



Research on the Practice of Carrying out Cooperative Action Between English Teachers of Universities and Middle Schools

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ABSTRACT

The English curriculum reform in middle schools requires teachers to improve their professional competence. University teachers are encouraged to involve themselves in this process so as to help solve the teaching problems. It is an effective way to carry out the cooperative action between the teachers of universities and the teachers of middle schools. In the cooperative action, both the university teachers and the middle school teachers can benefit. Taking the cooperative action between the teachers of School of Foreign Language, Yangtze University and the teachers of Jiangling Middle School as an example, this paper elaborates the significance of the cooperative action, discusses the forms of cooperative action of the two sides, as well as the positive changes and initial results in the practical teaching of Jiangling Middle School since the cooperative action.

Keywords: Cooperative Action Research, Curriculum Reform, English Teachers of Universities and Middle Schools.

Introduction

Action research is a distinctive approach to studying one's own learning, a method designed to examine whether one's practice aligns with one's expectations^[1]. In the context of teaching, action research refers to exploratory activities in which teachers examine and investigate teaching phenomena within their own classrooms, thereby gaining knowledge and improving the quality of teaching^[2]. As a new research method, action research has attracted widespread attention in recent years, and numerous findings on the subject have emerged; the most representative is Wang Qiang's book *Action Research for English Teachers*^[3], which not only provides theoretical explanations but also presents case studies on how action research is implemented in practice. In particular, it offers a detailed account of how higher education institutions can collaborate with teachers in basic education to conduct action research, thereby playing a significant guiding role for subsequent research in this field. Other practical studies have also confirmed the significance and positive impact of collaborative action research between higher education institutions and secondary school English teachers^[4, 5]. Based on current research, the majority of collaborative studies have focused on urban secondary schools, with relatively few studies centring on town-based secondary schools; consequently, a typical county-level high school—Jiangling Middle School in Jiangling County, Jingzhou City—was selected as the partner institution for this project. Commencing in September 2023, a three-year collaborative action research project was launched with Year 10 teachers at Jiangling High School, aimed at further exploring the practical significance of collaborative action research between university and town secondary school English teachers. This paper elaborates on the characteristics of action research and the theoretical significance of collaborative action research between universities and secondary schools, and reports on the positive changes in teachers' thinking and classroom practice resulting from five months of collaborative action research.

I. Characteristics of Action Research

The fundamental characteristics of action research, as recognized by scholars, are: participation, practicality, collaboration, reflection, systematicity and openness. Participation refers to the fact that teachers themselves must be directly involved in planning and implementing the programme^[3].

Practicality refers to the fact that, in action research, the researcher is also the practitioner; teachers investigate issues in their own daily teaching practice and use this to improve their teaching practice. Collaboration emphasises cooperation among teachers. Reflectiveness is the core and key to action research; researchers must reflect whilst in action^[1]. Systematic and open nature refer to the fact that the process of action research is systematic—that is, identifying problems, defining problems, designing solutions, implementing solutions, and evaluating results—and that the entire research process and the outcomes obtained are open.

II. The Significance of Universities and Secondary Schools Collaborating on Action Research

(一) *From the Perspective of University Teachers*

On the one hand, university teachers can track graduates from their own institution and gain an understanding of their development after becoming teachers. Our collaborators comprise six English teachers from the Year 11 English department, three of whom are graduates of the Department of Foreign Languages at Yangtze University. Through this action research, we can gain insight into the professional development of these graduates as teachers, thereby providing a perspective for our future efforts to train qualified foreign language teachers. On the other hand, it offers university lecturers an opportunity to put theory into practice.

Having worked in higher education for a long time, university lecturers often lack opportunities to communicate with frontline secondary school teachers and gain an understanding of basic education. This can easily lead to a disconnect from basic education; over time, this undermines the principle that ‘theory derives from practice and serves practice’. Furthermore, it can encourage university lecturers to continually acquire new knowledge and adopt new teaching philosophies, them to engage more effectively with secondary school teachers.

(二) *From the Perspective of Secondary School Teachers*

1. Action research can promote the professional development of secondary school teachers, thereby enhancing teaching effectiveness and quality. British curriculum theorist Lawrence Stenhouse argues that curriculum reform depends primarily on whether teachers can systematically reflect upon, research and improve their own teaching, and are committed to enhancing their professional standards over the long term^[3]. The General Secondary School English Curriculum Standards also emphasize that teachers’ individual efforts to enhance their professional standards are key to the effective implementation of the English curriculum; teachers should, through collaborative to achieve personal professional development, thereby improving teaching and enhancing teaching effectiveness^[6].
2. Through collaborative action research, secondary school teachers can enrich their theoretical knowledge and understanding of research methods, integrate teaching with research, obtain first-hand data, and become research-oriented teachers.
3. Resources are scarce in secondary schools; although the internet is now convenient and offers abundant resources, teachers face tight schedules and lack the time. By collaborating with university staff, they can access university teaching and research materials; moreover, university staff may have better channels for obtaining materials and a greater sensitivity

to research-relevant resources, enabling them to share these promptly with secondary school teachers.

