for Teacher # 1.

Methods Professor

I wanted this experience to provide Terry the opportunity to differentiate instruction for her HLLs. She clearly understood their strengths and weaknesses in linguistic proficiency but at the outset was not certain as to how to address them. Because Terry is so purposeful and deliberate in her planning, her data collection was effective and provided her with evidence for modifying instruction to meet the needs of her HLLs. Terry's teacher action research project gave her the opportunity to clearly assess and adjust her instructional strategies to meet the needs of her Heritage Language Learners. The benefits of this type of reflection have helped broaden her understanding of her role as a teacher and the impact she has with all learners. Further, as a reflective practitioner, an integral part of TAR, Terry was able to contemplate and fine-tune the classroom environment in an ongoing way to meet the needs of the learners within it.

Lita Ashley is the second teacher who wanted to develop strategies for teaching two distinct student groups in one classroom. This challenge is common to today's classroom and is one for which TAR can provide compelling information to teachers. In this scenario, the teacher focused her study on the use of cooperative learning groups and peer tutoring activities to address the diversity of learners in her classroom.

Teacher # 2

Cooperative Learning Groups and Peer Tutoring: Can They Unite Students with Different Language Experience in the Same Classroom?

Lita Ashley

French FLES teacher

Introduction

My foreign language classroom is located in an elementary school in the northern section of Virginia. I am a French FLES teacher who teaches first through fifth graders three times per week for thirty minutes each. My classes contain students of various levels of experience in learning French. The use of cooperative learning groups and peer tutoring can provide opportunities for students who are more experienced in the language to help those students who are less experienced. How can these two instructional strategies unite a classroom of differing language experiences?

My research was conducted in a French fifth-grade FLES class. The class is designed to be taught in the target language with a large number of interactive activities to promote a greater understanding of conversational French. There are twenty-eight students (ages ten to eleven) in the class. Eighteen of the students are in their third year in the French program while ten of the students have never had any French before. These students are on very different language levels based on their experience in French. From the very first day of class this school year, these two different groups of students have displayed marked differences in their ability to respond in class. The students who have never had French before often display behavior problems and disrupt the learning process. They will sometimes misbehave in class when they do not understand any or most of the French language that is being spoken. On the other hand, the students who have had French before appear bored as I am forced to stop many times and catch up the other students. This classroom situation provided a question for me to find ways to help both groups of students effectively learn in the same FLES classroom.

This FLES classroom is in an elementary school of approximately five hundred and sixty-five students. The majority of the students live in a middle-class neighborhood, comprised of culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse families.

Puzzlement

What types of classroom activities best engage the entire class when students are at two different language levels? How do I keep the 18 experienced students interested and challenged in class while bringing up the 10 inexperienced ones to the level of the others?

Methodology

I enlisted all 28 students in the classroom to participate in this research. I received parental permission for the students to participate in this research. I used a variety of interactive activities in French as well as four exit slips (a simple survey/questionnaire that allows students to self assess their progress; usually done at the end of the class before students exit the room) in English during this research project. Two cooperative learning methods employed were peer tutoring and think-pair-share. In peer tutoring, classmates taught each other simple concepts in the content areas such as math, science, or language arts. Think-pair-share was an activity in which students first listened while I posed a question, and then the students were given time to think of a response. Next, they were paired with a classmate to discuss their responses, and finally they shared their responses with the whole class.

Exit slips, three to four short questions that the students were asked to respond to in writing, were collected at the end of each lesson to find out what they had learned and how they liked it. I tallied the results for all the students in a notebook to compare their reactions and abilities.

Data Collection

I planned interactive activities during two 30-45 minute classes each week. Exit slips were given over a period of six weeks at the conclusion of each interactive activity. I gave written assessments and exit slips to evaluate how the students were performing these interactive activities. See Figures 1, 2, and 3 for three examples of surveys that were given to the students.

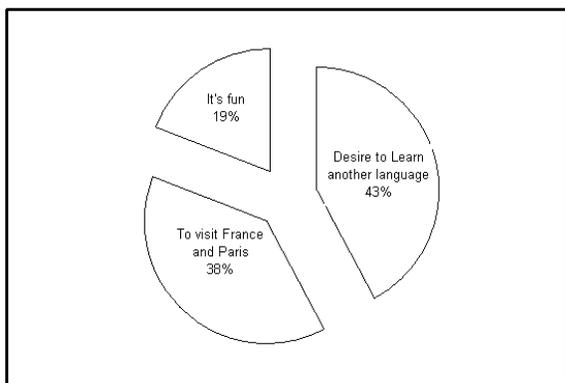


Figure 1. Question #1: Why would you want to study a foreign language?

