

Action Research and Didactics on Foreign Language Evolution

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Abstract

With the objective to find ways to attain the descriptors established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for the standardization of language learning, a group of 12 students from first year of the Foreign Languages Major at Universidad de Oriente was selected to implement an action research project and revise the procedures and techniques used in the teaching–learning process. The group included students from the three existing groups, 6 males and 6 females. The methodology followed in the experiment took into consideration steps offered by Burns, A (1998), Nunan, D. (1990) and Wallace, M.J. (1998) for action research; besides Bausela's (2004) professional perspectives: a social perspective (professional formation and social participation), and a personal perspective (formative aspects and cognitive aspects). First, an action was planned to address the problem, then the cycle planning, acting, observing and reflecting was followed according to the characteristics of this type of research and some arguments offered in Harmer's cycle (2005). Among the limitations detected in the linguistic diagnosis too much hesitation, poor speaking and writing production with short simple sentences, tendency to use Spanish to complete the ideas, and Spanish-like intonation patterns were registered. To solve the problems detected an "English club", which included different activities, was created, and put into practice. They contributed to improve the students' performance with the English language.

Keywords: Foreign languages, English, action research, students

Resumen

Con el objetivo de encontrar formas de lograr los descriptores establecidos por el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas (MCERL) para la estandarización del aprendizaje del idioma, se seleccionó un grupo de 12 estudiantes del primer año de la especialidad de Idiomas Extranjeros de la Universidad de Oriente para implementar un proyecto de investigación de acción y revisar los procedimientos y Técnicas utilizadas en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje. El grupo incluía estudiantes de los tres grupos existentes, 6 hombres y 6 mujeres. La metodología seguida en el experimento tomó en consideración los pasos ofrecidos por Burns, A (1998), Nunan, D. (1990) y Wallace, M.J. (1998) para la investigación acción; además de las perspectivas profesionales de Bausela (2004): una perspectiva social (formación profesional y participación social) y una perspectiva personal (aspectos formativos y aspectos cognitivos). Primero, se planificó una acción para abordar el problema, luego se siguió la planificación del ciclo, la actuación, la observación y la reflexión de acuerdo con las características de este tipo de investigación y algunos argumentos ofrecidos en el ciclo de Harmer (2005). Entre las limitaciones detectadas en el diagnóstico lingüístico, se registraron demasiadas dudas, mala producción de habla y escritura con oraciones simples cortas, tendencia a usar el español para completar las ideas y se registraron patrones de entonación similares al español. Para resolver los problemas detectados, se creó y puso en práctica un "Club de inglés", que incluía diferentes actividades. Estas contribuyeron a mejorar el rendimiento de los estudiantes con el idioma inglés.

Palabras clave: idiomas extranjeros, inglés, investigación acción, estudiantes

Introduction

The art of teaching and learning is permanently refreshed by the development of humanity. This fact is greatly reinforced at present by the imminent revolution of technology that affects every particular science exposed on fast scientific outcomes. The same is true for Didactics of foreign language, which is part of the world of sciences.

Historically, it has been focused by different methods and approaches identified in different periods of development; they all have offered arguments and rationales to push the science forwards. Among them the functional-notional approach, the cognitive approach, TBLT, the communicative approach could be mentioned.

The implementation of the different approaches and tendencies have enriched the techniques to be used in the teaching – learning process of English and have demonstrated that there is not a unique way of developing it. What can probably synthesize all of them is to experience in practice, to come over with the procedures and techniques that best suit for the accomplishment of the objectives expected from the teaching-learning process. The dynamics of Didactics is closely related then to research, since they share principles of inquiring, information collection, planning, implementation and decision making.

The psychologist Lewin, K. (1946) proposed the term action research to identify a practical way of investigation in which a group of people organize their activities to better up their living conditions and learn from their own experience; his model constitutes a permanent spiral of reflection and action, and it is true from other approaches as the Common European Framework for Languages. Consequently, the present work is intended to highlight the way of improving Didactics as a science applying these two approaches.

The XX Century was rich on the development of new tendencies in Didactics supported by research outcomes; among them it can be mentioned action research and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages which offer immediate clinic to the process, and the author of the present paper intends to illustrate.

Authors like Lewin, K. (1946) Castellanos Simons, B. (1998), Kemmis y McTaggart: (1989), Kathleen M. Bailey (2001), Bausela Herreras, E. (2004), Uljens, M. (2005) among others have studied the teaching-learning process using the action research approach and have contributed to this science with principles, techniques and methods.

