

Journeys of Reflective Practice

Strengthening Teacher Educators' Professional Skills (STEPS)
through Action Research



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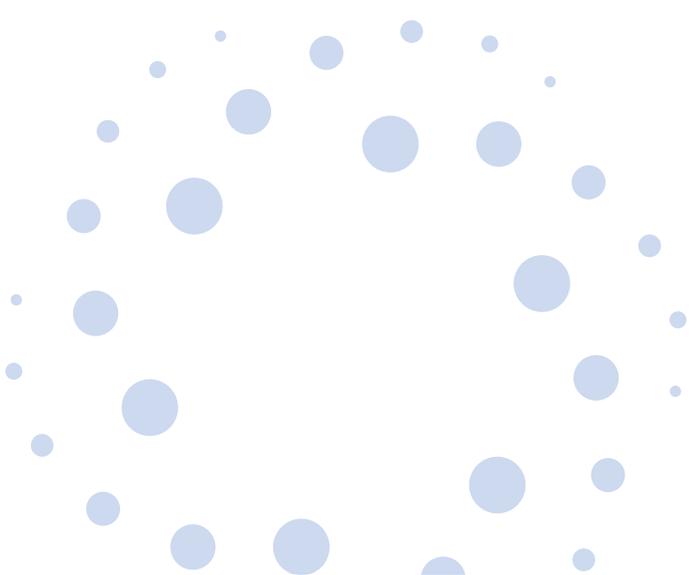
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Introduction

British Council has been working in Nepal in the areas of English language teaching and learning, examinations and wider education and skills for the last 60 years. We are committed to delivering impact through our work in education, and in particular our work with teachers and teacher educators. For many years we have worked closely with the National Centre for Educational Development (NCED) to support and promote Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for educators in order to enhance learning outcomes in the classroom. In order to reach the classroom level, it is essential to have a cadre of well-trained teacher educators who are not only able to plan and deliver, observe others and give constructive feedback but are also reflective practitioners who take responsibility for their own professional learning as well as supporting teachers with theirs.

In July 2016, British Council Nepal started a professional development scheme - Strengthening Teacher Educators' Professional Skills (STEPS) - for all the teacher educators working as part of our different projects. STEPS is aligned with British Council's broader Teaching for Success approach to CPD and aims to increase awareness of key areas of teacher educators' knowledge and skills, as identified in the Teaching for Success CPD Framework for teacher educators. Since its inception, the scheme has delivered various face-to-face and online training programmes to Nepali teacher educators to familiarize them with the British Council's longer-term standardised approach to teacher education work in Nepal and support them to develop their own professional expertise.

This book is borne out of the work STEPS has done to address two of the professional practices in the Teaching for Success CPD Framework for teacher educators:

- Researching and contributing to the profession
- Taking responsibility for your own professional development

As part of their first cycle of professional development activities, teacher educators were asked to identify a relevant problem they face in their classroom or training room, analyse it further and come up with possible solutions which they can try out and reflect on. Staying true to the fact that action research is non-academic and can be based on any topic of relevance to the person conducting the research, they asked themselves simple questions like, 'How do I encourage female students to participate equally?', 'How do I complete my tasks on time?', 'How do I make my classes interactive'. The teacher educators then went away to find answers to these questions with our support and guidance before submitting their final reports.

This book is a compilation of the research findings and reflections from 10 teacher educators who have effectively demonstrated their understanding of action research and classroom enquiry. We recognize the hard work and commitment of all of those who have participated and would like to thank them for sharing their action research stories with us.

I would also like to thank a few people for their hard work on supporting the teacher educators throughout the process and finally getting this book together.

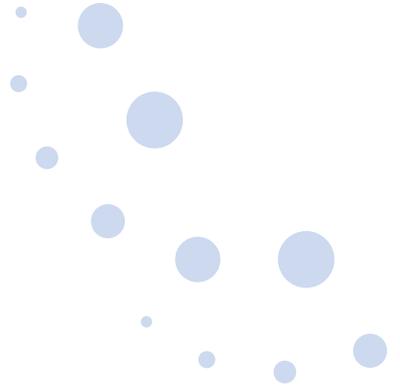
Vaishali Pradhan for co-facilitating the training sessions with me and assessing the research reports.

Bhogendra Lamichhane, Andrew Riley, Christopher O’Connell, Laurel Bassett and Erin Green for assessing the research reports

Alina Ava Laurent Olive for editing the final reports

We are happy to share their experiences with you and hope that it will inspire you to reflect on your own practice in order to make your teaching experience more fruitful and enjoyable.

Rhona Brown, Head of Programmes





Ensuring increased participation





Promoting equal participation of training participants through group work



Basu Dev Osti
Technical Officer, ETC Kavre

The problem

In 2011 I began my journey of being a teacher trainer. When delivering sessions, I started to notice a problem while setting up activities. Some of the participants didn't take part in the activities as much as the others, so this motivated me to find a way to get all the participants equally involved.

What did I do?

I decided the best way to get more participants to engage in the training sessions was to set up more group based activities. I adapted the training materials to suit their context and level, and developed a variety of materials like activity sheets, main idea charts, open questions, speaking frames for scaffolding activities and a variety of assessment tools for learning. I also prepared an observation checklist to collect data throughout the training period and designed questions to get the opinions of the participants after the training.