Data Analysis

I tallied the results of the surveys to compare and contrast the progress of the students. I was looking for data that would show that the interactive

activities were improving the students' knowledge and performance in the language. I also wanted to evaluate the students' attitudes towards learning another language during this process.

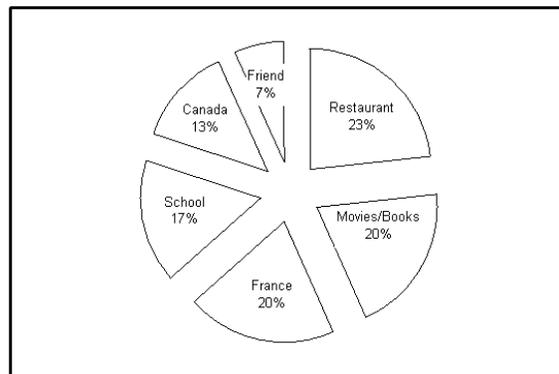


Figure 2. Question #2: What are examples of where you might see the French language used in your daily life?

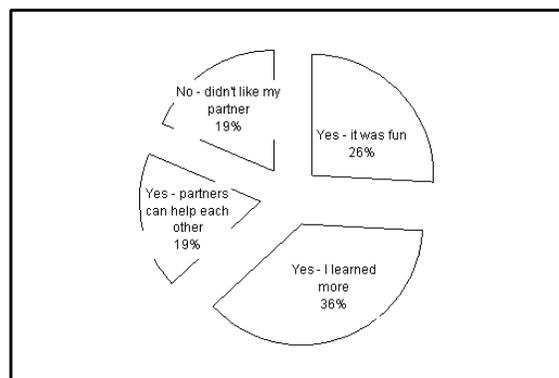


Figure 3. Question #3: Do you like working in pairs? Why? Why not?

Results

Throughout this research project, I found that using cooperative learning strategies enhanced the learning process in this FLES classroom. I also found that this classroom strategy helped encourage participation in the classroom, thereby making a more relaxed and comfortable learning environment for all students.

Conclusion

Two types of cooperative learning activities that were used with this research project included peer tutoring and think-pair-share. In each of the classroom activities used in this study, I found the students demonstrated greater classroom participation, greater language retention, as well as a reduced level of anxiety when speaking the target language in class. By keeping a journal each day about behavior in the classroom and the students' responses to the lesson (as well as recording notes

after each class), I noted a reduction in classroom behavior problems. After reading and analyzing the exit slips from this research project I discovered that the students expressed an overall positive experience from working with the cooperative learning groups and activities. Their reactions were positive when they were posed the question, “Did you like working in groups and pairs?” This teacher research action project has shown that the use of cooperative learning strategies can begin to unite a divided classroom of differing language experiences.

Implications

With our society and student populations becoming more and more diverse in background and academic experiences, it will become increasingly important to use cooperative learning strategies in foreign language classes. The part of the state in which the study took place is made up of a large percentage of transient families – often moving for enhanced job opportunities. There are students from a variety of educational backgrounds who enter foreign language classrooms at different times during the school year. As educators we need to find techniques and instructional strategies to help these students smoothly transition into an environment that encourages and enhances their academic success.

Reflections

This research project has validated for me the importance of trying new and varied activities in my foreign language classroom instead of a traditional lecturing style of teaching. Students enjoy helping each other learn as they work together in groups. It is clear to me that students have the ability to have a major impact on their own learning and that of their peers when they work together. I learned a great deal about my teaching from this experience: I plan very carefully and I am aware of the need to accommodate a wide range of learners on a daily basis. I am also aware of being critical about my teaching and examining what and why I do what I do. As a result of this systematic feedback, I feel that I view planning and assessment with a broader lens. Being aware of what works best for my students has deepened my awareness of being experimental and fluid in seeking a variety of ways to reach all learners.

