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Preparing Palestinian Reflective English Language Teachers through Classroom Based Action Research

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Abstract: This study aimed to describe the implementation of individual action research projects among some forty English language teachers distributed in thirty Palestinian schools in Ramallah and Qabaty districts-Palestine. It aimed to analyze the outcomes of the teachers’ action research as part of a broader participatory action research project that is intended to increase the capacity among teachers in Palestine as part of the LTD program. The data revealed that in spite of the difficulties that Palestinian teachers face, action research was a powerful, inquiry and exploratory tool that impacted teachers’ classroom practices and professional development. Furthermore, the implementation of reflection on a one year professional development program revealed a number of positive changes on the part of teachers’ collaboration and cooperation. Teachers have realised that cooperation and collaboration are the healthiest part where a nourishing context for learning could be created through a respectful, supportive and fruitful dialogue. It is recommended that the results of this research capture the attention of the administrators and policy makers in Palestine to adopt the strategy of action research and reflection in all educational sectors.

Key Words

Action research, reflection, teacher professional development, learning communities, collegial cooperation and collaboration

Introduction

Enhancing the quality of teachers in the Occupied Territories of Palestine is an essential task, yet one fraught with difficulties. Teachers in Palestine are faced with a range of problems: they are often inadequately trained; they are relatively underpaid, but most of all, they and their students, work in the exceptionally difficult circumstances of occupation, which creates a range of almost unique constraints. This paper reports on a participatory action research project that was specifically designed to enhance the quality of teachers in Palestine, in this case, teachers of English. Action research was chosen for a number of reasons, in part to develop among the

teachers more reflective professional practice, and partly because of the flexibility within the process, which was appropriate for the task within the context. Action research has been well documented and widely credited, particularly in western countries, as a compelling means of teacher development (Burns, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Nunan, 1992; Perrett, 2003; Richards & Ho, 1998; Stenhouse, 1975; Stringer, 2013); the research reported here assesses its value in very different and trying circumstances. The author was the principal researcher, co-coordinating the individual action research projects conducted by 40 teachers, as part of a larger participatory action research project under the auspices of the Leadership and Teacher Development Program funded by AMIDEAST.

Background

Since its establishment in 1994, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) in Palestine has been charged with the enormous duty of setting up an appropriate educational system for the Palestinian people. Fourteen years later, a reform plan addressing the perceived shortfalls in the educational system was launched in 2008. The Ministry of Education (MoE) set twelve main pillars for educational development and improvement (EDSP, 2008) and the program reported in this paper specifically addresses the Palestinian reform and development plan (2008-2012), which considered the development and implementation of policies and programs focusing on the quality of education at all levels, either in pre-service or in-service teacher training programs.

Developing teaching skills remains a major concern in Palestine. Teachers are not adequately trained in teaching as a whole, nor are they trained or supported to teach the Palestinian curriculum. Formal licensing into the teaching profession was only introduced in 2013-2014. Further, Palestinian teachers face problems related to low salaries, lack of administrative and supervisory support, strict regulations and traditional assessment measure, poor work conditions, overwhelming workloads, lack of resources and facilities, lack of incentives, poor social status, overcrowded classrooms, and many others. Contributing to these problems is fragmentation within the educational system that has led to duplications and impaired efficiency (Khaldi & Wahbeh, 2002; Kouhail, 2004).

Above all these, which may not be dissimilar the problems for teaches in many developing countries, are the constraints and difficulties arising from the Israeli occupation and living in a war-torn area. Repeated violations by Israeli settlers and soldiers force large numbers of teachers and students to cross military checkpoints and electronic gates daily, while being exposed to humiliation, or prevention; thus many students and teachers arrive late to schools or sometimes are not able to attend at all. Furthermore, there is also the need to provide health and counseling services in order to mitigate the negative effects of the occupation polices, which have led to inordinately high dropout rates. Effects on students include psychological, social and disciplinary problems, lack of concentration and increased distractions in addition to reduced memory (Khaldi & Wahbeh, 2002; Kouhail, 2004; Wahbi (2000). The lack of protection and safety for both the teachers and the students are of great concern to the MoE (EDSP 2014-19).

Believing that teachers are the most important factor in developing and enhancing students' performances, and believing that Palestinian teachers need support in their professional development to advance students' physical, intellectual, spiritual, social and emotional wellbeing, it was essential to make use of any opportunities to address persisting challenges and

to enhance efforts to improve education. The Leadership and Teacher Development program (LTD) established to do this provided the opportunity for an action research project with two purposes; to be the basis of teacher development itself, and, to explore the extent to which the program developed teacher qualities in such a torrid area.

The Leadership and Teacher Development Program (LTD)

LTD is a program developed by the America-Mideast Educational and Training Services (AMIDEAST) and MoE to improve the classroom practices of Palestinian teachers' from 5th grade to 10th grade. The LTD program effectively started in the fall of 2012 and will continue until the spring of 2016. LTD is a comprehensive education reform initiative focused on improving the quality of school education through an evidence-based approach to leadership and teacher development. The National Institute for Education and Training (NIET), a Palestinian institute for developing educational sector all around Palestine, also takes the lead in providing teacher certification through a year-long in-service teacher professional development program resulting in a Professional Diploma in Education (AMIDEAST and NIET 2012). The goal is to certify approximately 2,500 teachers from grades 5 to 10 in five disciplines: Arabic, science, mathematics, English language and technology education. This paper reports on the program employed to develop English language teachers. English is considered a vital area for student learning; it is seen as a 'window to the world' for Palestinians so that they can learn more information and knowledge to enable them to face the globalization era.

The professional development program was designed to provide opportunities for teacher educators to transform practice from a content-based, memorization and test-driven education model to more learner-centered dynamic pedagogies; doing this would involve reflective learning circles, action research, peer observation, diary writing and portfolio assessment. One overall aim in these activities was to stimulate professional reflection, as part of a capacity building approach (AMIDEAST, 2014).