The main participants were secondary level teachers of community-based schools in the Kavre district of Nepal. They taught different subjects in bilingual and multilingual contexts where English was taught as a foreign language. Over a period of time, I delivered fifteen sessions of group based activities to the different groups of secondary level teachers, each session being one and half hours.

I followed the starter, main course and dessert phases to deliver the contents, with group work used in every phase. In the starter phase, I grouped the

participants alphabetically, according to the first letter of their names with four members in each group. For the lead-in activities, I used a mixture of true or false, a matching game and pictures for writing captions. As well as this, probing questions were used to elicit responses.

In the main course phase, I regrouped the training participants through numbering and then they sat around a table in their allocated seat with their number on it. Each group was asked to give word definitions from a given text or a video and then asked to write the meaning of the words on activity sheets. I allotted a fixed time for the groups to share their work in. Each group was instructed to use speaking frames and share their answers using a main idea chart.

I facilitated the group activities by providing cues or by asking questions, and after the time was up, I reshuffled the groups and asked them to share



At first, I wasn't very sure that the group work activity would solve the problem. I thought that the attitude of the participants towards training may hinder the achievement of my action work, however, I was proved wrong.



what they had learnt, aided by speaking frames. After that, I asked some open questions with a 'no hands up' activity to draw on their learning experience through reflection.

With an aim for promoting critical thinking skills, I asked the groups to explain the reasoning behind higher order questions. The questions were raised to deepen an understanding of the participants on the contents. For instance, envisaging what might be and asking why, how and what if questions were used to explore their creative thinking. The participants were allocated time to think over the questions, discuss them in groups and orally present them to the whole class. I used the 'medals and missions' model for giving feedback to them.

In the dessert phase, I used reflection activities to review what the participants had learnt during the training. I set up the 'hot potato game' in which everyone stood up in a circle and were asked to share a learning point. After sharing, they passed a hot potato to the adjacent friend to initiate their turn to share and no one was allowed to repeat the same learning point. Thereafter, I distributed some assessment tools like questions, plus minus, two stars and a wish activity sheet. They were asked to write down their

reflection on their activity sheets and share it with the whole class. At the end, I summed up the overall training session and gave extension tasks to consolidate learning.

What did I learn?

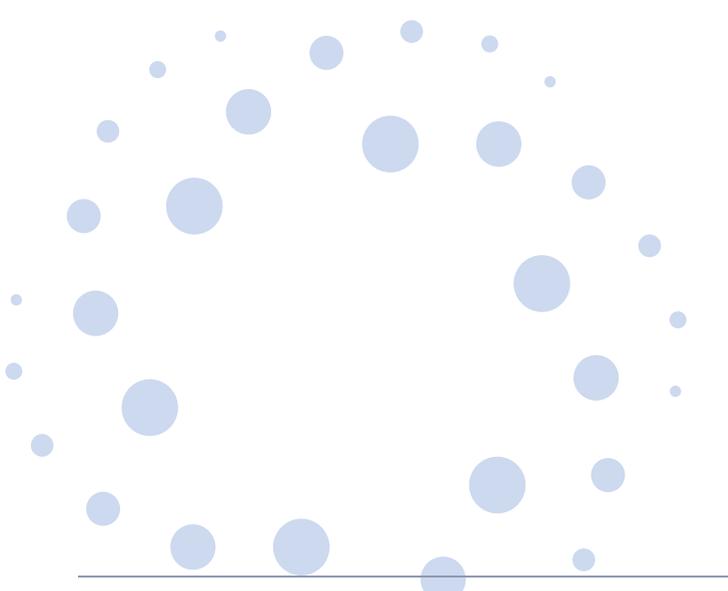
The use of group work was found to be effective in promoting equal participation of teachers in training. The participants were engaged and it also developed critical thinking skills with a variety of activities that built on each other. The activities designed for group work should move learning from word level to text level, from everyday language to academic language, and from lower order thinking skills to higher order thinking skills.

What will I do next?

I am going to continue the use of group work to involve all participants in training, as I like this strategy to develop core skills.

Reflection on action research process

At first, I wasn't very sure that the group work activity would solve the problem. I thought that the attitude of the participants towards training may hinder the achievement of my action work, however, I was proved wrong. The group work that I used throughout the training sessions promoted an equal participation of teachers in diverse training activities. I understood that the varied activities designed in advance and their presentation in an organized way is the key to overcome this problem. This work has greatly encouraged me to be a reflective practitioner and thereby lead my efforts towards becoming a more professional teacher trainer.



Increasing participatory activities for trainee teachers



Lok Bahadur Khatri

*Resource Person, Birendranagar Resource center, DEO Surkhet
Freelance Trainer for British Council Nepal*

The problem

The participants of teacher training are adult learners and are used to an old school way of teaching. They were taught in a traditional teacher-centered method which is non participatory; only listening, a little writing and all about Teacher Talk Time (TTT). They are more active than students while teaching but are passive as participants. They like to listen and write but hesitate to perform, speak and get engaged in activities.