End of Story for Teacher # 2

Methods Professor

I realized that Lita’s puzzlement was one that many FLES teachers undoubtedly face. Once Lita completed a quick review of literature on cooperative learning, she realized that this might be an effective instructional strategy given the linguistic backgrounds of her students. This enabled the current emphasis in foreign language learning to provide a

communicative context. A systematic approach to data collection is an essential element in TAR. Lita was very purposeful in organizing and assembling her data. By closely examining the results from her data collection, Lita was able to determine that cooperative learning and peer tutoring made her diverse class more united and more able to work together in a productive and stimulating learning setting. The research she completed allowed her to focus in on a need and construct a way to address that need to benefit both the teacher and students involved.

The previous two cases have demonstrated how action research can benefit and improve teaching strategies or approaches. According to Lita, “I never regarded myself as a classroom-based researcher. For me, doing this research was very empowering and I am a more confident teacher.” Teacher Action Research can also be used to improve and direct student behavior, thus possibly closing the achievement gap between students. Ally Milner, a French teacher at a large urban middle school, sought to discover how action research study could be used to improve student responsibility and homework completion in her classroom.

Teacher # 3

What Happens When Students and Parents Are Included as Partners in the Learning Processes of Language Learning?

A Closer Look at Homework!

Ally Milner

Middle School French Teacher

Teacher Background

I graduated from Brigham Young University in 1994. Although I studied to become a Biology teacher, I have never taught that subject. My experiences have led me to my current position as a French teacher. I have been teaching French for three years.

Introduction

This teacher action research project included all four French classes at a large urban middle school in Virginia. The students come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. For most of these students both parents work outside the home. The student population is also one of the most diverse in the county: 34.5% white, 27.9% African-American, 21.9% Hispanic, 5.7% Asian, 10.4% other.

The foreign language program in our county is a specialty program. Students who are accepted into this program start learning a foreign language in sixth grade. All students in the program sign a contract stating that they will maintain at least a “C” in both language arts and foreign language as well as an “S” (Satisfactory) in conduct. Students’ placement

in the program is reviewed if they are not meeting the contract requirements. Many students come into the program because they think it will be fun to learn a new language. Sometimes, however, their work habits need refining. My primary objective of this research project was to explore an alternate way of addressing homework.

Puzzlement

How can I get my students to do homework and make it more meaningful so they will want to do it?

I started by making a list of a few of the more-common responses I have heard regarding homework. Do these excuses sound familiar?

“What homework?”

“You didn’t tell us we had homework.”

“It’s due today?”

“It’s in my locker.”

“I did it but I left it at home.”

“Can I bring it to you later?”

This year I took a new approach to homework. No specific homework was assigned on a daily basis. I simply asked the students to practice the material learned in class that day for at least fifteen minutes each night. I encouraged them to be creative and have fun with their practice. The time spent in class was used to practice and prepare students for Friday’s quizzes. I encouraged students to supplement the practice we were doing in class with practice at home, but emphasized that it was their own responsibility to be prepared for the quiz on Friday.

I quickly noticed an interesting pattern in my classes. One half of each class consistently scored an “A” or “B” on the weekly quizzes while the other half consistently scored a “D” or “F”.

I wanted to establish a homework program to help students who needed more structure and accountability without penalizing those who were successful with the flexibility of choosing their own homework tasks. Would students who score below an 84% on the weekly quiz do better on the next week’s quiz if they had a homework sheet containing daily homework assignments aimed at practicing both the current as well as the past week’s material? These were the questions I addressed in my research project.

Methodology

I created a homework sheet, which contained carefully selected assignments for students to practice the current week’s as well as the material from the past week (see Appendix B). I wanted parents to be involved monitoring and encouraging their children in their foreign language studies. Many assignments on the homework sheet would be to practice out loud for just a few minutes with a parent

or to show a parent their written work. Parents would then sign-off for that day. Having parents directly involved helped me know that their children were making the effort to practice at home.

