

# **Action research and the non-specialist practitioner.<sup>1</sup>**

**by Saúl Santos. Universidad Autónoma Nayarit<sup>2</sup>**

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In the last years there has been a growing interest of EL Teachers in involving themselves in critical, reflective exploration of what happens in their language classroom. Was my class effective? Why didn't this activity work? Is my use of metalanguage appropriate for my students' level of English? Increasingly, action research has allowed teachers to find insights to questions like these, both as a way of reflectively looking into our classrooms and as a consistent component in programs of teacher education. The following is a report of an action research project carried out as a requirement of a teaching practicum course of the Master's Program in Applied Linguistics at the University of the Americas, México.

## **Action research.**

Action research is often described as consisting of small-scale interventions aimed at generating change, i.e. solving a problem. Characteristic of action research is the fact that it is usually initiated by the practitioner and is derived from a real problem in the classroom. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, cited in Nunan 1992) state that there are three defining characteristics of action research: (1) it is carried out by practitioners, (2) it is collaborative, and (3) it is aimed at changing things. Of these three characteristics, personally I do not believe that collaboration (among colleagues) is necessarily a defining component of action research: other alternatives, such as teacher-student collaboration should be considered. Especially in Mexico there are many instances in which practitioners find themselves in isolation and lack of collaboration among colleagues should not prevent them from carrying out action research projects. However, I should also state that collaboration is highly desirable.

<sup>1</sup> This is a referred article

<sup>2</sup> This author can be reached at: saulsantos@hotmail.com

Kemmis and McTaggart (1985, cited in Nunan 1989:12-13) outline four stages or developmental phases in the action research plan:

1. Develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening.
2. Act to implement the plan.
3. Observe the effects of action in the context in which it occurs.
4. Reflect on these effects.

The scope of action research is not at the level of generating "knowledge" in the sense of contributing to the field, because of the scale in which it takes place. Rather, it is an opportunity for practitioners to gain insight from the classroom. The main drive of action research is to bring about change and, hopefully, to improve the state of affairs in the classroom in which it has taken place.

This project takes these four stages outlined above as a guideline. It departs from what I would call phase zero: identify a problem.

### **Identifying the problem.**

I decided to use the comments of the evaluation that the students at the University of the Americas (henceforth referred to as UDLA) write every semester for the courses they are taking. The evaluation consists of 13 different questions relating the teaching practice and classroom management that the students grade on a scale from 1 to 10. There is an additional space for comments. In the evaluation that I received for the summer courses, which incidentally was the same level and same type of class, there was a comment that called my attention: *"el maestro trabaja bien y su inglés es bueno, pero me cuesta trabajo entender sus instrucciones..."*<sup>1</sup>

I feel confident about the way I give instructions and I am aware of different techniques to give instructions. At the teacher training course that I lead at the State University of Nayarit one of the sessions is devoted to instructions and the use of metalanguage. Yet, I decided to focus this project on the way I give instructions. I have learnt that many times we think we do things one way and the students perceive things in a different way. Many times because we are aware of the importance of something we think that we act accordingly, but that is not necessarily always true.

### **Action plan**

I used some of the assignments given in the Practicum to explore the target problem. My action plan included the following activities:

- A. Observation by a senior teacher to help me find out more about my instruction giving.
- B. Recording of a lesson to analyze my own instructions.
- C. Review of literature on instructions.

- D. Conscious attention to the way I give instructions and regular recording of segments of lesson and retrospective analysis (stimulated recall).
- E. The students' evaluation of the fall course (which includes a question on instructions and the use of metalanguage for explanations).

### **Implementation of action plan and reflection**

The action research project was carried out with a class of beginners (approximately 60 hours of English). The course is based on a textbook that has a strong component of grammar. The class takes place fifty minutes a day four days a week and the students have to complete an additional hour at the self-access center.

#### **A. Observation by a senior teacher.**

The first action that was carried out was the observation by a senior teacher. In the pre-observation session I asked the observer to focus her attention on the way I give instructions. During the post-observation feedback session we found out that there were no important problems in the way I give instructions. She noticed, however, that some students seemed to be confused and uneasy with my approach to the presentation stage. She asked why didn't I directly answer some of the students' questions? I explained her that I was trying to implement a more inductive approach. What I had observed in my students is that they seemed to be used to been taught directly, to be given grammar rules; they were used to a more deductive approach.

