Action Research in Teaching

Leaving aside the stereotype of teaching and learning of English, the incorporation of fun and joy in the classroom through the Tongue-Twister Competition

Definition

Action research is a kind of systematic inquiry that is done collectively or collaboratively, then from the data, information and performance of the participants, the researcher will have some kinds of self-reflective and critical thinking which will lead to the understanding of the practice, so as to improve it. Teachers nowadays are faced with lots of challenges, whether it is the behavioral problem of students, the imposed curriculum, standardized tests or the demands of improvement from parents or different administrative bodies. So action research is seen as a tool to facilitate the improvement and professionalism of teachers.

Let’s look at the definition and concepts of action research from various educationalists:

“The literature of education is littered with discussions of school reforms. School reforms is a response to a perceived need to move education away from the “egg crate” system of the industrial, teacher-centred model of educating children to student-centred, problem-solving, learning-for-understanding based system of learning.” (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991)

“The concept of research is traditionally a search for few knowledge that is disseminated to a broader audience. Action, on the other hand, denotes a process of doing something with the evidence that promotes a change.” (Noffke, 1997)

“Action research has been described as an “informal, qualitative, formative, subjective, interpretative, reflective and experiential model of inquiry in which all individuals involved in the study are knowing and contributing participants.”

(Hopkins, 1985, as cited in Gable, 1995)

“Action research is a learning process, the fruits of which are the real and material changes in (a) what people do, (b) how they interact with the world and the others, (c) what they mean and what they value, and (d) the discourses in which they understand and interpret their world.” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000)
**The rationale**

So action research bears different aspects and concepts of learning process and the hope of improving it through various actions. As a consequence of these motives, I made up my mind to put forward an action research which helps to understand students’ strengths and weaknesses in learning the correct pronunciation and the sound of English.

As an English teacher for more than twenty years, I fully understand the defects and difficulties that students face in learning and mastering the language. Having got the experience of English language teaching from primary to secondary, and the direct experience of personal encounters when learning the language, I come to a conclusion that many teachers will neglect the most fundamental and crucial element of learning English, that is accurate pronunciation.

I have devoted a lot of my classroom activities in drilling the students, in the hope of getting the correct sound of the words. It is most beneficial to do it in the junior forms when students do not have much pressure for the public exams. It is done individually, in chorus, in rows or the whole class. A lot of emphasis will be put on reading aloud paragraphs, sentences, phrases, single words or the syllables. These activities motivate the students in pronouncing words correctly and understanding how important it is to say out words clearly and precisely, not just murmuring or mumbling. Gradually they form the habit of reading aloud cautiously, in addition, awareness in the tone and expression of sentences. This is the rationale behind the motive of my action research in teaching: the Tongue Twister Competition for junior form students.

**Planning**

The target group is students from 2A, which is considered as a good class in the form. As a matter of fact, only 75% of students are up to the standard and 25% are below average. Among the four skills of English; they are reading, writing, listening and speaking; the last skill is the weakest. They paid little attention to the vowels, diphthongs, consonants, syllables, tone or stress of the language. If we teach these words one by one, and then give them examples, they will learn them but at the same time they will forget them easily. It will also create a kind of boredom that they will lose the interest of learning them. In order to arouse their interest and concern of pronouncing correctly, I choose three sets of sentences for them to practise.
She sells seashells by the seashore
The shells she sells are surely seashells.
So if she sells seashells on the seashore,
I’m sure she sells seashore shells.

Which wristwatches are Swiss wristwatches?

Three gray geese in the green grass grazing,
Gray were the geese and green was the grass.

The first one emphasizes the “S“ and “SH “ sound; the second one plays a little trick on “ Which” “Swiss” “Wrist”; the third one emphasizes on “G” and “GR”. Students often neglect these sounds and mix them up. They have a difficult time to read them at the beginning, as the structure of the sentences and the sound of the words are very interesting, it attracts their interest and willingness to learn. They find the fun and joy of pronouncing them accurately.