As a facilitator, I sometimes follow traditional methods too. I become more active than the participants with high TTT, which is definitely less engaging and interactive, and consequently participants go into the traditional mode of teaching as well. As they are trained in a non-participatory method, there is a high possibility that they will use it in their classrooms too. I realized this as my problem so I decided to conduct some action research in order to increase participatory activities for my trainee teachers.

Therefore, the main objective of this action research is to engage trainee teachers in the learning process using participatory activities and encourage them to apply these in their classrooms.

What did I do?

This action research was inspired by my realization that teacher-centered instruction doesn't enhance learning, but participatory activities do during the learning process. So, my action research implementation plan included participatory activities when preparing session plans. The research was done in a five day EMI Self Study Manual training, conducted in Latikoili Resource Center in Surkhet district.

First of all, I gave clear instructions using instruction checking questions (ICQs) and asked the participants to get involved in Total Physical Response activities (TPR) through out the class. The TPR activities work well as a warmer as they energize and open the participants' mind and body, making them more responsive to any activities that follow.



The game was the most liked and enjoyed activity where although the classroom got a bit noisy, they enjoyed talking and laughing openly. Participants were talking about the game the following day too, which I took to be a positive impact on them.



I then divided the participants into groups of 4 and instructed them to delegate the roles of leader/manager, writer, timekeeper and presenter among themselves in each group. All the participants performed their designated roles whenever needed. I tried to encourage them to exchange the roles as well so that every participant got the opportunity to play all of them. I reshuffled the groups everyday and kept on guiding, encouraging and helping them and used group work activities in almost every session.

Pair work activities was also planned in my session plan. For this, all the groups were further divided into pairs. I used pair work activities like information gap or matching and conversation activities. I asked them to share the outcome of their pair work in a group and then with the whole class, closely monitoring the pair work while participants were busy interacting.

I also included visual aids like picture cards, sentence strips and charts for matching and gap fills, which I noticed encouraged them to contribute more.

Role-play games were another engaging activity I planned for my session, as they create an environment to freely communicate to each other and actively participate in.

Throughout the training I observed the involvement of the participants and noted down my observation accordingly. I also got the participants to fill in the questionnaires about the activities done and their feelings about them as well as their potential plan to use them in their classroom.

What did I learn?

During the training period, almost all participants were engaged in one thing or other. It was wonderful. In group work, the majority of the participants were kept busy in discussions. The 'reporters' were speaking enthusiastically and taking notes, as they had to present the group's ideas to the whole class. Only 'timekeepers' seemed less attentive during the discussion as they only seemed to talk when the leader or facilitator asked them to. This made me understand that the facilitator should be very attentive about the participation of all group members during the activity.

All the participants showed interest in the visual aids as they were asking, responding or reacting heartily to all of them.

The game was the most liked and enjoyed activity where although the classroom got a bit noisy, they enjoyed talking and laughing openly. Participants were talking about the game the following day too, which I took to be a positive impact on them.

I learnt that my strategy worked and by including group work, pair work, games and visual aids, the engagement of the participants increased. It helped me realise how monotonous my previous trainings were, as now training was full of interaction, was vibrant, active and engaging.

The points that I learned can be concluded in the following:

1. Pair work, group work and games are activities that encourage active participation in the training sessions and classroom teaching.
2. Even simple visual aids like flash cards, sentence strips and charts are good attention grabbers. They work well as a catalyst to enhance participation.
3. More participation helps to be active, encouraging self-expression, and students talk time (STT), resulting in better learning.

What will I do next and reflection?

The aim of my research was to observe if different kinds of activities reduce TTT and increase STT. After my research, I found the result as I assumed. The interventions I applied in my training sessions drastically increased the participation of the trainee teachers and as a result, the learning outcomes were higher.

According to the questionnaire filled in by the participants, they not only liked the activities and materials but also made a commitment to promote their students' participation and engagement in the learning process in their classrooms.



However, a few participants said that group work and pair work is difficult to do in junior classes like grade one and two. Maybe I will carry on with this action research or encourage teachers to do so in ways to engage grade one and two students in pair and group work. Games also seemed to be very engaging activities with a freedom in communication and laughter, however, trainees said that games take time and space in the classroom. Hence, managing game activities effectively in the classroom could be one of the areas to be further researched.



Strategies to help students be more interactive in the classroom



Sagun Shrestha

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Freelance Trainer for British Council Nepal*

The problem

I have been working as a Test Preparation Instructor at the Kathmandu Alfa Beta Institute for the last few years where my responsibilities are teaching English language skills to students from various backgrounds. As per my experience, students tend to remain silent and hesitant when they are asked to speak in front of others in a classroom, even though they are verbally encouraged and guided. I hardly have any recollection of any student replying to a question with descriptive language; they mostly reply with very straightforward answers and in very basic language. This issue urged me to seek out and devise a tool that would develop and enhance their skills to express their ideas about anything. Additionally, the tool needed to help turn students into a confident starter and flexible elaborator.

In the IELTS speaking test, students have to go through three different parts. Based on what I saw and experienced, I was not confident that my students would be able to speak fluently, without any hesitation in the IELTS Speaking Test. Therefore I devised my Action Research Plan so that I could help my students to be better performers. As a part of the tool to develop their skills for all three phases of the speaking test, I used different kinds of topics from various genres that are often used in it, showed them methods of how to do it, motivated them to participate in speaking, and assessed their performances. Moreover, I showed them instructional and interactive speaking videos in the classroom so that they could see and experience actual speaking steps and skills.