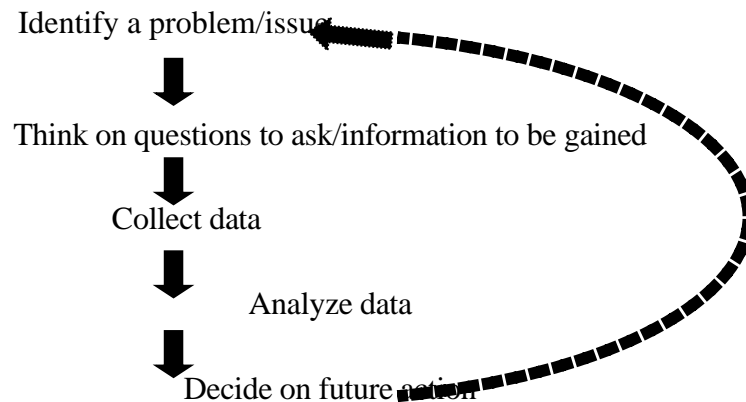
Action research implies a particular methodological approach which might affect any of the personal and non-personal components of Didactics. The concept is sometimes confusing with teacher research and classroom research because it is often conducted by teachers in language classrooms. Nevertheless, it focuses on particular features of classroom interaction. But action research is more than simply research led by teachers

in classrooms. It is an approach to collecting and interpreting data that involves clear, repeated cycles of procedures.

The wide goals of action research are to pursue local understanding and to bring about progress in the context under study. Kemmis & McTaggart (1989) described action research as “a form of ‘self-reflective enquiry’ undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out”. As it can be understood, this approach was first applied to social situations to claim for justice; then it moved to educational area.

According to Lewin (1946), the process lies on four phases: Planning, Acting, Observing and Reflecting, which reveals the evolution, in this case of language acquisition on the students’ side. This cycle takes the process forwards to planning, but planning with a different perspective, since the results of the reflections would be the content of the new plan. From the author’s point of view, this methodology keeps participants motivated towards the area of action, and it could be related to the stretching force the teaching- learning process demands to step forwards.

Most recently, Harmer, J. (2005) offers an action research cycle that could be taken into consideration as optional in the implementation of specific courses on language teaching and learning. He proposes to



Bausela, E. (2004) argues a more holistic view following Colas Bravo (1994:295) formative objectives of participatory research in teaching. They defend two dimensions, the social dimension that potentiates professional formation and social participation; and the personal dimension that includes formative aspects and cognitive aspects. This position embraces didactic awareness, since its outcomes are to transform the personal and non-personal categories of Didactics.

Although action research has had different perspectives, there are important methodological issues that can be summarized: the prior objective is to better the teaching practice instead of generating new knowledge; the process has the goal to guide, correct and evaluate systematically the decisions and actions taken; it is a reflective

research (Carr y Kemmis, 1988); it is a means for permanent formation; It is a way of introducing new approaches to the teaching-learning process; it is a means to improve communication and interpersonal relationship; and it makes possible the solution of classroom problems.

It also has important characteristics as the flexibility in the phases of the process favoring the classroom-problem solutions, careful analysis and interaction of all participants in the teaching-learning process; interpretative outcome rather than explanatory one; besides, it facilitates intensive drilling and places the teacher as professional researcher.

The management of action research requires its methodology, and authors like Burns, A (1998), Nunan, D. (1990) and Wallace, M.J. (1998) have contributed with activities like tape recording or registration of the ongoing process; questioning from different positions or roles (observer, teacher, student); keeping a diary for a period of time, then discuss how these issues could be investigated further, apply actions, observe and control the changes /outcomes for further actions; determining steps for action research project (planning, acting, observing, reflecting and re-planning).

Action research could be summarized as an active reflective research process that permits to implement innovations in the teaching -learning process, refreshing Didactics permanently.

A different approach is provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in the XXI century. It is an **action-oriented approach which** represents a shift away from syllabuses based on a linear progression through language structures, or a predetermined set of notions and functions, towards syllabuses based on needs analysis, oriented towards real-life tasks and constructed around purposefully selected notions and functions. This promotes a *proficiency* perspective guided by ‘**Can do**’ descriptors.

The proposal is a tool to assist the planning of curricula, courses and examinations by working backwards from **what the users/learners need to be able to do in the language**.

