Action Research: Bridging Theory and Practice

Nicole A Mills, Harvard University

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Nicole Mills, Harvard University, MA

Nicole Mills, Ph.D. is the coordinator of the Beginning French program at Harvard University.

Abstract

This article explored a two-year action research course aimed at linking theory and practice within a Masters of Arts in the Teaching of Second Language program for practicing foreign language teachers. Findings revealed that through self-reflection, participants were able to self-evaluate their teaching practices and beliefs, modify subsequent pedagogical approaches, and gain the tools necessary to engage in lifelong professional development.

For instance, researchers found that teacher beliefs and perceptions of competence are most malleable early in training and subsequently resistant to change. (Sax & Fischer, 2001). Despite such claims, some researchers suggest that teacher beliefs and perceptions of competence are most malleable early in training and subsequently resistant to change. (Ozgun-Koca & Sen, 2006; Pajares, 1992). This study, therefore, aimed to explore the influences of an innovative two-year online action research course aimed at developing practicing FL teacher beliefs and linking theory and practice within a Masters of Arts in the Teaching of Second Language program. Teacher self-efficacy, or "the extent to which the teacher believes he or she has the capacity to affect student performance," (Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, & Zellman, 1977, p. 137) was explored to provide insight into the relationship between teachers' perceived competence as both researchers and foreign language (FL) teachers. This study explored the major sources that contribute to TRs' self-efficacy and its consequences and how TRs' analyses of teaching tasks, action research tasks, and school context shape their teacher self-efficacy.

Bandura (1997) suggests that there are four sources and catalysts for change in self-efficacy: vicarious experiences, verbal persuasions, emotional indicators, and mastery experiences. Vicarious experiences are experiences in which individuals may assess their competence in relation to the accomplishments of peers. Verbal persuasions are verbal feedback about one's abilities to complete a task and emotional indicators are experienced emotions while teaching. The most influential source of efficacy information, according to Bandura (1997), however, is mastery experiences. Whereas successful experiences enhance self-efficacy beliefs, failed experiences weaken self-efficacy. (Tschanen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, & Hoy (1998) developed a model of teacher self-efficacy which includes the four sources of self-efficacy, analysis of teaching task and context, assessment of personal teaching competence, and the consequences of teacher self-efficacy. Grounded within this model, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What major sources contribute to the TRs' self-efficacy to conduct action research and how do the sources relate to their self-efficacy as FL teachers?
2. How do TRs' analyses of teaching tasks, action research tasks, and school context shape their teacher self-efficacy?
3. What are the consequences of teacher self-efficacy?

Methodology

Program Description
The context for this study was the Master of Arts in Teaching a Second Language Program for working French and Spanish teachers in 2010. The objectives of the program are to enhance language proficiency, cultural knowledge, pedagogical understanding, and critical thinking skills. The program consists of two summer terms and two non-residency years of online coursework. The online courses include a Language and Culture course and an Action Research Course.

Description of Action Research Course
The action research course encourages students to use classroom-based research to critically examine their own teaching practices and bridge second language acquisition theory to practice. The course assignments included three cycles. The first research cycle included the development of a research design and subsequent research report with a detailed data analysis of major themes and trends. The participants were asked to focus their research design and analysis on the promotion of joint, scaffolding, disciplined meaning making in the FL classroom. Joint refers to collaborative learning whereas scaffolding refers to assistance that allows students to engage in tasks that they are not able to complete independently. Disciplined meaning making refers to the negotiation of meaning in ways that promote and enhance critical thinking.

The second research cycle asked the participants to collaboratively conduct library research on a core concept such as love, morality, or nationalism within a specific Spanish or French context (i.e., Napoleon's role in history and its relationship to the concept of nationalism). The participants presented their concept-based research during online chat roundtables and developed conceptually-based teaching materials for their students.

During the third research cycle, the participants were asked to fuse the pedagogical understanding gained from the first research cycle with the conceptual content from the second research cycle. For example, for the first research cycle, a sample research question was: “What happens when students read authentic French texts?” During the second research cycle, this teacher conducted collaborative research on the concept of nationalism. During the third research cycle, this teacher transformed her research question to: “What happens when students seek to understand the concept of nationalism and its connection to cultural identity after reading an authentic French text?” The TRs then completed detailed research reports in which they interpreted the data and elicited their understanding about how students engaged (or did not engage) in joint scaffolding disciplined meaning making in the context of their research question. For each assignment, the participants received feedback online from their mentor who provided guidance and posed questions to enhance critical thinking. Collaborative discussion and co-mentoring was also encouraged among participants via the online discussion board.