Then we deduced that what the student tried to say in the evaluation comment referred to at the beginning might have been that he or she had problems with my approach rather than my instructions. This modified the course of action of my project. I changed the focus from instructions to the general approach to my lessons.

#### **B. Recording of a lesson**

I did not actually record a lesson at this point. I used the lesson that had been observed by the senior teacher because it was clearly representative of the target problem. I was able to recall instances of uncertainty in some of my students. The target item of the lesson was the use of *can* and *could*. I wanted the students to find out by themselves what the difference was between *can* and *could* in the context of requests.

I presented the target item through a dialog and immediately after that I had the students try to use it in a semi controlled activity. Even though most students were able to use *can* and *could* appropriately, some of them wanted to know what each word meant. My impression is, retrospectively, that they were using the target item mechanically, following the examples. Eventually, in the subsequent lessons, they were able to find out the differences. However, I realized that I needed to pay more attention to the way I was implementing an inductive approach. What I really wanted to achieve was to make the students take a more active role in their own learning, to help them learn to reason and find out rules by

themselves, to make them understand that they can learn about grammar by looking at patterns in language. Then the next step was to explore what the literature says about inductive approaches.

### C. Review of literature (summary).

Richards et al (1992:99) define inductive learning as that in which "learners are not taught grammatical...rules directly but are left to discover or induce rules from their experience of using the language." But exposure to language is not enough. This language or input needs to become intake in order to get through to the learner (see Krashen 1995). In order for learners to internalize features of the grammar which are not still evident to them, they have to notice them: "intake is most likely to occur when features of the grammar stand out in some way." (Batstone 1994:40). How can the teacher help the learners notice language items?

Parrott (1993) discusses two approaches to presenting language: *giving* and *guiding*. Guiding approaches are those where students work out the meaning by themselves. The following is an segment of a lesson where an inductive or guiding approach is used (Parrott 1993: 271-272):

Teacher: "Look at this dialogue on the board. The underlined verbs both refer to the future, but what's the difference in meaning? ...No. Well, think about when they made the decision."

The following is written on the board:

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A: Why do you want the corkscrew?

B: I'm going to open that bottle of wine I bought yesterday.

A: We drank it last night.

B: Oh, then I'll open a beer.

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A key aspect in the segment above is *the questions* that are used to help the students *notice* the target items and understand their meaning. It helps more if these are simple and direct. Parrott (1993:273) suggests that "they can be formed by specifying the crucial, defining components of meaning in terms of statements, and then turning these statements into questions."

### **D. Conscious attention to the way I give explanations and regular recording of segments of lesson and retrospective analysis (stimulated recall).**

After reviewing literature on inductive approaches and samples of lessons where this approach is used, I started to consciously adopt an inductive approach. I did this in two ways. Most of the time I would use the exercises in the textbook and would simply modify my explanations. Basically I would use questions to help my students "discover" rules of the language items in the textbook. At other times I designed specific lesson plans where an inductive approach was emphasized. The following are two examples of the implemen-

tation of a “guiding” or discovery approach.

First example.

The following is a transcript of a lesson where the students are dealing with *can* in the context of expressing ability. Previous to this segment, the students worked on a listening exercise. These are the instructions for the listening exercise:

Teacher: “Gloria began to study English two months ago. Listen to her speak about herself about learning to speak English; then circle *can* or *can’t* in each sentence”.

After the students listened to the monologue and completed the task I asked them to close their books and write down three sentences of things Gloria can do.