The authors of CEFR have stated from the very beginning:

‘One thing should be made clear right away. We have NOT set out to tell practitioners what to do, or how to do it. We are raising questions, not answering them. It is not the function of the Common European Framework to lay down the objectives that users should pursue or the methods they should employ’. (CEFR: Notes to the User)

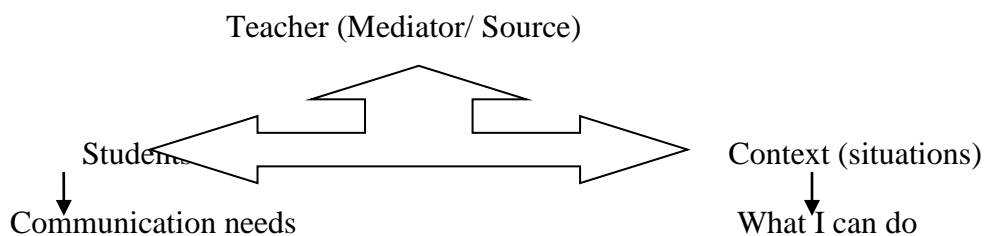
It implies that the teaching and learning process is driven by actions, suggests planning backwards from learners’ real life communicative needs, with consequent alignment between curriculum, teaching and assessment; but it leaves an important gap on how to handle the day-to-day classroom problems according to the context.

CEFR is a vehicle for promoting quality in second/foreign language teaching and learning as well as plurilingual and intercultural education. Its descriptors refer to three metacategories that involve communicative activities (for reception, interaction and production), strategies and communicative language competences.

These categories comprise key information to make communication work; nevertheless, most of the students fail in the strategies to use as hinge between the their resources (competences) and what he/she can do

with them (communicative activities) because they get lost in the chain, although the frame suggests the principles of a) planning action, b) balancing resources and compensating for poor performance during execution and c) monitoring results and undertaking repair as necessary.

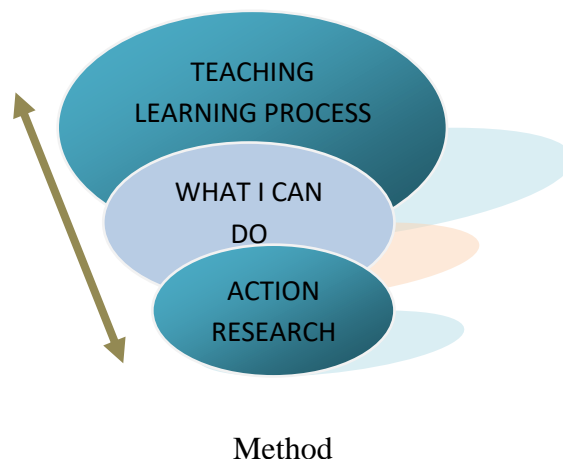
There is a congruency between the aims of Didactics and the action approach of the Common European Framework for Languages at developing capacities on the students at each level UNDERSTANDING (listening and reading) SPEAKING (interaction and production) WRITING. This approach marks a different way to look at language teaching and learning; it breaks some traditional internalized procedures; but establishes a direct connection between the language acquired and what people can do with it. Nevertheless, there are still aspects to perfectionate in terms of language acquisition. These gaps can be focused and solved with the potentialities and opportunities of action research.



The existence of so many different approaches and methods for the teaching of foreign languages, sometimes makes teachers hesitate on which one to choose and how to deal with the selection. On that concern, there is not a recipe; but it is advisable to reflect on what is appropriate and how to apply the methodological beliefs that guide our teaching practice, the objective we aim at the course, the context and the characteristics of the participants.

At this point, it is important to highlight that Didactics is flexible in the concreteness of its non-personal components, which paves ways for adequating and researching for better practices. Therefore, the teaching-learning process provides the context for the learners to develop the capacities and abilities at the lights of the Common European Framework of Reference. The outcomes are recommendable to be analyzed and the procedures offered by the action research approach fit perfectly well to make decisions under a reflective and creative process maintaining Didactics in permanent evolution.

Investigating the teaching-learning process of a foreign language in schools, constitutes an instrument for teachers to reflect on pedagogical reality in order to increase the self-understanding of their pedagogical activity, and the conditions under which they are working. It stands the importance of action research as a tool for professional development as well.



With the intention of finding ways to attain the descriptors established by CEFR for the standardization of language acquisition, a group of 12 students from first year of the Foreign Languages Major at Universidad de Oriente was selected to implement an action research project and revise the procedures and techniques used in the teaching –learning process. The group included students from the three existing groups, 6 males and 6 females. Not all the students were highly motivated in the learning process because they felt the rhythm of the course was too slow following the course book.