Participants
Six of the ten graduates of the Masters program agreed to participate in this study. Three participants were Spanish teachers and 3 participants were French teachers (all female). Three participants taught at the middle school level and 3 at the high school level. They had an average of 11.3 years of teaching experience and the average age was 43. The two course mentors possessed doctoral degrees in applied linguistics.

Data Sources
The participants completed a Background questionnaire, the Teacher-Researcher Sense of Efficacy Scale (RSE), and the Foreign Language Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (FLTSE). Likert scale survey responses were measured on a 9 point Likert-type scale with the notations: 1 (Nothing), 3 (Very little), 5 (Some influence), 7 (Quite a bit), and 9 (A Great Deal). The scales and means are provided in Appendices A and B (http://works.bepress.com/nicole_mills/).

Data Collection and Analyses
Online chat was chosen due to the ease of this format with participants who lived in different parts of the country and its familiarity to former distance learning students. The participants were asked to engage in an online semi-structured interview of approximately 1 hour 30 minutes with questions grounded within Tschanen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, and Hoy's (1998) teacher self-efficacy model. Patterns and themes found in the TAs' interviews were then identified through inductive coding methods. Each interview was reviewed line by line and the researcher generated categories and labels using inductive coding techniques. The researcher then computed scores and tabulated information from the three questionnaires as sources of triangulation with the interview data.

Findings
QUESTION 1: What major sources contribute to the participants' self-efficacy to conduct action research and how does it relate to their self-efficacy as FL teachers?

Mastery Experiences
Many described the outset of the action research experience as stressful (3 TRs), challenging (3 TRs), and time consuming (2 TRs). Participants claimed that there was initially an "enormous learning curve" (3 TRs) and that they were challenged and preoccupied with "doing the whole thing 'right'" (1 TR). The next phase, however, was described as one of realization and consciousness. Three TRs described experiencing sometimes sudden, sometimes gradual recognition of the necessity for change in their pedagogical practices. Two TRs described how action research "opened their eyes" to what was happening in the classroom. The TRs claimed that the self-reflective process allowed them to further comprehend their own teaching practices and gain a deeper understanding of second language acquisition, justifying "why" and "how" various approaches were valuable. In the next phase, the TRs claimed that they synthesized their understanding and implemented revised pedagogical methods. Four teachers described implementation and change in the form of curriculum revision, instructional practices, and integration of technology. In the next phase, teachers then perceived that they had attained an increased sense of "mastery", using Bandura's (1997) terminology, regarding their capabilities as TRs. At the conclusion of the program, five TRs described the research experience as fundamental in developing a personal sense of leadership among FL professionals. Their sense of developing mastery gained from action research led to recognition among colleagues and supervisors (3 TRs), interest in reading of scholarly journals (2 TRs), the receipt of a grant (1 TR), interest in submitting a manuscript for publication (1 TR), and a desire to pursue doctoral level studies in second language acquisition (1 TR).

One TR, with moderately high FLTSE (7.4) and RSE (7.0) scores, outlined her gradual evolution toward an increased sense of pedagogical "mastery" in the following commentary: At first I was stressed trying to incorporate the research into the curriculum. I looked for 'down time' where it would fit into the grammar and vocabulary exercises that I had thought I needed to accomplish with the students. Gradually, I became aware that the research should be the curriculum: everything I was doing in the classroom had to change to become integrated with the research I was doing... Now, I want to change and rewrite the curriculum so that I can continue to research what is happening in the class. I would say that I am excited now about...
the prospect of doing research...[my research] is valuable not just to me but also to others in the field. What I find out can influence someone else. It is not exciting...

This sense of developing “mastery” and capability to “influence someone else” appears to affirm her membership and leadership within the second language acquisition community.

**Verbal Persuasions**

The TRs noted feedback from a variety of sources including action research mentors (5 TRs), school colleagues (4 TRs), supervisors and administrators (2 TRs), Master’s program colleagues (2 TRs), and students (2 TRs). Two TRs noted that their colleagues expressed positive reception and support of their pedagogical ideas (1 TR) and were impressed with student engagement and the complex topics addressed in class (1 TR). Although two TRs mentioned that their principal did not show great interest in their research, two other TRs mentioned that they received the most valuable feedback from their principal. The TRs, however, mentioned feedback from their action research mentor in the most frequent (5 TRs). This feedback was described as valuable, encouraging, and pivotal to their development. Two TRs viewed their mentors as experts and were “more susceptible to their feedback because they were more learned in the field.” The TRs claimed that their mentors’ feedback encouraged them to dig deeper in their analysis (4 TRs), question their own thought processes (3 TRs), and make new connections (1 TR).