Data Collection

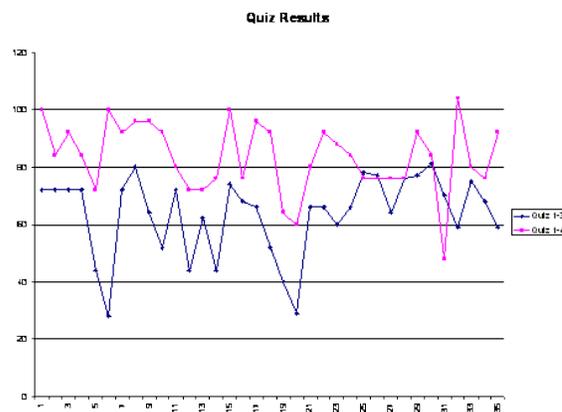
All students received the homework sheet, but only those who scored below an 84% on the previous week’s quiz were required to do it. I checked their homework daily for errors and offered them the incentive of retaking a past quiz if they achieved an 84% or higher on the next quiz as well as a 100% on their homework sheet.

Data Analysis

I kept a record of the students’ quiz scores and how much of the homework sheet they completed. I also had students write anonymous opinions about the homework sheet at the end of each week after they had taken the quiz.

Results

I monitored the students’ preparation for quiz 1-3 (first quiz) in class only. No other homework was assigned to these students to help them prepare. I monitored the students’ work the following week using the homework sheet in preparation for quiz 1-4 (second quiz). The data on the graph below compare the students’ quiz scores between their first quiz (quiz 1-3) and their second quiz (quiz 1-4).



Student Opinions

Below are some specific statements made by the students regarding the homework sheet. I chose these particular quotes because they represent responses that were given more than five times.

“I feel that the homework sheet is helping me do better and I feel that I’m learning more.”

“I like knowing my homework in advance.”

“Assigned homework forces me to study.”

“The homework sheet is helpful. I did better on the quiz this week. I felt more confident and the quiz seemed easier.”

“I want more homework. It helped me a lot.”

“ I like having the homework sheet as an option.”

Results

Overall, students were very receptive to the homework sheet and in almost all cases there was a direct correlation between how much of the homework they completed and how they performed on the following quiz.

Parents were also very receptive to the homework sheet. I received many e-mails from parents thanking me for this homework program. They were supportive, encouraging, and grateful. They were happy to know exactly what homework was assigned each day and to be able to monitor it.

Conclusion

The homework sheet has proven to be an effective tool in helping close the achievement gap among students in my class. The more the students practice the language, the better they perform. More importantly, I feel that this TAR helped my students develop as independent learners, in charge of their own learning. How much and what kind of practice is needed depended on the individual. Some students were able to do what it took to succeed without specific homework assignments, but there were many students who needed teacher-directed structured practice, either to get ideas of how and what to study or to help them discipline themselves. Offering the practice sheet as an option for those who were scoring at 84% or higher on the quizzes had been very positive. Students did not feel like they were doing busy work. Requiring students who scored under an 84% to complete the homework has proven to benefit them in their achievement, self-confidence, and attitude.

Implications

This research project presented the idea that seemingly drastic changes to the educational norm of homework can dramatically alter student enthusiasm and achievement. Additional research projects could examine the types of homework assignments developed by the students and how their own home learning methods can inform classroom instruction. This is further evidence that student-centered and constructed learning can be a successful approach to teaching.

Reflections

I have learned from this research project that some students need homework and some do not. Students who are doing well like the freedom of choosing what and when to study. I plan to continue

with this principle; however, I am going to make some adjustments to the design of the homework sheet so it is easier to use. Instead of writing all the homework assignments on the sheet in advance, I will leave blank spaces for the students to fill in the homework assignments themselves. This way I have more flexibility and allow my students the opportunity to build their learning in creative individualized ways. I felt that what is most critical in this work is the fact that my students have developed a keener sense of becoming independent learners, a life-long skill that they will take with them beyond my classroom.

End of Story for Teacher # 3

Methods Professor

Why do teachers give homework? Do students need incentive and motivation to complete homework tasks? Clearly, homework should be connected to in-class instruction and at-home work can provide additional “practice.” Homework in foreign languages is usually a reading/writing exercise. In this case, students responded favorably to having a choice about homework. Through her action research study, Ally was able to conclude that the homework sheet proved to be an effective tool in helping to close the achievement gap on the weekly quizzes. By giving students a choice, she was able to collect data based simply on what the students decided to do and how that decision impacted their grades. As Ally discovered, TAR can yield unexpected benefits as well. In this case, Ally found increased support from parents who welcomed the opportunity to know exactly what homework was assigned each day and the chance to monitor it. The research here created a foundation for not only methodological change, but also for student responsibility and choice which can lead to a more fulfilling and successful learning experience.