T: Teacher	Ss: All students	S#: A specific student.
T:	Ok. Now, I want to listen to some of your sentences. Uh, Ramón, Read your sentence please.	
S1:	She can to watch TV programs in English.	
T:	Ok. Everyone, look at the examples in the book. Daniela, uh, read one example from the book.	
S2:	<i>Gloria can understand the teacher.</i>	
T:	(Writes down sentence on the blackboard). Roberto, can you read another example from the book?	
S3:	<i>She can use a Spanish speaking bank teller.</i>	
T:	(writes down sentence on the blackboard). How do we usually make an infinitive... If you want to say <i>ir</i> or <i>jugar</i> , what do you say in English?	
S4:	Go.	
T:	Ok. That’s the “name” of the verb (brackets indicated with the fingers). But the infinitive. How do we express it?	
S4:	to go?	
T:	That’s right. Now, look at the examples. What’s different about these sentences?	
S1:	<i>Ah, no tienen to.</i>	
T:	Right. Then read your sentence again.	
S1:	She can... watch TV programs in English.	
T:	Ok, good. Marisol read one of your sentences.	
S5:	She can to understand the teacher...No...she can understand the teacher.	
T:	Very well Marisol. Daniel, your sentence.	
S6:	I can study at night.	
T:	You can study at night, great, but what about Gloria?	
Ss	(laughter)	
S6	No ella. She can study at night.	
T:	Now, what else do you observe? <i>Ahorita por ejemplo con la oración de Daniel.</i> He first said I can study at night, and then he changed his sentence to the third person. (Writes down both sentences on the blackboard).	
S7:	She can studies at night?	
T:	No, look at the other examples (points to the first two sentences, which are in third person)	
S7:	<i>Ah, no tienen S.</i>	

- T: Then what's the rule? *Qué podemos decir del can?*  
 S8: Ya no agregamos la S en tercera persona.  
 T: That's right.....

Two important points about the construction of *can* are dealt with in this segment of the lesson: the absence of the particle *to* and the invariance of *can* in third person singular. The intention of the procedure was to create salience in these two items. Salience was created by isolating the target items. But the isolated sentences came from the students. The first sentence, an ill-formed sentence, was produced by a student (S1). And at the end of a question-answer procedure, the student was able to correct it. Through this procedure I intended to have the students notice those two items. To me it is evident that the students noticed the absence of the particle *to*: it is clearly demonstrated by S5. She had obviously committed the same mistake as S1, and as she read her sentence, she realized it was wrong and immediately corrected it by herself.

As for the fact that *can* does not take an S in third person singular, it is also evident that the learners noticed it. It was not necessary for the teacher to actually say it, it was S7 who voiced it out. Now, the fact that the learners notice a language item does not necessarily mean that they have learnt it. However, it is a first step in the learning process.

### Second example.

The following is a segment of a lesson plan on *time clauses* (see appendix 1 for complete lesson plan). The activity described here is the fourth activity of the sequence. In the previous three activities the students worked on a reading exercise (Taken from Richards, J. C. (1991) *Interchange III*. Cambridge: CUP, pp39). The reading was used to provide the learners with an authentic context for the use of *time clauses*. However, the topic has not formally been introduced.

#### **Activity 4.**

Estimated time: 20 minutes

Objectives: To create salience in the target language item: time clauses markers. For the students to notice the target language item.

Description of the activity:

T writes on the blackboard the following words: After, Before, When, As soon as  
 Then the T asks the Ss to look for examples of clauses where *after* is used in the reading and he writes them down on the Bb. The target clauses are:

After breakfast, the teachers lead the children in morning exercises.

After that, they play a game of tag.

After lunch, it's time to go to the dormitory for a nap.

After returning to their classroom, the children are taught to recite a story.

T asks Ss to try to explain clause 4 (gerund). Some leading questions are:

"How is *breakfast* or *lunch* different from *returning*?" "what kind of words are they?"

Then T asks students to rewrite those sentences (4 in total) using the word *before* and using additional information from the passage. Then, Ss are instructed to produce sentences using *when* and *as soon as* with the help of the information in the flow chart.

Vocabulary: after, before, when, while, as soon as.

Possible problems and solutions: It is likely that Ss are not able to establish that when *that + verb* (without subject) the verb takes *ing*. Because of time restrains, if after a while Ss do not come out with an answer, then the teacher should explain it directly. Another problem that is common to Spanish speakers is that they tend to use *then* and *after* interchangeably. The text contains instances of the use of *then*. T may want to use them to try to elicit from the students the differences, using leading questions.