What did I do?

Since I came across the aforementioned problems whilst teaching, I started to focus on identifying the underlying causes behind students' hesitation and low confidence level. I noticed various causes for students being inactive and not willing to take part in activities which was mostly due to having a shy nature, lack of self-confidence, reluctance to change, lack of opportunity to speak as most of the time the more confident ones took the lead, the instructor not reaching out to the students, and a boring and unmotivated teaching method, etc. At times, I was pessimistic about achieving positive results, which made me realise that I needed to work on these problems and get on top of the situation. I planned to do action research on what strategies I could apply in my class to help my students to be more interactive.

Developing, devising and programming an effective and results-oriented class in this situation was far beyond hypothetical planning, but rather a rigorous analysis that gave me plenty of techniques to figure out how I could turn my students into active participants in the classroom. I designed a framework, which included group division and role-playing games.

I implemented this research into two of my IELTS classes. I divided the students into pairs or groups of three if there was an odd number. Each student in a pair was given the role of an interviewer or student and vice-versa. I prepared a list of questions on a small sheet of paper and gave it to the interviewer. The interviewer would ask the student questions of his/her choice from the list and then the student had to speak for 1 to 2 minutes, after a minute of preparation. I did these activities in two of my IELTS classes of 7:00 to 8:00 and 12:00 to 1:00 on the 25th of November 2016 and 14th of December 2016.

I used an instructor's observation form, students' self-reflection forms, peer feedback and colleagues' feedback form to keep a record of any changes and improvements. I filled in the



Interactive learning and teaching sessions enhanced the required skills and provided the students with more opportunities to identify and analyze their weaknesses and strengths.



observation sheet whereas the students' feedback and peer observation were done by the students themselves. I requested my co-worker Mr. Tuk Rumba to fill the colleague feedback form.

What did I learn?

I found the following things through observation of the classroom activities:

- a. The students who were reluctant, hesitant and shy during the one to one interview with me were more comfortable with their peers. It was surprising to see some of the students, who had never spoken in class being open with their friends when asked a question.
- b. Even though mingling with each other in the classroom for the purpose of learning and developing speaking skills wasn't seen before, at the time of the class activity the students were mingling and helping each other. For instance, in one of the groups, one of the students had to speak about her favorite hangout place and she tried to answer the question, but maybe she didn't understand it as her answer was totally off track. After her first attempt, her peer explained to her what the question was actually asking and if she gets that particular question, how would she respond to it. If the same thing had been done wholly as a class, she would have been embarrassed rather than being encouraged.
- c. As with many instances of our life, our mistakes and weaknesses can't be discovered by ourselves but can be found out by others. The students were providing genuine feedback to each other which was really helping them to find out the problems they had while speaking. Some of the students recorded their voice and checked the timing of their performance. After which, they used the recording as a reference to tell their peers about the good points as well as any mistakes.
- d. Though some of the students were reluctant at first, they tried to answer the question asked as best they could through persistence. For example, one of the students was not able to speak for the time allocated but on the second attempt, he was great with the timing.

What would I do next?

The findings of my plan, implementation and observation for classroom activities to improve, develop, and master students' speaking skills and abilities are results-oriented and motivational ones. Students may feel more self-conscious about speaking in front of the whole class, whereas, they will definitely speak if they are divided into appropriate groups and pairs. Being adults, the students are good observers too, so when they were divided into pairs they learnt from their peers, as they felt more comfortable to ask about things within the same age group.

Though, saying this, we still need to be careful while dividing the group up, focusing on the students' level and making sure they are placed in a group or pair that encourages them.

Language games such as a dice game or selecting the topics by themselves, are really fruitful as they had to do role-plays and each of them needed to answer, as well as comment on each other's performance. I talked about the game and the outcomes with my colleagues too and they were eager to do similar activities in their class as they too were facing the same problems of motivating their students to speak. They also shared that the learning approach I was implementing and experimenting with was more focused on developing skills and strengths and that could contribute to a more comprehensive performance ability of students. Particularly, one of my colleagues highlighted that the interactive learning and teaching sessions enhanced the required skills and provided the students with more opportunities to identify and analyze their weaknesses and strengths. The students were benefited not only by the instructions and guidelines given by the teacher, but also by their peer members who had observed their performances.

Maximising student talk time by minimising teacher talk time to ensure better interaction among learners



Mukunda Prasad Dahal

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Freelance Trainer for British Council Nepal*

The problem

Minimizing Teacher Talking Time (TTT) in the classroom is one of the most frequent challenges I've dealt with whilst delivering my lessons. Whenever I run training sessions or regular classes, I feel that my TTT is higher than it should be. As I worked on finding the reasons behind it, I came to the conclusion that my basic problem is that I take too long to set up the task, give clear instructions and give feedback. Whenever I involved my learners in the planned interactions, discussions were often soon over and I had to do something myself like elaborating on the topic more, resulting in even more TTT. As a result, the learner's role in most of my classes turned out to be only that of a respondent. I felt that I was discouraging their autonomy by not providing them enough ground to identify things on their own. I had a realization that my over-use of TTT had always been counter productive in the teaching-learning process and therefore, I felt the urgency to reduce it in order to ensure more STT in my class.