While the previous examples demonstrate how action research can be used to modify specific activity in the classroom, the following study demonstrates how one teacher sought to examine how her students regarded her as an effective teacher. This teacher was particularly interested in enhancing her skills as a reflective practitioner and thinking deeper how her own teaching practices. Reflective teaching practices (Richards & Lockhart, 1996) create multiple opportunities to investigate teaching strengths and weaknesses in a comfortable, yet efficient manner.

Julia Ortega wanted to discover more about her sixth grade language students to improve her teaching and become more effective in the classroom. Reflective teaching practices (Richards & Lockhart, 1996) allow educators to evaluate their teaching

strengths and weaknesses in order to build a strong teaching philosophy and identity. By conducting the following research in her classroom, Julia hoped to develop her reflective skills and construct a more positive learning environment by adjusting her teaching style.

Teacher Story # 4
Helping My Students Build
a Learning Community

Julia Ortega

Middle School Spanish Teacher

Introduction

This research took place in my Spanish I sixth grade class in a northern Virginia middle school. These students take Spanish I for two years. In sixth grade, they take half of level I Spanish and in seventh grade, they complete the other half. They are awarded high school credit (Carnegie unit) at the end of two years. This group also takes Spanish II as eighth graders.

Puzzlement: Do my students feel that I create and support a learning community? I believe by understanding what motivates and concerns my students, I can be more effective in the classroom. My research was simply motivated. I wanted to know more about my students so I could improve my teaching and yield more positive student attitudes and outcomes. I set out to discover if there was a relationship between their responses to simple questions and factors such as gender, age and participation in class. I wanted to give my students a chance to talk about their feelings regarding Spanish class and give them an opportunity to talk about anything of their choosing.

Methodology

I focused on gaining information from my students through the use of a survey, Figure 4. I wanted to understand the perspective of my sixth graders and to reflect on their concerns as students in my classroom.

Some questions that motivated my research were:

- Am I too difficult or easy?
- Am I perceived as mean or fair?
- How do students feel about my class?
- How can I improve my teaching strategies?

After administering the survey, I planned to analyze the results by synthesizing common themes. I used the results to compare and contrast student responses according to males and females because I was curious about perceptions of middle school-aged learners. Using the information obtained, I hoped to be able to make decisions about how to improve my teaching styles and affect immediate change in my classroom.

Data Collection

All of my 6 th grade students, a total of fifty in Spanish I (two periods or classes), were anonymously surveyed. The survey was administered once in the school year. Students were asked to omit their names on this one-time survey. Students were assured their answers were confidential and they would not have to fear repercussions. The survey took about 7-10 minutes to complete. I told students that I would give them as much time as needed to complete the survey. Students were told not to look at each other's papers and not to discuss their answers with each other. They were asked to think about their answers and be as honest as possible. I also asked if they had any questions prior to conducting the survey.

Use your own paper and answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

- What do you like about my class? Why?
- What don't you like about my class? Why?
- Do you participate in class? If yes, why? If no, why?
- Are you involved in any clubs or extracurricular activities? If so, what are they?

You are not required to sign your name on this survey. If you choose this, please identify yourself by Male or Female. Thank you!

Figure 4. Mrs. Ortega's Survey

Students completed the survey and were asked to place their surveys on a desk near the door. I didn't want them to have to walk up to my desk to turn in their surveys. I wanted to reduce or minimize any possible intimidation factors.

Data Analysis

A total of 31 females and 19 males were surveyed. The data presented here are a sampling of all data collected. Individual student responses are verbatim (italicized) and when applicable, the number of students with the same response is provided. Each single italicized item is an individual response unless otherwise indicated.

What students like about my Spanish class. Male responses. 53% answered " watching movies." Other responses are listed below:

- I like learning Spanish(4)
- I like doing the work(3)
- I like Spanish because it is fun (3)
- I like speaking Spanish (3)
- Spanish projects (2).

Female Responses.

- Spanish is fun (9)
- I like learning Spanish (8)
- I like Spanish projects (7)
- Movies (7)
- Games (6)
- Speaking Spanish (5)
- I like learning new Spanish words (3)
- Write on chalkboard (3)
- I like writing in pen (2).