(三) *From the Perspective of Secondary Schools*

Collaborating with universities to conduct action research is an effective way to align with and deepen the reform of the secondary school English curriculum. The General Senior Secondary School English Curriculum Standards encourage secondary schools to tap into external resources, engage university experts and scholars, and to make full use of social resources to address practical problems in teaching^[6]. Therefore, collaboration between universities and secondary schools in conducting action research and sharing teaching resources is conducive to deepening curriculum reform. Furthermore, the outcomes of action research have a ripple effect on other schools.

III. Project Implementation

The project involves English teachers collaborating on action research, with one party comprising five teachers from our university's Department of Foreign Languages, and the other party comprising eight teachers from the Grade One English Teaching Group of Jiangling High School. These eight teachers form a young, proactive team that is willing to embrace challenges, bold in pursuing reform, dedicated to their work and highly effective in execution; together, the two groups have formed a new type of learning community.

The aim of the project is to assist secondary school teachers, through collaboration, in identifying and resolving teaching challenges, thereby enhancing their professional competence, improving teaching quality and effectiveness, whilst simultaneously monitoring the teachers' participation process and development. Consequently, the research comprises two aspects: first, to assist secondary school teachers in identifying and resolving specific issues in the classroom; and second, to track changes in teachers' pedagogical philosophies and teaching practices throughout their participation. In accordance with the project's objectives and scope, and in line with the characteristics of action research, work was carried out in a phased, planned and purposeful manner. The following details the practical implementation of the action research conducted in collaboration with Jiangling Secondary School over the past five months.

(一) *Helping teachers identify and resolve issues*

To assist teachers in identifying issues in their teaching more accurately, we employed a range of methods, including lecture-based training, classroom observation and lesson evaluation (both collective and individual), group teaching research and one-to-one discussions, reflection, joint reading, and case analysis.

1. Through lectures and training sessions, teachers learnt the relevant theories of action research. To ensure teachers understood the objectives of our project and to address any confusion they might have regarding action research, we delivered lectures on the subject, clarifying its significance, aims, steps and research methods, and analyzed case studies from academic papers on action research, thereby laying the groundwork for the subsequent work.
2. Observation and evaluation of lessons. By observing lessons, we can identify issues in

teachers' classroom practice. Following the observation, we evaluate the lesson together with the teacher, pointing out problems, acknowledging strengths, and offering targeted suggestions. This promotes reflection on their own teaching not only for the teacher delivering the lesson but also for other teachers participating in the observation and evaluation. At the same time, classroom observation and evaluation can help teachers enhance their awareness of issues and their sensitivity to teaching practices, thereby enabling them to identify their own research questions: by comparing themselves with the teaching staff—particularly outstanding teachers—they can pinpoint their own shortcomings, identify teaching behaviors in urgent need of correction, and then embark on their research. Consequently, classroom observation and evaluation constitute an important and effective avenue for action research. A four-day programme of classroom observation and evaluation is scheduled each month, employing a combination of centralized sessions and individualized guidance, which has yielded positive results. In addition, exemplary and open lessons delivered by outstanding teachers are frequently shared in WeChat groups; by observing these, teachers can learn effective teaching methods, identify their own shortcomings and gaps, and subsequently work to improve their weaker areas. For instance, after observing a model lesson, Teacher Li noticed that the presenting teacher made extensive use of vocabulary, and immediately recognized this as an excellent way to put learning into practice. She decided to adopt this approach in her own lessons and, in her subsequent lesson planning, carefully prepared her classroom language to incorporate as many of the students' recently learnt vocabulary and sentence patterns as possible.

3. Collective teaching research and individual exchanges. The Teaching Research Office holds weekly collective teaching research sessions. Following these sessions, individual exchanges and communication with teachers are organized to listen to their thoughts and concerns both inside and outside the classroom. This allows for a better understanding of their teaching experiences, pedagogical philosophies, and ideas, as well as their attitudes and views regarding this collaborative action research. Practice has shown that such individual exchanges are highly fruitful.
4. Reflection. Teaching reflection is the cornerstone of action research. Teachers must proactively engage in continuous, systematic reflection on their teaching practice, remaining constantly alert to their teaching decisions and behaviors, and becoming reflective practitioners. In action research, it is not enough merely to reflect; more importantly, action must be taken following reflection to improve practice. It is recommended that when teachers keep reflection diaries, they do so in a systematic, purposeful and targeted manner, focusing on the research questions. They should not merely pose questions, but actively seek answers.
5. Joint Reading. We read three books together: *Action Research for English Teachers*, *The Senior Secondary English Curriculum Standards*, and *What to Change, How to Teach, How to Assess*. Through joint study, we developed a relatively consistent teaching philosophy, which facilitated smoother communication and ensured we acted in unison.

6. Analysis of existing action research reports. To draw on the achievements of existing action research, we analyzed case studies and learned from existing experience during teaching research sessions, whilst at other times we encouraged teachers to draw on these resources as needed in relation to their own research questions. Ultimately, two action research questions were identified at the teaching research group level: one was how to improve student engagement in the classroom; the other was how to enable students to learn vocabulary effectively. Teachers also had their own more specific research questions.