What I did?

Since I felt that it was basically because I took a long time to give instructions, task setting and feedback, I planned my sessions in such a way that the instructions were really short, to the point, backed up with gestures and followed by ICQs. I also added some student-centric activities and games like mingling, 'back to the board', 'crumpled ball game', 'banana race' and Chinese whispers. Also, I allowed my learners to talk in L1 to some extent since I felt that some of them were not interacting as they had problems speaking in L2.

I especially allowed L1 when the topic for discussion was tough. In addition, I also worked on making my feedback shorter by asking them to suggest answers and peer checking it rather than clarifying it myself. For that, I included elicitation as part of my lesson plan.



I may be spending a bit more time on planning my lessons and designing activities, but I am much happier during my lesson delivery.



I made all of this preparation for two of my classes: one for my IELTS students and another for an English medium instructions training session. I wanted to be observed by someone in both classes to make sure that my TTT had gone down, so one of my colleagues helped me in one of the classes and my co-trainer in another. I also prepared a feedback form to be filled in by the participants and designed a checklist for data collection both from the observer and participants for those sessions.

What I learnt?

I learnt that lesson planning plays a vital role in making classes more interactive. My observation report indicated that I had significantly reduced my TTT and students had been more interactive in my class. It also provided me new insight into why I used to have such high TTT.

Despite the diverse background of the participants in both of the classes I experimented in, all the learners enthusiastically participated in the activities I designed. Letting participants communicate in L1 to some extent was one of the key learning points of my research. As I didn't allow them to use it previously, their group work used to finish too early and then they used to be silent, so I had to say something to get them interested again and as a result, my TTT was never under control. Another learning point was how adding fun activities can also help in reducing TTT as learners really enjoy them, which ensures more STT. Instructions never being long and boring but short and precise, is yet another key lesson learnt from this action research. The instructions should also be backed up with ICQs and gestures so that you aren't spending lots of time to make them understand what to do. When my observer commented that it was a very interactive, student-centric lesson, I was so happy that I could achieve this.

What I will do next?

Since this approach helped me to bring a significant change in my way of teaching by ensuring more STT and interaction in my class, I am going to use it again and share it with my friends and colleagues. I will tell them that it is one of the easiest and best approaches to control their TTT. Also, I shall make further lesson plans for teaching and training in accordance so that it can help a great deal to make me more professional. I will definitely work harder on it as a part of my continuous professional development and self-motivation by finding out solutions for any such problems that might come up in my teaching career in the future.

Reflection

High TTT had really been a headache in my professional development. It was not easy to get rid of it. It was indeed hard, but eventually I got out of it and I'm doing much better now. These days, I hardly speak in my class and I'm much more satisfied that my classes are interactive and learner-centric. I may be spending a bit more time on planning my lessons and designing activities, but I am much happier during my lesson delivery. It gave me confidence to find a solution for any other problems if they arise in the future.



Inclusive approaches





Increasing girls' participation in pair and group activities in the classroom



Ishwor Prasad Kadel

Lecturer, Tribhuvan University

Freelance Trainer for British Council Nepal

The problem

In group or a pair work, all the students should have equal and active involvement. In my training sessions, I often found that female trainee teachers were less active in pair and group work than the male trainee teachers. Equal participation is a must to meet the goals of the training. I found that my attempts to keep all the participants engaged in activities were not very successful and did not actually meet the objective. In a group based activity, I noticed that male trainees were more active than female trainees, in so much that the male participants led where as the females simply accepted what the males said and nodded in agreement.

In addition to this, it was mostly the male trainees who came in front of the class for their group presentation, as female trainees were often very shy. If I put forward any questions like ICQs and CCQs, it was male participants who always answered back. If all the members in a group or both members in pair work do not take part equally, the aims of such collaborative work would fail and thus I could not make my class as fruitful as I had expected to. This male domination was also apparent during the monitoring of the activities, where even in a mixed group, female participants didn't take part actively and so the given task was over before the allocated time. So, the main focus of my research is to examine the causes of what makes female students feel too shy to take part in group work unlike the male students and find out the possible solutions.

What I did?

I made plans to incorporate female friendly group and pair work activities using a social studies textbook for grade eight students in Little Star English Boarding School, Chitwan. I gave clear and short instructions to the students and requested any one from the class to translate the instructions into Nepali, which helped everyone to understand the task better. I gave the main focus to the female students in pair and group work, encouraging them to speak by giving them the first priority rather than the male students who often used to get ready to respond to the teacher first. By doing this, the female students became more motivated to take part.

I involved the students in pair work first and then group work to discuss on the topic. Due to this, shy and more introverted participants slowly started to feel more comfortable to contribute. Naturally, some male students were still found to be dominating their group members and used almost all the allocated time. To solve this issue, I gave the dominating participants an individual task where they had to listen to their group members' conversations and write down the main points of the discussion.

The other reason for their shyness was the use of English, which the girls felt uncomfortable using, being aware of their grammatical mistakes. The girls started to feel more comfortable by using L1 sometimes to support them. I displayed their work in the classroom and praised them with frequent monitoring and feedback, which encouraged female students for their active participation.