Additional responses cited by females included: Love everything, Role-play, Homework passes, Like listening to the teacher’s jokes, teacher doesn’t put you on the spot, I like oral work, Working in the Spanish web, I like Señora Ortega and the way she teaches, It’s like having recess but you are also learning.

What students do not like about my Spanish class. Male Responses. 50% of the males surveyed don’t like tests or homework. Other dislikes are: The class opener - Spanish conversation (2), I don’t like looking up words in the dictionary (2), I can’t think of anything I don’t like (2).

Female responses. Tests and homework were also on the top of the list for females in terms of dislikes about my class. When females were asked what they don’t like about my class, they answered: *Translations* (3), *Class is boring, too much work* (2), *Spanish words that are hard* (2).

Results

The survey yielded some interesting results. My student participation rate was over 95% as indicated by the students and I believe this is a reflection of what students thought they should write in answer to the survey question, “Do you participate in class?” Also, in terms of gender differences, the females wrote much more than the males. The girls were openly critical and dealt with broader issues. The girls were more concerned about classroom justice and fairness. Boys’ concerns were practical such as classroom temperature or concerns about the work (translation, vocabulary, content). In terms of class participation, both males and females had equally high participation rates (ninety percent or more).

I was surprised by the responses from my third period class. This class has seen more of the disciplinary side of me because of some student conduct and work habits, but their surveys did not contain more negative responses than the less difficult 4 th period class. Essentially, I discovered that students like my class and they believe that learning Spanish is fun. The rewards of learning

appear to be intrinsic for these young learners. I do have external rewards such as homework passes, bonus points, stickers, but the students did not mention these motivators on the survey.

Conclusion

The results of the survey affirm my personal feeling that nothing goes unnoticed by students and that, as a teacher, I truly am on stage. Comments made by students on the survey about my hair and my personal appearance supports this idea.

The survey also presented some interesting sociological patterns. Females were much more articulate about their dislikes than the males. They also had more criticisms. It is interesting to note that females viewed me more critically than the males or they were more open about discussing their opinions.

I’m glad to know most of my students are happy with me. I am strict at times and demand a lot, but I believe expectations have a lot to do with how students perform. I expect the best from my students and they give me their best. The survey allowed me to get in touch with my students and to appreciate their perspectives in the classroom and in their lives. I believe this survey has made me a more compassionate and caring teacher.

Implications

This classroom based research project proved to be a powerful way to gain insight into my own teaching. I feel that surveys are a useful tool for all teachers who seek honest feedback from students. By asking the right questions and carefully reviewing the responses from the surveys, teachers are in a better position to improve the classroom environment and their teaching methods. Administering anonymous surveys is essential to obtain realistic and concrete information that can be valuable and instrumental in creating optimal learning experiences. Future use of surveys could assist me in improving other aspects of my teaching including classroom management.

Reflections

After carefully reviewing the data from the survey, I decided to make a few changes in my attitude and procedures. I realize I have to be more flexible with my 6th graders. They are making a transition from elementary to middle school. High school Spanish can be overwhelming for 6th graders. The survey answers remind me that these children are dealing with all kinds of pressures from parents and peers. I don’t want to add to that. I hope to be a positive influence in their lives and not a negative one. As a result of the survey, I also try to release my sixth graders a minute early so they won’t be pushed or harassed by seventh graders in the hall. I never knew this was a problem until the survey.

Also, in retrospect, I should have used a more objective way of measuring student participation other than posing the question: Do you participate in class? For instance, if I were to count the number of raised hands during a given period, my participation rate would have been more accurate than what the students indicated in the survey. While the survey was effective, modifications to it could have yielded more useful results.

Overall, I feel that the reason for my research was satisfied. I learned more about my students, made changes in my attitude and procedures, and learned about the Teacher Action Research process. I hope that this new and deeper knowledge of my students will ultimately translate into better teaching strategies and improved student outcomes.