Process
The students were taught during the lessons and each of them will have chances to read aloud. Comments and corrections were given and they would know their ways of pronouncing, whether it is right or wrong. From this repeated and continuous drilling and demonstration, they got a lot of improvement. Some weaker students could not pronounce them correctly at the beginning, a few days later, they had a lot of improvement. The main reason was that they found it very interesting, very funny and amusing. They considered it not a kind of homework when you asked them to practise at home, but a game to play with friends or family members. I remember once a student came to me and said, “ Oh, Miss Lau, I couldn’t pronounce these words yesterday, but now I can do it, because I spent the whole night practising it. I would like to read it to you now.” It was very encouraging when I listened to her, as the goal of my research has been achieved eventually.

Every time when I asked them to read aloud, I would give them a mark. At first most of them got very low marks, except a few smarter ones. During the lesson, when I have finished the main target, I would ask some of them to read. They loved reading it to the whole class and they had a good laugh when their classmates read it wrongly. So they realized what the correct pronunciation is although some of them still cannot pronounce it correctly. This is indeed a kind of improvement because they can distinguish what is right or wrong. They had moved another step forward.
Outcome
After two weeks I compared the marks that I gave them, I found that each of them got a great deal of improvement. Then I asked them to form into pairs, each pair of students had to recite the sentences and tried to read it as fast as they could. Each student had to supervise the other one and report to me whether they were getting on well. I gave them the date of the competition so that they could have a good preparation. They were eager to learn because they know the importance of correct pronunciation, intonation, stress and clarity of speech and sound in English.

On the day of the competition, I took more than one lesson to listen to them, and I pointed out their mistakes one by one. Each student would note down his/her mistakes and practise them again at home or with classmates. I chose ten best ones and asked them to stand in front of the blackboard and ask the class to listen to them again and to decide the best three in the class. The students had to listen to each student very carefully, as a result, it strengthened their knowledge about the correct sound of the words. This was a very meaningful step as the students had to use their own discretion to choose the winners and once again they learnt the importance of correct pronunciation through the Tongue-twister Competition. They were very delighted when the winners were chosen. The three finalists would enter the grand final with winners from other form two classes.

Students who are weak in pronunciation will not be neglected and personal attention is directed. They were grouped into pairs so they could practise with other classmates and I would listen to them during lunch. There is a great deal of improvement after careful guidance and their progress is obvious.

Conclusion
It is a very encouraging competition because the students find the fun and joy in learning the English language and they are proud of themselves once they can master the different sound of words. It is like a game that they can gain something in it. So in the later days, I would use more interesting and authentic material to teach the students, to stimulate their desire to learn, their eagerness to involve in the process and the accuracy of using the language. I would pay more attention in teaching phonics to students during each lesson as they are very interested in it. I also realize the significance of careful organization and preparation before any activity in order to get the students to learn and participate. The Tongue-Twister Competition will be continued next year.
**Reflection and Evaluation**

Although the overall banding of students in the school is not as high as other prestigious EMI schools, through careful guidance students can have very good achievement. Don’t assume that they are incapable of doing it, nevertheless, some of them are very unique and talented. A teacher’s job is to find out their talent and potential in learning. Therefore every time a learning activity is being carried out, you will discover some unexpected potentials from students. For Example: the Debating Competition; the Speech Festival; the Penmanship Competition; the Writing Competition, the Story-Telling Competition or the Tongue-Twister Competition. Besides classroom routine teaching, students should participate in a variety of activities so as to excel and to make the best of their potential.

Through the process of the activities we can also find out those who are below average or weak in foundation, so extra care and attention will be given.

Students have grasped the preliminary skills of pronouncing correctly and the awareness of accent, tone, stress and expression while reading sentences. It is a very fundamental step of mastering the English language. Such kind of learning attitude should be encouraged in other learning activities.

**Follow Up**

I will make a chart to record the performance of the students. It will be served as an indicator of the standard of the students. From the data collected, I can understand my students more and I can offer assistance accordingly. Phonics will be a very important category and I will encourage my colleagues to teach the students more next term.

I think this action research allows autonomy for teacher-centred professionalism and can engage learning actively in a classroom, the final outcome is the product of how teaching and learning is transformed in the learning environment. Eventually it is a student-centred inquiry with collaboration and the sharing of problems, data collection, reflection, action and the most important of all is improvement in student learning.