Developing English language teachers aimed to go beyond simply providing techniques, methods and strategies. For teachers to develop their professional practice, they should be able to question, experiment, reflect upon, and improve their own teaching instruction (Curry, 2006; Schmuck, 2006). They should be able to cooperate and dialogue with their colleagues to adopt, adapt, and expand their teaching techniques, methods and strategies. Through dialoguing, teachers could find solutions to some of the challenges they face in their English language classrooms. Teachers themselves are rich resources of knowledge regarding their own classrooms and, as a result, change can be implemented better by practicing teachers who will study the results of the change and its impact on improving their practices and students' learning (Tinker-Sachs, 2002; Wallace, 1998). Richards and Farrell (2005) report that collegial, cooperative forms of professional development help teachers to interact, share skills, experiences, and develop solutions to common or shared problems.

Research Problem

There were two levels of problem that drove the research described here. At the higher level were the broad problems of improving educational resources, particularly teachers, and

opportunities for students throughout Palestine, as identified in the leadership development program (LDP). The second level of problems lies in the individual contexts and practice of each of the participating teachers. These came together in a 'nested' participatory action research program, operating at the two levels. At one level were the individual teachers conducting their own, classroom based action research projects; at the higher level was the work of the principal researcher who was also a trainer in the program, conducting the broader participatory project with the teachers.

What seemed to be the major problem at the classroom level was that when teachers are in the process of teaching, some classroom events occur repeatedly that should be halted and studied. These 'critical events' can be used, through self-reflection and action research, to help teachers gain a better understanding of their teaching practices. But what invariably happens is that teachers often take these events as an integral, irredeemable part of their teaching environment, and they disregard reflecting on them. To put it differently, too many classroom actions and strategies are applied routinely, without conscious thought or in-depth reflection. Reflection involves posing questions about how and why things or events happen the way they do and what alternatives might be available. We must, as Dewey says, "move from routine action to reflective action which is usually characterized by ongoing self-appraisal and development" (Dewey 1933, p. 15).

English language teachers are only supervised by their supervisor and their principal during their professional teaching practices. This supervision aims to provide feedback to the teachers to improve their teaching methods. However, many Palestinian teachers resent the authoritative supervisory system, which is considered a burden. Nor is the supervision a supportive agent or approach in the educational reform and transformational process. Therefore, self-reflection through collegial cooperation and collaboration was an opportunity for teachers to assume greater accountability, and to evaluate and critique their teaching practice. Self-reflection helps teachers to take responsibility for improving and developing their practices. It helps them continuously set, implement and assess their professional growth.

The problem may imply that some Palestinian teachers do not fully realize that they have a professional responsibility to be reflective and evaluative about their practices because of their low income, full schedule and their overloaded programs. In addition, some teachers are unaware of their potential abilities to improve their teaching techniques, though this can be achieved through active self-reflection and constructive peer-observation and collaboration. As teachers become aware of the value of their reflections, they will be able to identify how to improve their professional practice and thus improve the quality of students' learning. Teachers may also learn that reflection is an important driver for cooperation and collaboration among teachers. It helps them to build bridges of collegial cooperation with their colleagues that lead to the creation of learning communities in schools.

Teachers have often expressed their discontent with previous training programs held by the MoE. As a result, the LTD program asserts the practical aspect in training as well as the theoretical aspect, in addition to encouraging personal responsibility and lateral accountability. The LTD tries to respond to teachers' needs in their training programs, acknowledging that a successful program tries to narrow the gap between theory and practice, while retaining the formal authority of the teacher (Guthrie et al., 2009).

Deciding on Action Research

The application of action research has become a core feature of the LTD program. It is very important in the Palestinian context because teachers do not have many opportunities for professional development, due to the difficulties arising from the context in which they live and work. The action research process explicitly recognizes the new and greater roles and responsibilities of the teachers both in their schools and in Palestinian society, as well as honoring their professional status. Action research represented an autonomous tool to help English language teachers learn and adapt to the accelerated changes in the globalized educational world. Teachers would be responsible for their professional development and growth to maintain and enhance the quality of teaching and learning. They become inquiry-seekers (researchers) who can produce professional pedagogical knowledge that aims to improve the quality of education in Palestine. Bailey (2001) maintains that action research for language teachers is “an approach to collecting and interpreting data which involves a clear, repeated cycle of procedures” (p. 490).

In the LTD program, teachers had to attend face-to-face sessions every month in the school year 2013-2014. They also had to attend learning circles for six hours twice a month. During the first face-to-face meeting session that was held in March 2013, it was deemed necessary to discuss the theoretical issues related to the application of being reflective through action research practice. Discussions in the meeting emphasized that the quality of teaching English as a foreign language in Palestinian schools depended on teachers’ abilities to regularly question and reflect on their own practices. Teachers committed to the development program were asked to take steps to make the necessary changes in order to improve their classroom practices. Research asserts that this type of action research provides opportunities for teachers to consider and develop their own solutions to problems. It also provides meaningful opportunities for reflection, self-peer observation, self-peer evaluation, on-going inquiry, collaboration and dialoguing (Clarke, 2007; Gallo, 2012; Lyons, 2010). Bolton (2010) asserts that reflection is a means of professional development that begins in classrooms. Obviously, the value of action research lies in the fact that it is not something imposed on the teachers, but rather that they are encouraged to identify deficiencies and develop solutions relevant to their own context.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to implement individual action research projects among some 40 English language teachers, and to analyse the outcomes of the teachers’ action research as part of a broader participatory action research project intended to increase capacity among teachers in Palestine as part of the LTD program. It aimed to study process – how teachers conducted their action research and what research processes they followed to investigate their own teaching - and outcomes – to analyse and discuss the changes that took place with a particular focus on the extent of reflection practiced during the implementation of their action research and how teachers describe the changes that took place.

The study addressed the following questions:

1. What action research processes do Palestinian LTD teachers follow and how is reflection revealed in their action research?

2. How does action research enhance teacher professionalism?
3. What kind of changes took place as a result of reflection and action on the teachers' part?
4. How do teachers describe the changes, if any, in their teaching practices as related to their action research?