End of Story for Teacher # 4

Methods Professor

This study clearly highlights the complexity of TAR. This teacher began her study asking a question with four sub-questions. The end result was a survey that emphasized what Julia's students' thought about her as a teacher. What is particularly noteworthy about this study is that it highlights the notion that research is multi-faceted and is not always straightforward. The researcher may start with one goal in mind and then be moved in other directions. The survey used in Julia's research allowed her to discover affective feelings about her students and to appreciate their perspectives. Through the process, she was able to see expected and unexpected outcomes both of which can assist in informing pedagogical choices. Julia noted, "I now realize these kids have a lot to juggle and after I conducted this interview I became more aware of what it's like to be their age. Also, I was really impressed at how grateful they were that I thought enough of them to ask their opinions." It is clear as well from this study that although TAR can begin with a specific series of questions, not all may be answered and some new ones can arise. Julia's research discoveries gave her practical information that she could apply instantly. This research also pointed out the teacher's need to become more receptive to change, a task that can never be understated in the process of teaching as well as when conducting research.

Conclusion

As the methods professor I guided and supervised these 4 in-service teachers as they conducted their research projects. My objective throughout was to empower these teachers to begin regarding themselves as researchers – to take ownership of their ability to question, analyze, and reflect on the teaching and learning process. The use of TAR allowed all four of these teachers to actively

engage in classroom-based research. Each of the teachers faced similar challenges: providing appropriate instructional assistance for Heritage Language Learners, choosing effective teaching strategies to reach a wide range of students' language proficiency levels, and student behavioral problems and motivation. Once the teachers identified the puzzlement, they set out in an organized methodical way to investigate, gather and analyze data and then make informed decisions. During the time of the research projects, I witnessed each teacher examining and questioning their own assumptions about what was occurring in their classrooms. These were evident in weekly email communications as well as in-class discussions. Each continued to examine their own beliefs and all were critical with regard to ways to improve and/or do things differently in both teaching and assessment practices.

Here we have clear examples of how teachers acting as researchers can create thought-provoking environments that allow the teacher to become the learner by constructing an individualized informative study that often yields powerful results. The teachers in this paper were supported by the methods professor in the course. Topics such as working with Heritage Language Learners, Cooperative Learning, Multilevel classes, etc. were all covered as part of the course syllabus.

When will we debunk the myth that teacher action research is "scary" and not for the faint at heart? More and more the tide is changing as we see larger numbers of classroom teachers actively engaged in research. Mills (2003) defines action research as:

... any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers to gather information about the ways that their particular school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn. The information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment and on educational practices in general, and improving student outcomes. (p.4)

The common denominator in the many terms used to describe teacher action research is the teacher as an "active constructor of knowledge rather than a passive consumer of it" (Miller & Pine, 1990).

I am heartened when I read the breadth and depth of current research being undertaken by both novice and experienced educators. What is particularly encouraging is that we clearly see the professional development of reflective practitioners. Educators examine a particular phenomenon that is indigenous to their respective classrooms. Teachers conducting research are empowered. The four teachers cited in this article have all learned not only

about the TAR process but also about the profound effect this type of research can have on teaching. Teacher research treats teachers as autonomous, responsible agents who participate actively in directing their own work and their own professional development (Zeichner & Klehr, 1999). TAR is transformative in its ability to scientifically display the dynamics of a classroom and present the teacher as a professional with an individual research base.

Finally, of primary importance in teacher action research is sharing findings, i.e., what one learned. Teachers engaged in classroom research typically become leaders in their schools. Often their work is shared within the school district and many go on to present their findings at local, state, and in some cases, national conference settings. These are sometimes presented as workshops or poster sessions. The relationship that forms between the classroom teacher and the university academician provides a very fertile ground for additional work. Such was the case with the four teachers who told their “stories” in this article. They are not only school leaders but continue to collaborate with the university methods professor in on-going professional development projects.

Additional resources for Teacher Action Research can be found at:

<http://Gse.gmu.edu/research/tr>
<http://www.ericsp.org/digests/TeacherResearch.htm>

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Appendix A

Fairfax County Public Schools - PALS: Performance Assessment for Language Students
Spanish for Fluent Speakers Level 1 Writing Tasks - Analytic Rubric

Criterio de Evaluación para el Discurso Escrito

Ejecución de Trabajo Indicado

1 --	Ejecuta el trabajo en lo mínimo; el contenido es inadecuado e ilegible
2 --	Ejecuta el trabajo parcialmente; cumple con algunos requisitos adecuadamente, pero sin desarrollo
3 --	Ejecuta el trabajo completamente; cumple con todos los requisitos adecuadamente con cierto desarrollo
4 --	Ejecuta el trabajo superiormente; cumple con todos los requisitos, con ideas bien desarrolladas y organizadas