The following were changes that I decided to make as I was developing the lesson:

1. As I elicited sentences 1 to 4 (see segment of lesson plan above) to write them on the blackboard, I modified them.

Original sentences	Modified sentences
1. After breakfast, the teachers lead the children in morning exercises.	1. After breakfast, the children do some exercise.
2. After that, they play a game of tag.	2. After that, they play a game of tag.
3. After lunch, it's time to go to the dormitory for a nap.	3. After lunch, the children take a nap.
4. After returning to their classroom, the children are taught to recite a story.	4. After returning to the classroom, the children recite a story.

I decided to modify the sentences because I did not want to distract the students' attention from the target language item (time clauses). I tried to make the models as simple and "noticeable" as possible, but still using the context of the reading. The learners did not have difficulties explaining sentence 4.

2. I asked the students to transform sentences 1, 2 and 3 in such a way that they looked like sentence 4. They worked in pairs or groups of three and I gave them no more than two minutes. Then I elicited the new sentences from different groups or pairs. Corrections were made by the whole class (like in a brainstorm of alternatives) as I was writing the sentences.

Model sentence	Sentences 1 to 3 transformed
After returning to their classroom, the children are taught to recite a story.	1. After having breakfast, the children ... 2. After going to the bathroom, the children play a game of tag. 3. After having lunch, the children ...

3. Then I asked them to use the word *before* instead of *after* and make the necessary changes to express the same idea. They worked in the same way as in 2 above.

## Prompt

## Transformed sentences

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. After breakfast, the children do some exercise.</li> <li>2. After going to the bathroom, they play a game of tag.</li> <li>3. After lunch, the children have a nap.</li> <li>4. After returning to the classroom, the children recite a story.</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Before the children do some exercise, they have breakfast.</li> <li>2. Before they play a game of tag, the children go to the bathroom.</li> <li>3. Before the children have a nap, they have lunch.</li> <li>4. Before reciting a story, the children return to the classroom.</li> </ol> |
|---|--|

I was pleasantly surprised to see that the students were able to produce all this combination of sentences. Obviously not all the students were able to produce every single sentence. This was a collective construction. My role in this activity was to encourage the students to "think aloud". That is to say, to voice out the reasoning for constructing the new sentences. (e. i. The word *breakfast* is a noun. Do I need a verb here? What verb do I use with *breakfast*? / If I don't mention the subject, what does the verb needs? That's right, I need an *ing*, etc.)

My overall impression of the lesson is that it was satisfactory. The lesson plan was designed to achieve three objectives:

1. To provide the learner with a natural context for the use of time clauses.
2. To encourage a "discovery" approach to the learning process.
3. To integrate at least some of the four basic language skills (reading, listening and speaking and writing to a certain extent) in a more communicative framework.

From these three objectives at least 1 and 2 were reasonably achieved. The learners showed evidence of having "noticed" the construction of time clauses without the need of a direct explanation from the teacher. Depending on the performance on the following activities (see appendix 1) decisions have be made with regards to the need of further practice on present time clauses (e. i. through written drills) or the possibility of moving to a new, related topic: past time clauses.

#### E. The students' evaluation of the fall courses.

The idea of this project was elicited from the comments of the evaluation of the summer courses. I though it would be a good idea to look at the comments of the fall course to see if the issue of instructions or explanations is brought up. The following is a comment written by a student of the target class:

"Este curso en verdad si que es bueno. El profesor Santos enseña de una manera clara y que se puede entender. Claramente sigue un programa y con esto se puede decir que los temas van unidos unos con otros."



## Conclusion.

The data presented here shows reasonable evidence of some degree of change both in the students' expectations of a presentation and in my ability to "guide" the students. But more than proving that my action plan was effective in improving my skills in using an inductive approach to the EFL classroom, I wanted to show how a reflective approach can be adopted. I also wanted to show that action research is a kind of research that the regular practitioner can do, that it is not exclusively confined to "the expert." It obviously takes commitment and a genuine interest from the teacher in the teaching-learning process. I learned a lot from the experience and I am confident that my students also benefited from it.

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## Appendix 1

### The lesson plan.

#### Activity 1.

Estimated time: 6 minutes

Objective: to activate the students' content and formal schemata and to arouse their interest in the general topic.

Description of the activity:

T writes on the Bb the following:

What kind of things do children do and learn in kindergartens?

Then he asks the Ss to individually brainstorm ideas. After a minute T asks the Ss to share their ideas with a peer. Then T elicits from pairs their ideas and creates a mind map on the Bb.