Participants

The cohort for this study consisted of forty teachers from thirty Palestinian Schools distributed in Ramallah and Qabatyia districts. Thirty teachers were females and ten were males. The forty teachers had participated in the LTD program, and had been selected by the MoE through their Directorates to participate. None of the teachers held any form of certification in education. They were specialized either in English literature or pure linguistics but none in teaching English as a foreign language. Their classroom experiences ranged from three years to twenty-two years of teaching. In this action research project, the teachers were situated at the center of the process, observing themselves and critically reflecting on their instructional practices.

The Researcher

In this study the researcher was actively involved in the professional development of the forty teachers being researched. The LTD program aimed at establishing a national cadre of teacher and leadership educators that meet MoE standard and therefore the researcher was trained by international experts. In this way, the researcher played the roles of being both a researcher and a trainer. This meant that the researcher had the advantage of providing a double lens in the project, questioning the benefits and the challenges of conducting and evaluating action research.

Action Research Procedures

During training sessions the trainer (who was also the principal researcher) and the English language teachers discussed some of their problems and the methods or the steps that they might use to explore the questions they were interested in investigating. By the end of the first training session, it was expected that teachers were ready to go back to teaching their classes and experiment with different teaching strategies and methods they wanted to explore, and to document their progress. Future group meetings, referred to here as learning circles, were held twice monthly and involved discussions on what the teachers had tried thus far and the various research issues that were arising for them. Multitudinous suggestions were shared during these learning circle discussions, both related to their own research and to that of their colleagues.

The learning circles, attendance in which was required of all participants, as far as possible, were a collaborative process involving ten to twelve teachers (community of learners, community of inquiry) coming together with a facilitator to engage in a critical discussion and reflection on issues pertaining to action research projects. The facilitator's role was to support

teachers' practices and motivate them. In these learning circles, teachers invested time in discussing the challenges regarding the application of some new methods or strategies, making recommendations of actions, promoting risk-taking, evaluating some practices, deepening their understanding of some of the topics discussed, giving and receiving reflective feedback, asking for alternative strategies, and then following up and discussing next steps. Danielson and McGreal (2000) argue that "Teaching is highly complex, and most teachers have scant opportunity to explore common problems and possible solutions, or share new pedagogical approaches with their colleagues" (p. 24). The broader project aimed to address this by providing teachers various opportunities to do so.

In the first training session, English language teachers were provided with some theoretical background about the nature of action research and the steps that they were to follow to implement their individual action research projects. It was discussed that numerous researchers have proposed models for the action research process and these models, while being somewhat different, possess a number of common elements. Some models are simple in their design, while others appear relatively complex. For examples, Stringer (2007, 2013) describes action research as "simple, yet powerful framework" consisting of a "look, think and act" routine.

While Kurt Lewin (Smith, 1996, 2001, 2007) who is credited with coining the term "action research", depicts the spiral nature of action research. It includes fact-finding, planning, taking action, evaluating, and amending the plan before moving to the next action. Kemmis and McTaggart, (1988) action research tends to be cyclical, participative, qualitative and reflective.

In this research, English language teachers followed the shared common steps identified by many researchers. These steps were written briefly in Arabic Language in Module One Trainee Handouts as the first training session was conducted in the Arabic language. More elaboration on the steps was provided by the researcher.

Problem identification was the first step. LTD teachers were to articulate their problems clearly and concisely, prioritising the difficulties they needed to address. The second step was to frame the research question in order to identify the appropriate strategy to achieve the desired goals or results. Forming the research question or questions or what Munby and Russel (1990) call "puzzles of practice" was important in order to help teachers to identify and address their problems, and this was expected to be achieved by reading some articles, asking experts, colleagues, observing some educational YouTube videos, etc. Teachers needed to identify the desired results they sought and the methods for achieving the desired results should also be specified. In the third step, which was complementary to the second step, teachers were required to review some academic literature related to the question/s they wanted to address. In the LTD program, it was very important to help teachers realise the importance of reviewing research that might help and lead them to better understandings of their problems and the strategies they could use to address them. Looking at the literature could help teachers understand how others have approached the issues of investigation.

In the fourth step, teachers were expected to collect data through various methods, at two separate stages. The first stage was at the beginning of their project and the data here was to provide evidence of the extent of the problem their project was addressing. The second stage followed the implementation of their action plan and would be used to evaluate the success of their projects. Data could be gathered through classroom observation, videos and audio tapes, interviews, surveys, focus group, field notes, talk aloud protocols, diaries, reports, students'

portfolios, documents and artifacts, homework and test scores. Teachers were advised to collect their data from more than one source for the purpose of triangulation.

In the fifth step teachers were expected to analyze the data. They were asked to look for patterns of evidence over the period of their action research. Since action research was based on teachers' reflection, teachers were not only expected to answer their research questions but also to reach some conclusions that might lead to other questions for a future project. The analysis of the data collected would also help teachers realize the importance of deep reflection through action research and the importance of trying to understand more deeply their teaching practices.

In the sixth step, teachers were to disseminate their findings to other teachers through presentations in learning circles, what McNiff and Whitehead (2006) call 'validation' and an important part of the action research process. The findings might motivate other colleagues to join in a collaborative action research. In learning circles, the teacher educator could get some feedback and comments from other trainees regarding their action research. In the seventh step, teachers were to monitor change, analyse and evaluate in order to identify their follow up actions, and to look for other methods to solve classroom problems.

In summary, teachers were required to identify and define the problem, to frame their questions, to review some related literature, collect data, analyse data, answer the research questions, draw conclusions and follow up with the cyclical nature of action research. The cyclical steps of ongoing reflection in this research were related to Schon's reflection on action (1983; 1995) (what did I do and how can I do it better?). Reflection on action is the most common type of reflection that teachers get involved for the purpose of giving them authority to make decisions in their classrooms instead of waiting the supervisor or the head-teacher.