Comprensión

1 --	El texto es incomprensible.
2 --	El texto es comprensible, pero requiere que el lector descifre el texto
3 --	El texto es comprensible; requiere un mínimo de enmiendas por parte del lector
4 --	El texto es comprensible; no requiere clarificación por parte del lector

Nivel de Discurso Escrito

1 --	Usa oraciones completas, algunas redundantes con pocos o sin mecanismos coherentes
2 --	Hay uso predominante de oraciones completas, poco redundantes con uso apropiado de mecanismos coherentes
3 --	Surge una variedad de oraciones completas y creativas; párrafos con cierto desarrollo; uso apropiado de mecanismos coherentes
4 --	Usa una variedad de oraciones completas y párrafos desarrollados con ideas creativas; uso apropiado de mecanismos coherentes

Vocabulario y Gramática

1 --	Uso limitado de vocabulario básico y/o de estructuras gramaticales básicas
2 --	Uso adecuado de vocabulario básico y/o de estructuras gramaticales básicas
3 --	Surge el uso de vocabulario nuevamente adquirido y/o de estructuras gramaticales complejas
4 --	Uso adecuado de vocabulario extenso y/o de estructuras gramaticales complejas

Ortografía

1 --	La escritura de las palabras es incorrecta y carece de acentos; la puntuación y/o el uso de la mayúscula son inapropiados
2 --	La escritura de las palabras es a veces correcta; el uso de los acentos; la puntuación y/o el uso de la mayúscula son a veces correctos
3 --	La mayoría de las palabras están escritas correctamente; la mayoría de los acentos, la puntuación y/o el uso de la mayúscula son correctos.
4 --	Las palabras están escritas correctamente; los acentos, la puntuación y/o el uso de la mayúscula son correctos también

Appendix B

Sample of Homework Sheets

Nom: _____ **Period:** _____

IB Homework sheet 1-6 10/14/02 – 10/17/02

I am providing this homework sheet as a way for you to have structured practice which will help you bring up your quiz scores. If your next quiz score is an 84% or higher, you may retake 1 of your past quizzes. I know that you can do it. I am confident that this practice will help you accomplish your goals.

Instructions for homework sheet: You are to do each of the assignments on the day it is assigned. All assignments are due the following day. Please have the homework as well as this sheet in class everyday. I will stamp your sheet if you have completed the assignment. At the end of the week, you will turn in this stamped sheet.

Homework Assignment

Day assigned

Teacher stamp

Lundi
10/14/02 Write a sentence using each of the possessive adjectives: *Mon, ma, mes, ton, ta, tes, son, sa, ses, notre, nos, votre, vos, leur, leurs*. Make flashcards for the new vocabulary learned this week – refer to phrase list 1-6 (16 flashcards).

Mardi
10/15/02 Write a sentence using each of the possessive adjectives: *Mon, ma, mes, ton, ta, tes, son, sa, ses, notre, nos, votre, vos, leur, leurs*. Go through all the new flashcards 1-6 and pull out the ones you don't know. Study the ones you don't know with your parents for 10 minutes and have them sign in the teacher box.

Mercredi
10/16/02 Write a sentence using each of the possessive adjectives: *Mon, ma, mes, ton, ta, tes, son, sa, ses, notre, nos, votre, vos, leur, leurs*. Go through all the new flashcards 1-6 and pull out the ones you don't know. Study the ones you don't know with your parents for 10 minutes and have them sign in the teacher box. Get a picture or pictures from the internet for the front of your postcard. Postcard due jeudi le 17 octobre.

Jeudi
10/17/02 Write a sentence using each of the possessive adjectives: *Mon, ma, mes, ton, ta, tes, son, sa, ses, notre, nos, votre, vos, leur, leurs*. Go through all the new flashcards 1-6 and pull out the ones you don't know. Study the ones you don't know with your parents for 10 minutes and have them sign in the teacher box. Take careful notes about the quiz for tomorrow and check the items off, when you feel prepared, as you study.

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Note from the 2015 Executive Editor, Constantin Schreiber

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