Vocabulary: All and any. Related to children activities, school verbs.

Possible problems and solutions: The Ss may want to use vocabulary they still do not know in English. T should encourage them to write in Spanish and as T elicits he translate those words into English (as he writes them in the mind map).

### Activity 2.

Estimated time: 6 minutes.

Objective: To practice getting the gist of a reading text (extensive reading: skimming), and to establish a link between the lead-in discussion and the reading.

Description of the activity:

T hands out reading passage (see appendix 1) and asks Ss to quickly read the passage and see what information from the mind map is mentioned in the reading. They are given two minutes to do so. As the teacher notices that most Ss finish reading he asks them to stop. Then T elicits feedback from Ss. As he elicits feedback, he ticks on the mind map.

Vocabulary: The one contained in the reading passage. It is not meant to deal with it at his stage.

Possible problems and solutions: As the students read they may run into words they do not understand and they may want to know their meaning. T should make clear as he explains the activity that Ss should not worry about unknown vocabulary, and that they should look for the general idea.

### Activity 3.

Estimated time: 10 minutes.

Objective: To practice looking for specific details in a reading passage (intensive reading)

Description of the activity:

T asks the students to individually read the passage again and then in groups of three to construct a flow diagram with the different activities the children do in the kindergarten. T encourages students to help each other with new vocabulary. T elicits from the different groups their outcomes and draws on the Bb a summarizing flow chart.

Vocabulary: the one contained in the reading.

Possible problems and solutions: Even the learners are encouraged to help each other with vocabulary, they may still have problems with difficult words. T tries to elicit from other groups the meaning of those words, and as a last resource he explains them or gives the equivalent in Spanish.

### Activity 4.

Estimated time: 20 minutes

Objective: To create salience in the target language item: time clauses markers. For the students to notice the target language item.

Description of the activity:

T writes on the blackboard the following words:

After / Before / When / As soon as

Then the T asks the Ss to look for examples of clauses where *after* is used and he writes them down on the Bb. The target clauses are:

After breakfast, the teachers lead the children in morning exercises.

After that, they play a game of tag.

After lunch, it's time to go to the dormitory for a nap.

After returning to their classroom, the children are taught to recite a story.

T asks Ss to try to explain clause 4 (gerund). Some leading questions are:

“How is *breakfast* or *lunch* different from *returning*?” “what kind of words are they?”

Then T asks students to rewrite those sentences (4 in total) using the word *before* and using additional information from the passage. Then, Ss are instructed to produce sentences using *when* and *as*

soon as with the help of the information in the flow chart.

Vocabulary: after, before, when, while, as soon as.

Possible problems and solutions: It is likely that Ss are not able to establish that after a verb the *ing* form can be used. Because of time restrains, if after a while Ss do not come out with an answer, then the teacher should explain it directly. Another problem that is common to Spanish speakers is that they tend to use *then* and *after* interchangeably. The text contains instances of the use of *then*. They may want to use them to try to elicit from the students the differences, using leading questions.

#### **Activity 5.**

Estimated time: 15 minutes.

Objective: To provide a context for a more natural use of time clauses.

Description of the activity: Role play.

Preparation - Ss work in groups of four. Some groups are members of the staff of a well-known kindergarten. They have to prepare themselves to give a press conference about the way their institution works. The other groups are journalists. They have to prepare an interview to kindergarten staff members.

Role play - In the instructions the teacher makes clear that in the questions and in the answers the Ss have to use time clause markers.

After five minutes the teacher rearranges the groups, each new group with members of the staff and with journalists. Then they role play the interviews. Each group is given a set of cards with the time clause markers, two of each (before, after, when, as soon as), eight cards in total. And during the interview, every time they use one of those words, they put the card on the desk. The groups will not complete the task until they have used all the cards.

Vocabulary: related to the reading passage. Time clauses.

Possible problems and solution: One problem in role plays is that they may or may not elicit the use of specific target language items. In general role plays are good for developing fluency, but not to foster the use of a specific item. In this case, the use of the cards is introduced to make sure that the Ss use specific target language.

<sup>1</sup> "the teacher's performance is ok and his English is good, but I find it difficult to understand his instructions"