Samples of Teachers' Action Research

What follows are some examples drawn from the individual action research projects of the teachers in their own classrooms. Five reflect the successes of the projects but one is also included because it reveals the problems that some teachers faced and that not everything went according to plan.

Case 1. Liking English: 'Facebook' in the Classroom

An English language teacher at a girls' school in Jenín-Palestine, identified the main difficulty that her tenth grade students usually faced was in speaking and writing in the language classroom. The core of her action research was improving speaking and writing skills for her students through directed practice. The teacher assumed that this difficulty was due to not giving enough time for students to practice the language. Related to this was that students do not use English outside the classroom walls, and within the classroom, teacher talking time (TTT) is much more than students talking time (STT). For her, on-going practice of oral and written skills would help her students.

Her action plan was to use the social media tool Facebook™ to create an interactive English language classrooms. She devised a classroom "Facebook" in which each student had her own paper-based Facebook account, with a profile, personal details and a representative picture hanging on a piece of cardboard affixed to the classroom wall.

Students wrote something new on their “walls” regularly, such as a status, news, interests, social events, feelings, essays, hopes, troubles and anything they want to share with their friends inside their English language classroom. Most of the time, students presented their own posts, and the other students had the opportunity to comment, discuss, share ideas and communicate in English in oral and written form. New vocabulary was pinpointed, revised, memorized and frequently used in new contexts. The “Facebook” was also a place for students to raise questions about current topics such as the Israel-Gaza Conflict, violations against the Al-Aqsa Mosque, but in fact, most topics were related to their English language curriculum and to subjects of students’ interests.

The teacher reflected that her action research was extremely successful. Evidence showed that students’ motivation and participation had increased. The teacher wrote in her reflection, “The more you motivate your students, the more they learn.” She was so amazed by her students’ excitement that it is now part of her teaching repertoire and that English is now part of their daily life through the “Facebook” page. Students were competing to add posts to their “Facebook” page and to present to their classmates. She also realized that teacher talk time had reduced and that she had created a positive classroom environment where learning was “cool” and fun for both the teacher and the students.

Her next step was to enhance students’ fluency through taking advantage of the students’ interest in technology. Therefore, the teacher decided to ask students to create YouTube segments that can enhance a classroom discussion as her follow up activity.

Case 2: Enhancing Understanding through Multiple Intelligences

Another tenth grade teacher in Qabatyia-Palestine admitted that his problem was in always trying to cover the textbook regardless of students’ understanding. So, when he was introduced to lesson planning based on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983; 2013), he decided to design his own unit around the most well-known Palestinian poet, “Mahmoud Darwish”.

For enhancing verbal and spatial intelligence, and to broaden the context, students were asked to read names and statements on prominent world figures and match their names with photos. Then, students were divided into groups and they were given more statements to shed light on these people, asking them again to match the statements with the photos. Following this, students were asked to design a ‘CV’ for Mahmoud Darwish.

Other activities followed; to enhance logical mathematical intelligence, students were to provide a timeline chart for Mahmoud’s Darwish life. For enhancing kinesthetic intelligence, students were to compete with other students and to match sets of photos with appropriate statements placed around the room. To address musical intelligence, students were to listen and sing Mahmoud’s Darwish song “Sajjil Ana Arabi” or “Ana Min Huna”. Some students recited one of his famous poems:

Write down
I am an Arab
And I work with comrades in a stone quarry
And my children are eight in number
For them, I hack out a loaf of bread..... (Mahmoud Darwish, 1964)

For enhancing interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences, students discussed the life of Mahmoud Darwish in groups, in English, and then they were asked to play roles. Students were

asked to imagine themselves as Mahmoud Darwish and to think about the future of his great literary work. Students were also asked to imagine that they had found one of Mahmoud's Darwish poems in one of the isolated places, and they were to read this poem to a crowd of Palestinian students.

The teacher reflected that engaging students in different activities helped them gain better understanding. These activities addressed students' different predominant intelligence and different learning styles. His follow up activity was designing more lessons based on the theory of multiple intelligences and to study their impact on students' achievement.

Case 3: Classroom Dynamics

This project was conducted in the village of Dir Dibwan, near Ramallah-Palestine, with fifth-grade students. The teacher identified one of her problems was that not all students participated in her language classroom and to address that, she decided to implement play-based learning as to develop students' social and cognitive skills and to enhance their self-esteem.

She started her class with an activity called "Word Forest"; in this she used flashcards with pictures of animals and flashcards with the names of animals and asked students to match the picture with the appropriate word. The teacher then asked the students to spell their animal vocabulary within their groups and then one student from each group spelled the word for the whole class. After that, students were to put the words in an animal pocket aid. In the same lesson, the teacher tried to revise present perfect by playing a "hands on" game. The teacher used plastic balls with two big baskets (one for the simple present and the others for the past participle). Some of the balls had present verbs and others had past participles. Students had to throw the ball in the correct basket and while throwing they were asked to give a sentence on the verbs chosen. The last activity was playing roles using finger puppet or hand-puppet (asking and answering questions).

In her reflection, the teacher stated that students were engaged and having fun in all the activities and these activities motivated students since they created positive learning environment. As for the observer, it was not difficult to notice students' motivation and participation. However, the teacher was advised by the observer to work more on a deliberate and effective play-based approach that supported her students' cognitive and social development. The teacher reflected that she needed more time to evaluate adequately the impact of the play-based approach in English language classrooms. The observer advised the teacher to always ensure that 'hands-on' activities enhanced 'minds-on' learning too.

Case 4: Making Storytelling More Powerful

This action research was applied in Dir Jrir, a village near Ramallah-Palestine, and was also for fifth-grade students. The teacher stated that her story classes were invariably an exercise in reading comprehension without any interactive activities that enhanced students' understanding of the story and might improve their speaking skill. For her action research, she decided to include different activities that revealed students' understanding for the story by retelling, creating another version and concluding with the story's moral.