(二) *Changes in Teachers' Pedagogical Philosophies and Teaching Practices during the Collaboration Process*

Changes in pedagogical philosophy can lead to changes in teaching practices. In their teaching practice, teachers must continually update their educational philosophies and innovate their teaching methods; they must guide students to adopt autonomous and collaborative learning approaches; they must shift the focus from the teacher's instruction to the student's learning; and they must endeavour to allow students sufficient time for autonomous learning and development; Classrooms must be not only student-centred but also learning-centred; students should 'learn by doing' and 'learn by applying'. These principles are also frequently emphasized during collaborative processes.

1. When observing classes again in January 2024, compared to the first observation in September 2023, it was gratifying to see that teachers had made positive changes in both their pedagogical philosophy and teaching practice. This demonstrates the openness of the teachers' educational outlook; they are able to update their educational perspectives in a timely manner, are willing to try new teaching strategies and methods, and exhibit strong implementation in the classroom. For example, when Ms Yang (project leader in the Department of Foreign Languages) suggested strengthening reading and provided reading materials, the teachers immediately incorporated novel-reading activities into self-study periods, during which students read English novels independently. Furthermore, teachers are gradually placing students at the centre of the classroom and making them the primary participants. In class, group activities, discussions and individual student presentations all demonstrate that teachers have progressively shifted their focus from their own teaching to the students' learning. In Teacher Li Ping's reading exercise class, through group discussions, students explained incorrect answers to one another, outlined their problem-solving approaches and strategies, whilst the teacher provided supplementary explanations. This approach, which allows students to solve problems independently, addresses the issue of insufficient classroom participation and the problem of only high-achieving students dominating the classroom. In Ms Wang Yanyun's composition class, students present their own writing, offer peer feedback, and identify well-crafted sentences, thereby effectively demonstrating their central role in the learning process. Compared to the first lesson observed, Ms Li Yaping's teaching has shown marked improvement; her activities have stimulated students' thinking, encouraging them to speak up and get hands-on. In the lessons of Teachers Zhang Xiaoxia, Zhang Lu and Meng Xiulian, students were given ample time for reflection and independent study, with full use made of cooperative

group learning; moreover, the lessons of Teachers Zhang Xiaoxia and Zhang Lu were conducted almost entirely in English.

2. Teachers' ability to adjust their teaching methods and activities according to students' needs and the actual circumstances of their class is, in essence, a process of identifying and resolving issues during instruction. For example, in reading lessons, the top-down approach is generally adopted, i.e. first identifying the main idea, then the text structure, and finally understanding the details and language. During a discussion with Ms Li Yaping, she mentioned that when teaching this reading lesson, she adopted a bottom-up approach, i.e. first understanding the language, then identifying the main idea and structure. She said this model was more suitable for her students, and the feedback from them was positive. As there are many weaker students in the class, they found it very difficult to grasp the meaning and structure after speed reading; adjusting the method in this way improved the students' learning outcomes and made the classroom more lively.
3. Enhanced teamwork: through sharing, communication, observing each other's lessons and peer evaluation, teachers had more opportunities to interact with colleagues, learning from one another and complementing each other's strengths. For instance, after observing Teacher Li Ru's lesson, Teacher Li Yaping learnt the technique of identifying key words to link paragraphs. Following Mr Zhou Zhiqiang's lesson on reading techniques, all teachers gathered to evaluate the lesson and shared the reading strategies they had taught their students; the very next day, Ms Liang Rui incorporated these shared techniques into her lesson on reading exercises.

(三) *Gains as a University Lecturer*

1. Having gained an understanding of the actual circumstances of frontline teachers and students, I have redefined my own role, narrowed the gap between my ideals and reality, and acquired a basic understanding of the teaching methods and environment at Fan Zhong High School. I have begun to consider issues from the perspective of Fan Zhong teachers and the actual circumstances of Fan Zhong students, approaching matters from a practical standpoint and putting myself in the teachers' shoes to provide targeted guidance and sound advice.
2. I have also grown personally through this collaboration. The process of working with teachers is itself a learning experience; it requires not only personal study but also learning how to collaborate with frontline teachers, how to communicate, and how to resolve the various issues that arise during the research. Throughout this process, both my problem-solving skills and my capacity for learning have improved.

Conclusion

The collaboration between university and secondary school English teachers in conducting action research is beneficial to the development of both parties. Both sides can leverage their respective strengths, fulfil their respective roles, understand and support one another, and engage in dialogue on an equal footing. By establishing a new type of teacher learning community, we achieve mutual benefit through collaboration, contributing to the effective implementation and deepening of

secondary school English curriculum reform, and providing a perspective for the training of future English teachers in school of Foreign Language, Yangtze University. Although the project has only completed its first phase, preliminary results are already evident. Through lectures and training, lesson observations and evaluations, collective teaching research, individual exchanges, reflection, joint reading, and case analysis, secondary school teachers have undergone positive changes in both their teaching philosophy and practice; for university, growth has also been achieved through learning and exchange. It is hoped that in the coming phase, we will continue to work together and conduct research as before, ultimately achieving the desired outcomes.

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