I observed students while working in group and pair work and filled in my daily diary after the classes were over. I also prepared an observation sheet, filled in by my co-trainer and a student survey questionnaire to be filled in by the students. I observed the female students and made notes of any changes and did my own self-reflection.



Culturally, females grow up with this mentality, believing that discussion and debate are rather a man's job and women should not stand before males and talk with them face to face. If they are supported and encouraged by teachers to participate in school activities, it only takes a few days to bring positive changes in them.



What I found out?

During my interventions, I started to find changes in the role of female students in classroom activities like pair and group work. I found that female students are mostly shy even though they often know the answers to the questions or solutions to the problems teachers put forward to solve. From my perspective, this could be because they are told to only listen and not to speak much, or give their opinions in public by their grandparents, parents and the society they live in. Culturally, females grow up with this mentality, believing that discussion and debate are rather a man's job and women should not stand before males and talk with them face to face. If they are supported and encouraged by teachers to participate in school activities, it only takes a few days to bring positive changes in them. Slowly and gradually, the girls in my class started to be more active than they were before and began to ask the teacher questions if they had any confusion. The other subject teachers also noticed changes in the female students of class eight and complimented me.

What I will do next?

I will first share the outcomes of my interventions with my teacher friends in the school and request them to try my successful techniques of giving more focus to female students in pair and group activities minimizing male students' domination in class in their respective classes too.

I'll also design the session plans for my teacher training sessions in the same way to encourage female participants to contribute. The female teachers in the training also have similar problems with the use of L2, just like the female students in class eight. In the beginning, I will focus on their fluency more than accuracy to support them in their active participation in the activities.

Reflections

Pair and group work are the backbone of teaching and learning activities, but I was always saddened with the minimum participation of female participants in training sessions. This had been the main obstacle for me to meet my objectives as a trainer. Now, I have found the solution to this problem from my recent action research that I had done with the grade eight students. In my training sessions as a Teacher Educator, I will apply this understanding to make female trainee teachers more active in pair and group work. The findings of this Action Research are a breakthrough in my professional development. As the female participants start to take part in classroom activities, they will overcome the barrier of their traditional roles of not talking very much, rather than only listening and simply agreeing with whatever the males say.

Ways to make lessons more learner-centred



Prakash Thapa

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Freelance Trainer for British Council Nepal*

The problem

In any classroom, group work can be an effective way to engage students in active learning, which encourages communication, problem solving and decision-making. Group work has provided me with an opportunity to find out how well students collaborate in and completing tasks and more importantly, grasping the content. But in a lot of cases, no matter how carefully I plan, one or two students in a group are still inactive and only nod in agreement to the decisions made by the active members of the group. Consequently, they are not able to retain much learning from group work, but rather it probably has made them feel like it's a waste of time. As a trainer, I find their indifference to group activities really distressing, as they fail to meet the lesson objectives despite my efforts.

This situation has led me to think about ways that would make the group work of my sessions more learner-centered, motivating and collaborative. Hence, the purpose of my action research is ensuring the participation of all the group members in my classroom sessions.

What I did?

After reviewing some of the available literature on this research area, I found out about the following strategies in hope that they would make all the students equally take part in any group work activities:

1. Assigning a role to every group member before starting group work. Roles to each participant weren't assigned randomly, but based on what the subject matter was.
2. Using self-selected groups where students choose their own partner.

These techniques were carried out in Grade 10 lessons at least three times over the period of two weeks. I gave an ample amount of time to students to feel comfortable in working with these new ideas.

In order to obtain data for this research, I used interviews and observations followed by analysing data generated from responses of participating students/teachers and interview/observation notes. I also sent letters to parents/guardians requesting them to help me by allowing students to participate in my research work.

One of the classes I teach which was selected for the intervention, is the tenth grade of Annapurna Higher Secondary School, Jyatha, Kantipath, Kathmandu. This class is made up of thirty two students, 15 boys and 17 girls. The class consists of below average to above average performing students.

My data was generated through comparing the student's involvement and performance before and after the selected group work techniques were implemented. Their activities were documented not only by an observer, but also by the students themselves in the form of reflection and notes at the end of the each day throughout the intervention period. I also had individual interviews and focus group discussions followed by a survey questionnaire. I noted down the student's comments during the interviews and focus group discussions. I repeated this in the second and the third cycles of the intervention.



I came to the conclusion that role assignment and member selection could be very useful to have equal participation of all the members in group work activity at least in my context.



What I found out?

In my observation, I noticed that students were thoroughly enjoying the new group work techniques. They even ended up wanting more group work than individual tasks in my second and third cycles of intervention. They were enthusiastic about choosing their partner and were also eager to know what their role in the group work was going to be.

Normally, some of the students would remain lethargic during group activities, but, during the study period, all the group members worked enthusiastically throughout the set time. However, at times while using the self-selection strategy, there was a tendency to choose the same partner over and over again which I had discouraged by making them randomly select their group member instead.