To achieve this, the teacher asked the fifth-grade students some oral questions related to the story “The Wolf”. Then, she asked the students to match pictures and words as a vocabulary revision. Wait time and peer correction were used effectively, as the teacher had reflected. Next, she told the students that she was going to give them clues or hints for some words, as students were to tell the story starting with “Once upon a time...”. Finally, the teacher asked the students about the moral of the story.

At later stages, students were to listen to a cassette audio-recording in order to answer true or false questions. If the statement was true, students were to clap their hands but if the statement was false they were to stamp their feet.

The teacher also gave syllable clap activity so as to make sure that students pronounced new words correctly. The last activity was “Switching roles activity”, where students took turns to play the role of the teacher. They asked questions and other students answered. Additionally, students were encouraged to create a new version for the story and to present in front of the class.

The variation of the activities that the teacher implemented in her story lesson helped students use the language and communicate with their friends. Story classes become more enjoyable and more fruitful.

Case 5: Enhancing Students’ Participation

This action research was conducted in a girls’ Secondary School in Kfur Nimeh, another village near Ramallah-Palestine. The teacher worked with her eighth grade class. Her problem was that some students did not take part, or exert much effort, in answering questions when working in groups. She decided to collect more data through observing student participation in order to take the appropriate action. According to the findings from her exploratory data, she decided that she should change her teaching method to encourage all students to participate and take roles. She decided to implement what Krashen and Terrel (1983) call a communicative approach.

Here things did not go plan, mainly because the implementation of the communicative approach was not elaborated and evidence for improvement in student participation were not clear. The teacher shifted in her action research to discuss the use of flashcards, pictures and real objects to teach vocabulary but how was this connected to the main goal of her research was not clear. The results of the implementation of the communicative approach were not displayed, and samples of her application were not included. As a result, this was one of the (few) unsuccessful projects.

Case 6: Correcting Grammar

The final example is drawn from a cooperative action research conducted in a girls School in Ramallah-Palestine by two teachers teaching different classes in the same school; they tried to research their error correction practices. Discussing error correction and the importance of feedback during one face-to-face meeting encouraged the two teachers to investigate their own practices regarding correcting grammatical errors. The teachers were eager to do this action research project for their own professional development.

The action research was based on “which grammatical errors to correct?” The teachers had read an article about grammar correction and they then collected data through samples of students’ work. The results indicated that the teachers had a tendency to correct every grammatical error in their students’ written work. After reading the article and listening to some discussions during the face-to-face meetings, they realised that selective correction, as suggested by Ur (2009) and Truscott (2007), might be better. The teachers were to implement changes in their practices, but they had some concerns regarding students’ and parents’ reactions as they were used to them correcting all grammatical errors. They also had concerns about what types of errors should be corrected. The two teachers were encouraged to implement the process of action research to decide which errors were priorities for correction.

The two teachers concluded that grammar correction depended on the type and the recurrence of errors that required either immediate or postponed feedback. They concluded that they should identify the aim of the activity with reference to fluency or accuracy. Moreover, they decided to take notes of common errors and write and discuss them with students on whiteboard.

In their reflection, the two teachers stated that by not correcting all grammatical errors, they saved more time that could be invested in future plans, and thus students were given more responsibility to edit their own work either individually or through peers. Additionally, the two teachers adopted symbol error correcting codes to identify the type of error to be addressed. Finally, they decided to talk with other colleagues teaching Arabic or English language about the ways in which they used to address grammatical error correction.

Discussion

The discussion of the individual action research projects and the broader participatory action research project can be framed around the theoretical perspective of ‘ages of professionalism’ as contended by Hargreaves (2000). In this, Hargreaves argued that teachers have moved, or are moving through three ‘ages’ of professionalism, towards a fourth, which is still somewhat undefined. The first is the age of ‘pre-professional’; the second the ‘autonomous professional’; and the third the ‘collegial professional’ (Hargreaves, 2000). Very simply, one broad thesis in the paper is that the later stages of professionalism are responses to changing contexts, including greater accountability, increasingly complex demands of schooling, changes in what to teach and how to teach, and changing expectations in relationships between students, classrooms and teachers. While Hargreaves’ position is based on western educational systems he also refers to the global extent of the movement and evidence of changing professionalism in developing countries as well. Palestine, despite its many unique problems, is also subject to these contextual changes and thus the LTD and other forces for developing teachers seek to develop teachers in terms of professional approaches.

The discussion that follows is framed around a thesis that the action research projects have enhanced teacher professionalism in four ways: first, through the professional behavior that action research provides and affirms; second by encouraging reflection as a core aspect of professional behavior; third, by encouraging professional collegiality, through the introduction and use of professional learning communities; and finally through the enhancement of pedagogical content knowledge, developing skills in knowing what to teach and how to teach it. These four areas will now be considered in terms of what the action research projects achieved, taking each in turn.

Action Research

The findings of the current study showed Teachers in the LTD program were required to implement several action researches as an essential part of English language teacher professional development. They were asked to think of and reflect critically on their professional teaching practice. They were asked to address their problems professionally based on factual findings and data, and to sum up an authentic action research that would help them experience the importance of being a teacher-researcher.

The LTD teachers often undertook their action research as an individual project in his or her classroom and sometimes involved other colleagues who had the interest in investigating the same problem.

LTD teachers followed the steps of action research and addressed some classroom problems. They experimented with various new teaching strategies in their classrooms to improve students' learning. Teachers' reflection was revealed in recognizing and responding to the difficulties in teaching practices. It was also revealed in framing and reframing their difficulties and in experimenting multitudinous solutions to the identified difficulties.

The researcher noted that some of the teachers needed more support with their data collection, data organisation and their data analysis. From the analysis of teachers' action research, it was obvious that teachers need to work more in depth on identifying the results of their action research and the "follow up" steps. It was also clear that a few teachers still lack the experience and the skills to do a coherent, well-organized and in-depth action research as it was a new experience for them. Teachers need more training to realise that action research should be part of their practices as it is connected directly to their context and to their professional development.