**Vicarious Experiences**

When asked how they were influenced by others in action research, five TRs cited a combination of influences. These influences included their mentor (5 TRs), second language acquisition scholars (4 TRs), colleagues in the Master’s program (3 TRs), principals and supervisors (2 TRs), and students (2 TRs). The literature of scholars in the field of second language acquisition assisted TRs in structuring research reports (1 TR) and making connections between research and practice (1 TR). It appeared that by appraising their own capabilities to those of their scholarly “peers,” the TRs may have perceived themselves as more competent members of the community of FL practitioners and scholars.

**Emotional Indicators**

In describing how they felt while engaging in action research, the TRs, collectively provided a total of 26 adjectives to describe how they felt during the action research process which illustrated the five aforementioned phases toward developing mastery. Although four TRs described a progression from anxiety to developing confidence, the order in which two TRs presented their adjectives does not suggest that their emotions and feelings always progressed linearly. In “roller coaster” fashion, one TR with moderately high FLTSE (7.1) and RSE (6.4) scores described experiencing both “waves of competency” and “waves of doubt.”

**QUESTION 2: How do teacher-researchers’ analyses of teaching tasks, action research tasks, and school context shape their teacher self-efficacy?**

**Analyses of Action Research Tasks**

When asked if their research capabilities had an influence on their competence as FL teachers, all six participants responded affirmatively. They claimed that action research permitted them to validate their instructional choices through enhanced understanding of second language acquisition (4 TRs), reflect on classroom goals and happenings (4 TRs), improve instructional practices (6 TRs), increase teaching self-confidence (4 TRs), and enhance student learning (3 TRs). One TR with moderately high FLTSE (7.4) and RSE (7.0) scores described a personal shift from teacher-centered to student-centered instructional practices and expressed a seemingly liberated ability to be “free to be a learner alongside them.” Four TRs similarly discussed the value of enhanced understanding of second language acquisition with claims that they can more easily answer questions from parents, students, and coworkers about "what they are doing and why they are doing it" (2 TRs).

**Analyses of Teaching Tasks**

On average, the TRs reported a moderately high FL teacher self-efficacy score for their perceived competence in instructional practices (7.0). When asked to discuss their strategies used to engage students based on their action research, the six TRs provided a total of 53 different personalized pedagogical approaches, or an average of 9 instructional approaches per instructor, aimed at promoting joint scaffolded disciplined meaning making in their FL classrooms (see Table 1, http://works.bepress.com/nicole_mills/).

**Analyses of Teaching Context**

In describing the support that they received from their graduate program context, five of the six participants claimed that they felt well-supported by the Master’s program. Four of the six TRs also claimed that they felt “very supported” by their colleagues (2 TRs), department heads (3 TRs), and principals (5 TRs). Two TRs claimed, however, that the support received in their school context was sometimes less enthusiastic. One TR with moderately high FLTSE (6.3) and RSE (7.6) described the challenges that she faced with her department head as a result of the “new doors that have been opened” from her newfound knowledge. She stated:

Other colleagues...specifically my department head supports me in my work, as long as I don't ask her to change what/how she teaches. That is sometimes frustrating because I feel like new doors have been opened to me and want us all to take advantage of it, but I am 'treading patiently and carefully' with her, hoping to change her mind about certain things.

With the enlightened understanding gained from her action research experience, this TR is now confronted with the challenges of reintegrating into a teaching context that is resistant to pedagogical change. Her current challenge within her teaching context, however, does not appear to be a determination of if the curricular innovations will occur, but instead a determination of how she will effectively "tread patiently and carefully" within her context to attain these goals. Displaying similar leadership qualities and a sense of responsibility within her teaching context, another TR with moderately high FLTSE (7.4) and RSE (7.3) scores claimed, "I am responsible to guide my co-workers in this process... and pass the ideas to the other two teachers."

**QUESTION 3: What are the consequences of teacher self-efficacy?**

In reference to consequences of teacher self-efficacy, all six participants claimed that they would now be successful in their ability to innovate, reporting a high RSE average score for innovation (7.9). Three TRs claimed that they have already implemented changes in their teaching practices. Three others professed that they had begun the process of curricular redesign. In describing its critical importance, one TR stated, “I like how [my classmate] referred to us as doctors. You wouldn’t go see a doctor who stopped researching in his field and didn’t adapt any of the new and latest technologies and findings in his practice.”