All the students responded to the pre and post intervention surveys though the level of response was not the same. Some chose to elaborate while other remained distant. In the interview sessions some of the students said that they remained idle during group work because they did not know what to do and not participating in the group didn't make any difference to the score awarded as it wasn't given on an individual basis. Assignment of a role to each member of the group did not let any group member remain idle.

The comments made by the students and by my colleagues (in-service teachers of the school), who participated in the research as observers of the students' participation in group work before and after the intervention, were tallied. The analysis of the survey yielded positive results. It indicated that new strategies of group work kept all the members fully engaged and motivated them to work on the group objective.

I also revisited my own observation and interview notes throughout the intervention cycles to find out further how the individual students' engagement in group work was. Thankfully, it was found that the students were truthful in their comments. The students' comments and teachers' observation (including mine), showed that the chosen strategies for all students' full engagement on group work had a positive impact on students, though some cautions needed to be taken while implementing the self-selection strategy as mentioned earlier.

What I will do next?

I wanted to engage all the students in group work for which I implemented selected strategies. After observation, interviews and analysis of the data collected, I came to the conclusion that role assignment and member selection could be very useful to have equal participation of all the members in group work activity at least in my context.

I will continue to utilize the strategies I had tried in my other classes in order to have equal participation of all the members in group work and also explore other useful ways which could be used in the classroom.

I will also share my findings with my colleagues and other fellow teachers and listen to their ideas which would help them to identify other possible ways to overcome a lack of participation in group work activities, if they have the same context as mine.

Reflection

The three cycles used in the intervention proved to be very productive as they gave the participants an opportunity to get used to the new strategies and also provided me with enough evidence to conclude that they are in fact effective.

In my experience, self-selection of group members could be problematic without some degree of intervention from the teacher, as students normally tend to select the same partners repeatedly, which may leave some students inactive and some a little dominating during group work. A teacher must be very vigilant as this may turn potentially fantastic group work into a fiasco.

Promoting equal and active participation of all the trainees in group work activities



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The problem

Teaching or training adults is different from teaching children, which means of course, we need to treat them differently. Adult learners are motivated and self-directed; they bring life experience and knowledge, are goal-oriented, need to know the relevance of a session, are practical and also like to be respected (Knowles' Six Principles of Adult Learning). Thus, adult learning needs to follow approaches to learning that are problem-based and collaborative, rather than traditional lecturing or 'the teacher knows all' model.

One technique to make learning more problem-based and collaborative is group work, during which, participants are able to discuss an issue or subject given to them. This group work promotes better learning, as they also feel respected when they work in groups by working out solutions to problems by themselves, rather than being told what to do. It also ensures experiential learning, as whatever they discuss is based on their past experiences. Besides learning the content, the participants also develop skills like communication, teamwork, negotiation etc. It's a learner-centred technique and is popular in both teaching and training.

As a teacher trainer, I have been using group work as a technique when I deliver sessions, but it hasn't always been helpful to me. Most of the time, when I ask participants to work in groups, some of them just leave to use the toilet, some start playing with their cell phones, others only pretend to be discussing and contributing. Only a few people in the groups are really working on the task so, I wanted to ensure that everyone is contributing and collaborating.

What did I do?

By observing the trainees' behaviour and by reflecting on the tasks and my own training delivery, I realized that the trainees were not taking part actively and equally in group work activities because my instructions were not properly staged and thus not clear. I also didn't monitor during the group work, neither did I assign individual roles within the group and one or two participants dominated it. Thus I planned and did the following:



Group work gives the participants a feeling of ownership and they enjoy learning by sharing ideas with each other.



I gave the instructions prior to the group work- for example I said, "now, you are going to work in a group. One table will be one group. Think of a lesson you are teaching. Make 6 questions to ask the students in your class. Are the questions open or closed? Make a list. This is group work so you all need to work together."

- I asked instruction checking questions (ICQS) to make sure that they all understood what they were expected to do, for example I asked, "are you working in a group or alone? Are you supposed to make questions from the whole textbook? What do you do after making 6 questions? How will you categorize the questions?"
- I gave individual roles to each participant of the group: A's were secretaries, B's captains, C's presenters and D's were negotiators.
- While they were doing the activity, I moved from group to group and ensured that they were doing the task as instructed. It created a kind of pressure on them to do the task as well.

I had developed a questionnaire in both Nepali and in English to be filled in by the participants of the groups and an observation sheet to be filled in myself.

The questionnaire asked about the clarity of instructions, monitoring by the trainer and their contribution during group activities. As soon as the group work was over, I gave the questionnaire to the trainees where they had to tick 'yes' or 'no' and write anything they would like to see at the end. I gave my co-trainer the observation sheet and told him to observe each participant in the groups and write down their contribution to the assigned tasks.

What did I learn?