In spite of the pitfalls in teachers' action research, it was an opportunity for Palestinian teachers to experience being a life-long learner through using on-going inquiry for the purpose of improving classroom instruction. Through action research, teachers were more aware of their roles and of their students as English language teachers/ learners. Using the cycle of action research helped them rethink their own teaching practices and this experience provided teachers with new ways of thinking. Action research helped teachers explore and learn from experiences they gained in the LTD program and from their colleagues.

Many teachers have realised that by exerting efforts to increase their self-awareness, they will enhance their teaching effectiveness and of course their job satisfaction. Teachers in the LTD program have shown willingness to take risks and have tried new strategies that created positive classroom environment.

Through action research, teachers have been more aware of the importance of encouraging students to take responsibilities for their learning. Teachers have realised that one of the golden keys to successful teaching is engaging students in the learning process and helping them be involved. How to keep students engaged in a variety of activities during the lesson has been emphasised in the programs to ensure that effective learning happens.

Reflection

LTD teachers started to become accustomed to the idea of researching some teaching strategies and implementing them in English language classrooms. The implementation of the

new teaching strategies and studying their effect through action research project was an opportunity for Palestinian teachers to engage in ongoing reflective teaching practices that led to professional development.

The results of this research are compatible with literature about reflection as LTD teachers used reflective practice as a tool to support and develop their teaching practice. It has been shown that reflective practices and collegial collaboration are strategies used by teachers for their professional development (Alger, 2006; Cornish, et al., (2012); Hammersley-Fletcher & Osmond 2005; Hendricks, 2009).

Through reflections, teachers have the opportunity to question and evaluate their own practices either individually or within a community of peers. Research reveals that learning communities helps teachers think more about their practices and have different views and perspectives that may help them modify or adapt their teaching performances (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

Teacher educators in this study expressed that they are now more convinced of the importance of reflection that leads to better teaching practices. The reflective feature of action research helped them take decisions regarding problems and challenges they face.

Teachers recognized the importance of being reflective and this was revealed in their reflections. One teacher stated,

“If we cannot reflect on our own teaching practices, we will not be able to move forward. We will keep doing the same thing and we will always gain the same results. Reflection enables us to make improvements to the way we do things in the present and in the future. Reflection practices help us always explain and question our instructions.”

The importance of developing reflective skills was revealed by another teacher who stated,

“The journey of doing action research has helped me gain better understanding of my classroom practices. This experience encouraged me to be accountable to myself and to my students.”

It should be noticed that reflection is not a passive way of thinking, on the contrary, it is a way to be productive and knowledgeable if followed up (Blank, 2009). Another teacher wrote,

“Self-reflection has always been with me as it is part of the human processing mind, but I have learnt how to use it effectively and productively during the LTD program. Reflection is no longer a passive contemplation, but more a dynamic-ongoing process through which I work to improve both my professional career and the teaching environment.”

For samples of teachers' reflection, see the appendices (1 and 2).

Teachers revealed that questioning skills were developed through reflection and this helped them develop their classroom interaction and communication. Some teachers commented that they used to ask closed, convergent questions and reflection helped them realise the importance of asking open, divergent questions. Open questions helped their students to understand materials presented in English language classrooms more in depth. Some of the

teachers believed that they should transfer this reflection skill to their students since this is a skill that students need in order to be better learners.

Some teachers stated that through this reflective experience they modified many classroom practices. They implemented some of the new thinking classroom routines that they had never implemented before, such as, “Think, Puzzle, Explore, Think, Pair, Share, See, Think, Wonder” and many others. Reflection improved the way they provided feedback to the students. Some teachers believed that being reflective helped them manage their classrooms better, and helped them create, design and provide an attractive class environment that motivates the students unlike the previous statistic one. Reflection actually opened new undiscovered realms for the teachers to think about and implement.

The results of this study are compatible with the findings of Jacobs et al (2011) and, Killen (2007; 2009). According to Jacobs et al., (2011) “teachers need attitude of open-mindedness and whole-heartedness so that they can be able to question their practices” (p. 58). Killen (2007; 2009) additionally points out that “no matter how well you teach, there is always room for presentation improvement. This suggests that teachers need to be open to possibilities. However, open mindedness requires positive attitude and acknowledgement towards alternatives and new ideas” (p. 93). Open mindedness helped LTD English language teachers try different doors that lead them to better practices.

The results are supported by other researchers like Richards and Farrell (2005), Richard and Lockhard (1994), and Wallace (2006) who have carried out studies to help English language teachers to teach effectively. Richards and Farrell (2005), provide valuable guidance for the language teacher who wants to further their own development. For Richard and Farrell, English language teachers should investigate their own practice through reflective writing as they are responsible for analysing and evaluating their own classroom practice. Wallace (2006) states that reflection makes teachers independent to the extent that may contribute positively to teacher development through the implementation of action research and thus leads to teachers’ professionalism.

Action research and reflective teaching exert immense benefits to the professional development of the LTD English language. Despite all the benefits that teachers stated, they encountered some challenges and constraints in being reflective teachers through the application of action research.

Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

The implementation of action research in the LTD program had a significant impact on the English language teachers’ awareness of the importance of the construction of professional learning communities (LCs) in order to cultivate a culture of support through the collegial cooperation and collaboration.

LCs helped teachers observe, comment, reflect and experience their colleagues’ practices, as well as their own. LCs helped teachers broaden their perspectives by considering the many viewpoints around them. Teachers have become more familiar with each other’s practices, including the power of sharing experiences and reflection that impact their professional development as well as their instructions.

Teachers have realized that cooperation and collaboration are the healthiest part, where a nourishing context for learning could be created through a respectful, supportive and fruitful

dialogue. This was because teachers were exposed to new pedagogic ideas through their colleagues. Teachers indicated that they have benefited enormously from the chance of being part of the LCs.

LTD teachers reported that presenting their action research in their LCs and getting feedback from colleagues helped them listen to alternative ideas and helped them modify their work continuously. The researcher observed ongoing collaboration and cooperation among teachers. Teachers discussed and shared instructional materials that they could implement in their classrooms. A teacher from Ramallah wrote, “My participation in the LTD contributed to a new understanding and stronger commitment to building the desired learning community in our schools for a better future for the Palestinian students.”