The methodology followed in the experiment took into consideration steps offered by Burns, A (1998), Nunan, D. (1990) and Wallace, M.J. (1998) for action research; besides Bausela´s professional perspectives: a social perspective (professional formation and social participation), and a personal perspective (formative aspects and cognitive aspects). First, an action was planned to address the problem, then the cycle planning, acting, observing and reflecting was followed according to the characteristics of this type of research and some arguments offered in Hammer´s cycle.

While narrowing the problem, reflections made by students and the teacher permitted identify the foremost needs: the students wished to widen their vocabulary; to be self-confident; to solve pronunciation problems; to overcome limitations on understanding people from different cultures; to react in interactions; and to extend their integral culture.

Among the limitations detected in the linguistic diagnose were registered too much hesitation, poor speaking and writing production with short simple sentences, tendency to use Spanish to complete the ideas, and Spanish-like intonation patterns.

A second moment was to discuss with the students their perspectives on how they would like to solve these limitations. These reflections brought about interesting proposals as to work out new strategies in class to meet students' needs, to negotiate whenever possible the topics and learning activities, to work on language

awareness and learning autonomy, to use TIC in the teaching- learning process, to visit places of interest and socialize the input in English and to promote interaction with natives or other foreigners in the English language.

Consequently, an action plan was organized starting by the creation of an “English Club” as the image of the group. Activities were organized in a weekly meeting for listening to different materials, exchanging about topics, watching films, free writing, understanding proverbs, interaction with English speaking people, reading books.

The Club carried out the action plan for two semesters, period after which a new reflection section revealed great satisfaction on all participants’ side, since they referred to their advances in the English language mainly in the capacities of speaking (interaction and production) and writing. They have also improved in understanding, but it was considered they had to work harder in both listening and reading.

Results

As a result, the new actions to focus on are reading stories, deliver reunions for conversations, film debates, visit socio-cultural and historical places, receive lectures on updated topics, participate in scientific events, present their language learning experience to students of Senior High Schools and Pedagogical schools to motivate students from general education towards the study of foreign languages.

On the other hand, valuable ideas arouse to be taken into consideration from a Didactic point of view:

To develop the written capacity

- Train students in free writing first for the development of their imagination

• Supply supports to develop the capacity of writing such as pictures, sounds intrigue, spots, read and write, speak and write.

- Deal with writing as a process after enhancing creativity.

To develop speaking capacity (production and interaction)

- Use broadcasting

- Give priority to authentic materials

- Propitiate the debate in the process

• Organize language confrontation activities with students of other levels, specialists and foreigners.

- Participate in lectures offered by the British Council or other specialists.

These proposals proved that Didactics is permanently updated and, in its evolution,, it incorporates new techniques and conceptions in foreign language teaching and learning.

The outcomes of the project revealed that all the students improved not only in the language, but also in their integral formation; therefore they suggested extending these ideas to other students as well.

The evaluation of the project showed that when assessing the language level of the students all of them accomplished the 'Can Do' descriptors of B1 on speaking and writing, three (3) students did A2 in understanding and the others B1. Motivation increased not only for language study but also for their profession of study.

Discussion

After applying action research approach to find ways to accomplish the action oriented approach of the Common European Framework for Languages, it is possible to argue that they compliment one-another and at the same time enrich and reinforce Didactic principles, procedures and techniques to favor the teaching-learning process of the English language.

From a professional perspective, they generate critical attitudes and professional renewal. They also allow participation and modification of the context. Furthermore, from a social perception, they favor the changes and action transformations in the group and reinforce the consciousness of everyone's role in the society. Finally, from the personal perspective, they influence the cognitive and formative aspects, since the students developed intellectual skills, communicative abilities, acquire knowledge through active learning; module their performance and participate actively in the construction of their ways of learning

Conclusions

Didactics of English is a vivid science that permits the constant renewal of its procedures and methods. Consequently, it is important to put into practice the wide theoretical information available to refresh the teaching-learning process. In that direction, the present work highlights how action research interacts with the action oriented approach of the Common European Framework for Languages to develop communicative habits and abilities on the students in the teaching-learning process, and at the same time, continue the evolution of Didactics as a science.

Therefore, attention should be paid to this type of research and the CEFR, since they propitiate a renewal dynamics to the Didactics of English; and processes of comprehension, participation, reflection towards the implementation of action research in English language classrooms should be promoted.

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