All six participants also claimed that they would now place a “great effort” into the achievement of joint scaffolded disciplined meaning making because it was “important” to them. One TR with moderately high FLTSE (6.3) and high RSE (7.6) scores made the claim that she would spend “several days thinking about and working on one lesson in order to meet this goal, whereas before the [Master’s program], [she] just followed the book and didn’t put as much thought into goals for the students....” Similarly, five TRs claimed that they would actively engage in strategies such as analyzing and adjusting a lesson’s organization (2 TRs), revising question formulation (2 TRs), and self-reflection and evaluation after a lesson to ensure successful achievement of these goals in future lessons.

**Discussion**

Research has suggested that teachers’ beliefs are typically formed at the beginning of one’s teaching career and subsequently resistant to change (Ozgun-Koca & Sen, 2006). Findings from this study suggest that practicing FL teachers’ beliefs may indeed evolve when we ask teachers to problematize current practices, engage in personalized research, and engage in critical reflection (Swarz, Smith, Smith, & Hart, 2009).
Ling and Mackenzie (2001) suggest that “without [critical reflection], teachers are disempowered and dependent upon outside forces to control their work.” (p. 96). These findings suggest that the critical reflection component of this action research experience allowed these practicing FL teachers to establish a sense of ownership and regain control of their professional development. Through self-reflection, the participants were able to self-evaluate their current teaching practices, beliefs, and motives, and inform and modify subsequent pedagogical approaches, thus gaining the tools necessary to engage in lifelong professional development. The action research course, appropriately titled Developing Leaders through Teacher Research, empowered these practicing teachers by enhancing their perceived competence as teacher researchers and affirming their membership and leadership within the second language acquisition community.

**References**


**Critical Multiculturalism for Immigrants of Color**

**Gilbert C. Park, Ball State University, IN**

**Abstract**

While public schools have been preparing immigrants and their children to become productive members of the society, the demographic shift from earlier European immigrants to today’s immigrants of color demand a different way to address the goal of successful Americanization. Recognizing the impact of race in this process, this article argues for critical multicultural education that challenges the meaning of “American” to foster successful integration of today’s immigrant students of color into the American mainstream.

**Introduction**

Traditionally, public schools have played an important role in assimilating young European immigrants into the American mainstream. With the shift in the demographics of immigrants towards persons of color since 1965, however, an increasing number of scholars (Olsen, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Grant, 1994) argue that straight-line assimilation where immigrants become fully incorporated into American mainstream is only one of many options for today immigrants of color. Some of these critics (Park, 2011; Tuan, 1998) point to race as a factor in the Americanization process where schools actively construct white Americans to mean “real” Americans thereby leaving hyphenated American identities for many immigrants of color as less than authentic Americans. Seeking to add to this body of knowledge and to interrupt this process, this article argues for shift in schools’ approach regarding today’s immigrants of color towards critical multiculturalism through review of relevant findings. Specifically, it starts with an argument that race plays a role in guiding the immigrants of color towards dissonant acculturation away from mainstream America. Secondly, it criticizes widely used cultural celebrations to promote ethnic pride as a way to foster selective acculturation. Lastly, the author suggests critical multiculturalism that politicizes teaching and learning to foster selective acculturation into the American mainstream by challenging the meaning of “real” Americans.

**Segmented Assimilation & Race**

Today’s demographic shift adds a racial dimension to the Americanization process unlike the one experienced by the earlier European immigrants. According to Census 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) as an example, only 14% of foreign-born residents living in the United States were of European or Canadian origins while Asian and Latin American immigrants alone constituted 81.3% (p. 2). This demographic shift challenges the traditional understanding that Americanization is a straightforward process where immigrants become fully incorporated into American mainstream over time (Park, 2011; Lee 2005, Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). For instance, Portes & Rumbaut (2001) explain that today’s immigrants are “undergoing a process of segmented assimilation where outcomes vary across immigrant minorities and where rapid integration and acceptance into the American mainstream represent just one possible alternative” (p. 45). Other alternatives include rapid assimilation into non-mainstream and oppositional cultures of inner cities and slow assimilation on the terms of the immigrants. Considering the impact of race, they (2001) argue that “race is a paramount criterion of social acceptance that can overwhelm the influences of class background, religion, or language” in leading to either smooth or difficult incorporation into American mainstream (p. 47).