For the most part, one of the changes that had a great impact on teachers was the creation of the emotional and professional “Facebook-Network” support “Qabatya English LTD Teachers”, “New English Club 4 All”, “English Language Teachers-Palestine”, “Teacher Reflection” and “Writers for Palestine”. These “Facebook” pages have revealed positive and supportive environments to exchange experiences, to ask questions, exchange opinions, download worksheets, tests, articles, etc. The “Facebook” pages have represented real virtual learning communities that expanded to the participation of teachers outside the LTD program. LTD teachers noticed that cooperation and collaboration could be something that they would like to do frequently in authentic settings that promote learning and exchanging experiences.

The result of this research is compatible with that of Murray (2010) who states: “one way to take control of one’s own learning is through cooperation with other teachers. Collegial cooperation can help teachers become more assertive and decisive about their personal learning; it can also boost their confidence and empower them to find solutions to challenges they face in their teaching (p. 4).

In short, it was good to see the interactions among teachers. They were engaged in reflective LCs. They were giving constructive feedback to each other and encouraging others to implement successful classroom practices.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)

The LTD program has given teachers opportunities for learning some theories, methods and techniques about teaching English as a foreign language in the face-to-face sessions. However, the program has basically focused on the practical application of theories, methods and techniques that lead to professional development.

During training sessions, trainees enhanced subject and subject pedagogic knowledge in a variety of holistic and individualistic ways. In the LTD program, there were some individual training plans to account for the diverse needs of the English language teachers, including subject knowledge (SK), pedagogical knowledge (PK) and subject pedagogical knowledge (SPK). Self-audit was also part of the LTD program as teachers were required to identify their strengths and weaknesses. They were to identify gaps in their knowledge, either related to the content, pedagogy or pedagogical content knowledge.

Content knowledge (CK) was improved in the LTD program because the program was implemented through the medium of English. The Palestinian curriculum “English for Palestine (EFP)” was the medium for the application of many activities so as to enhance teachers’ CK, PK and PCK. The program helped trainee acquire PCK in a practical view of what works for them,

i.e. passing on successful experiences. Teachers observed other teachers teaching their classes in order to enhance their understanding and improve their pedagogical knowledge. One teacher commented, “After observing some of my colleagues’ classes, I started to adopt and adapt some ideas about teaching English as a foreign language.” Crucial was the close cooperation and collaboration among English language teachers and among teachers and some specialists in the field of teaching English as a foreign language.

Internet resources were also used to help and reinforce teachers’ content and pedagogic knowledge. The trainer decided to subscribe teachers to three well established language learning programs, www.edhelper.com; www.enchantedlearning.com; www.busyteacher.org. Teachers were also provided with articles, books and handouts to enhance and broaden their CK, PK and PCK.

As student characteristics and learning environment were part of the PCK, teachers’ realised that their roles were not only passing knowledge from “EFP” but also helping students gain skills required for the 21st century, including being creative thinkers and risk takers within the medium of enhancing the four skills of English Language.

Challenges

At the beginning of the LTD program, teachers held some concerns about the additional work involved in action research project. However, these concerns tended to dissolve for a large number of teachers as teachers realised the benefits of implementing action research. The new process of developing and implementing action research produced a number of benefits for both the teachers and the students. However, LTD teachers admitted by different means, the difficulties and challenges they faced in conducting their action research in addition to the overwhelming work they were to handle.

It became clear from the data that being a reflective teacher was a big challenge for some of the teachers. Teachers claimed that one of the obstacles of being reflective was that they could not acknowledge their shortcomings in their classroom performance. They used to claim that obstacles only exist because of the MoE and the political and economical situation. This seems a common obstacle that teachers might face. In an article for Akbari (2007), “Reflection on Reflection”, he indicates that the identification of a problem is not an automatic process, and there are many instances where teachers are not able to see what is wrong with their classroom performance. Akbari adds that problem identification needs a “trained critical eye” which many teachers lack, especially the novice ones (p. 199). One can argue that teachers need to be trained to engage in critical analysis of their lesson presentations that will lead to improving their practice

Some teachers found it difficult to detach themselves from the limits of their professional practices. They always had justification for what they did since they were incapable of finding what was/is wrong with their performance. This is compatible with what Stanley, (1999) asserts “Teachers may be fearful of reflecting on their teaching if they experience blame, guilt or anger at themselves for not having taught well or having adversely affected the students’ learning” (p. 112).

To help teachers identify their shortcoming and solve some of the problems they face, peer observation had been implemented in later stages in the LTD program. Peer classroom observations were also discussed during the learning circle meetings. It was revealed that peer

observation helped teachers see challenges they face in different ways. They realised that they share many difficulties that can be solved with collegial cooperation and discussion.

Teachers in this study referred to time and the overload of work as the most important constraints that sometimes impeded the attainment of reflection. They complained that they did not have enough time to undertake research during the school year. Teachers in Palestine are in full-time work, overwhelmed with school duties and social economical responsibilities.

Some teachers, especially veterans, were also concerned about their workloads and they believe that this hinders their ability to conduct action research. They claimed that they have many years of experience and they do not need to do such research. They complained that they are always under the pressure of covering the content of their textbooks and they do not have the time to analyse what is going on in their classrooms. They are also under the pressure of unified exams held every semester by the Palestinian Ministry of Education.

Teachers noted that, “unlike any other nation, Palestinians face difficulties and challenges that should be taken into consideration in planning and implementing new techniques and strategies.” Palestinians' problems are always related to the conflict and the ongoing violence in Palestine, the lack of security, and the socio-economic and educational difficulties. As a result, teachers in Palestine have additional responsibilities that they must take into consideration while designing and implementing their lessons, i.e. contingency plans.

Unlike any other students in the world, Palestinian students are affected physically and psychologically because of the violence they are exposed to in their daily life. The psychological damage of a large number of students, makes it very difficult for some students to study and succeed in school. Abu Ayyash (2011) states, “Our awareness of the complexity of the individual learners – may require us to look deeply into these individual needs: be social, pedagogical, cognitive or psychological, once we agreed to take teaching as our career” (p. 67).

Summary and Conclusion

Action research in the Palestinian context is still beginning to spread. However, it is a modest beginning. Action research is a demanding and challenging process in the Palestinian context because teachers are not only assuming the responsibility for doing the research but also for implementing change and studying the impact of such change. In this study, action research was conducted as a tool for developing and enhancing reflective skills and improving teaching English in the context of Palestinian schools and classrooms. Therefore, reflection through action research was implemented by in-service English language teachers to provide valuable sources of knowledge for teachers regarding their own classroom practices.

Through action research, LTD teachers gained, interacted, transformed and applied knowledge from their classroom experiences. The implementation of action research helped teachers become more autonomous, and helped them be more accountable and responsible for their practices. Action research led to actions that made a difference in teaching and learning through an ongoing process during the training program. This research asserted that action research is very important in the Palestinian context because teachers do not have many opportunities for professional development. Therefore, action research could represent an autonomous tool to help English language teachers learn and adapt to the accelerated change in the educational world.

In this research, the implementation of reflection on a one year professional development program revealed a number of positive changes on the part of teachers' collaboration and cooperation. Not only did learning communities provide precious resources for a deeper understanding of teaching practices and students learning, but they also provided teachers with feedback on what has been successful in their implementation and what could be improved in future.

The data showed that teachers who have carried out action research reported improvement and positive changes in their teaching practices. They have increased their awareness of the importance of constructing and creating professional communities at the level of their schools or the level of their districts. They have additionally increased their awareness of their roles as English language teachers. They have developed reflective, analytical skills and have experienced the importance of being a life-long learner through using inquiry as an approach for the purpose of improving classroom instruction. Improvements in classroom interaction and students' engagement have also been manifested.

Teaching and learning processes became more meaningful when teachers realised that classrooms are considered a place for investigation and interpretation.

The following diagram illustrates the changes in practice that teachers identified when discussing the application of action research to their practice.

Before and After Action Research Implementation

The researcher believes that action research constitutes one of the most important ways to make Palestinian teacher educators reflect on their practices; reflection builds professional development, self-confidence, self-assessment, social awareness, creativity, and decision-making skills that hopefully help them become better teachers. The researcher believes that reflection implies the concept of "intelligent accountability" where we trust teachers as professionals and help them focus on self-evaluation; this evaluation does not distort the purpose of developing teacher practices, on the contrary, this evaluation encourages the fullest development of English language teachers.

Another noteworthy issue about self-reflection in Palestinian context is that it is a way to move from our resentful top-down, authoritative culture. It is a way where we develop trust in our teachers and lead them to make desirable changes from "inside out" by implementing the skill of being reflective teachers.

This research is evidence that action research is a fruitful strategy for in-service English language teachers to undertake. It offers them a systematic (Frabutt et al., 2008; Shon, 20007), collaborative (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; 2000), and participatory inquiry process (Holter & Frabutt, 2012; Mills, 2011).

Recommendation

The following recommendations are based on English language teachers' reflection towards the implementation of action research and reflection and its impact on their professional development. The recommendations address the following sectors, Palestinian teachers, Palestinian Schools, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) and researchers.

Recognizing the importance of action research, English language teachers have recommended other colleagues to practice action research and reflection in their classrooms. It is also recommended to transform Palestinian schools into learning communities or collegial centers of inquiry where teachers cooperate, collaborate and continually conduct open-reflective dialogues about their students and their teaching and learning processes.

The results of this action research should capture the attention of the administrators and policy makers in Palestine to adopt the strategy of action research and reflection in all educational sectors. Teacher education programs, for pre-service and in-service teachers, need to encourage participants to engage in action research.

Action research can also provide and be an alternative for the MoEHE to measure teacher performance and professional development rather than the current processes of accountability and evaluation.

Although the focus of this article has been on the Palestinian context, it will be evident to international readers that the findings and recommendations have relevance outside Palestine. Teachers and researchers in other countries experiencing civil unrest are recommended to explore the potential of action research and reflection in improving and developing education. According to my experience presented in this paper, all practitioners are encouraged to implement action research and reflection to make a difference for the good of humanity.

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Appendices

1. Self Reflection

To start with, of all the lessons I teach, grammar lessons are the most difficult for students to comprehend and use immediately. In this lesson the main aim was to help the students understand and use the past perfect tense as well as forming questions.

I was pleased with how well this lesson went on. I started with warm-up by making revision about the main points of the previous lesson (River Jordan). Students were active and used the language by summarizing the text.

Moving on with the lesson, I reminded the students with the form of past perfect as well as insisting on action 1 and action 2. Students started giving examples of their own. There were

some mistakes and correction was done. Writing some examples on board made it easier for me to explain how to form questions in the past perfect. The lesson went on smoothly, I used pair work, Students form sentences and questions.

I think it was good to ask students to write some questions in their copybooks for the illustrated pictures in their (SB) while I was going around checking. Looking back, I think I should minimize the time for the warm-up revision part to save time for checking the students' answers. Finally, I think the aim of the lesson was accomplished and students didn't feel bored.

2. Peer Reflection

I visited Miss Nadia who is a teacher in Abu Qash Secondary School for Girls. I attended her class for the ninth Grade. First of all Miss Nadia greeted the students then she made a revision for the previous lesson which talked about our friend "The Forest". The students were very active and many of them participated and answered the questions. After that, she gave them some cards and asked them to answer the questions on these cards (Using Conditionals: Type 0 – 1). Miss Nadia wrote all students' answers using if type 0 and 1 then she asked the students to tell her the rule.

In my opinion, her strategy is very successful and she involved all the students in the learning process and her class is learner centered class. After I had attended her class, I decided to use the strategy she used in this lesson since I found it very successful.