By looking at the responses from the questionnaires, I came to know that the instructions had been clear to the trainees, I had monitored and helped the trainees, I had assigned some individual roles for group members and all the participants had been active and had contributed to the group work. By analyzing the comments from the observation sheet, I realized that all the participants of the groups had contributed to the task. The findings of this action research are given below:

- a. Trainees find it easy to understand short instructions.
- b. Trainees understand the instructions only after being asked instruction checking questions.
- c. Trainees need to be monitored when they do the group task. This way they can ask if they have any confusion and when they know that the trainer monitors their work, they can't and don't avoid the given task.
- d. Even in group work, trainees need to be given some individual roles. When all of them are given individual roles, they can't avoid the task. All of them need to do their part otherwise the work is not complete. This also creates a kind of pressure on the group to do the task.
- e. Group work gives the participants a feeling of ownership and they enjoy learning by sharing ideas with each other.
- f. The group work should be meaningful and needs to be suitable. Discussing the concept of something, let's say, the meaning of 'deep learning' would not be suitable.
- g. When the trainees don't do the group task seriously, it doesn't mean that they are inactive. It means that there's something wrong on the part of the trainer. The trainer needs to do a lot from the setting up of the task to the presentation of it.

What will I do next?

I've learnt that I can ensure equal and active participation in group work activities. Some of the interventions that I tried in this action research like making the instructions short and clear, monitoring of the trainees' participation, etc. also work well in other types of training activities such as pair work, and individual work as well. The successful demonstration of this can inspire the participants to use the same strategies in their classroom teaching as well. I will continue adopting the strategies that I used and worked well in this action research in my future training sessions so that there'll be meaningful participation of all the trainees which will lead to learning.

Reflection

This is the first time I've ever done action research. I delivered sessions on action research at different times while working as a teacher trainer, I gave a lecture on the theoretical aspect, gave them the format to write the report and when asked for an example, I used to give them the action research reports of other participants. Now, I've got a satisfactory example of an action research report and I'm confident enough regarding the different stages, from problem identification to report writing. By completing this action research, I've realized that doing it is a simple because it's for the improvement of your own practice. When we realize that there's some kind of problem in our teaching, we think over the reasons behind the problem and the ways to solve those problems. The ways to solve the problems are technically called interventions. We try them out and see their effects, if they work, we'll continue doing them or look for other interventions and if it works, it means we've been able to eliminate the problem. Finally, we just write down what we did during the action research: we write the problem, we write the interventions and their effects and we write the lessons learned.

Action research is not that big or that difficult to carry out. It's easy and it helps us to be a more professional practitioner.





Task-setting





Giving clear instructions when setting up tasks



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The problem

I find giving clear and effective instructions during setting up tasks in the training sessions the most challenging. I make the instructions unnecessarily long and also spend a long time explaining the task. Sometimes I don't even understand the task and so cannot make the participants understand it either. I've also noticed that the class becomes noisy and the session becomes a mess when the instructions are not clear. Therefore, I decided to focus and work on giving clear instructions and checking the understanding of participants whilst setting up a task for this action research. I was guided by the following research questions:

- i. How can I pre-plan essential instructions for setting up a task clearly?
- ii. How can I give the instructions in simpler language and shorter sentences so that the trainees understand the task clearer?
- iii. How can I use ICQs to check understanding of the instructions?

What I did?

I planned sessions with instructions and prepared a checklist to collect data to measure any improvement by the intervention I was going to implement in the sessions. The respondents were randomly divided into two groups. In the first group there were 18 teachers from Rupandehi and the second of 11 head teachers from Surkhet. Both groups were the participants of courses provided by the British Council under its Connecting Classrooms project. Thus, the responses that were collected were analyzed in a comparative way. My focus was on making improvements in giving instructions and then comparing them

to the previous sessions.

These interventions were taken as a way of making instructions effective and clear. I mainly applied the following three strategies to make the instructions effective:

- i. Pre-planned instructions to give essential information in simpler and clearer language. For example:
Stand on the line.
Move one step forward if the question is open.
Move one step back if the question is closed.
Stand easy if you can't decide.
- ii. Instructions were followed by Instruction Checking Questions (ICQs), which were also written in the session plans for checking understanding. For example:
Do you go back if the question is open?
Do you stand easy if the question is confusing?
Do you go forward if the question is open?
- iii. Demonstration, wherever possible, body language and gestures accompanied the verbal instructions.



One of my peer reviewers wrote, “The activities are better planned so the participants were engaged well and achieved the desired learning outcomes.” This was encouraging.



What I found out?

The action research really was a success as it offered me some insights into how to give instructions better when setting up tasks. Despite the participants being from different subject and linguistic backgrounds and had diverse motivational interests in the training, they were still engaged and enjoyed the activities. Interestingly, one group or another often came up with different answers than I had expected (88.88%). Some of these deviations in the group production were an eye-opener for me. Once there was serious confusion when the task instruction and supplemented demonstration were different and misleading, so I had to stop the task for the day and assign it as homework, which the participants completed as instructed. From this incident I learnt that irrelevant comments should not be allowed before the completion of the task.

The collected teachers' performance and responses from the first group made me think about their observations and perception about my performance. I was surprised to see that the majority (88.88%) of groups or individuals had different responses which also made me think about the clarity of checklist statements. So, I tried to implement the interventions more deliberately in the second group but administered the same checklist to collect data. This time, only a few of the groups or individuals presented the report differently to the others (18.18%). This showed that there was a significant improvement in the guidance of instruction (81.81%). This means instructions were clear (100%) and tasks were completed as expected.

One of my peer reviewers wrote, "The activities are better planned so the participants were engaged well and achieved the desired learning outcomes." This was encouraging.

However, I also found that I still need to work on my bad habit of repetition and improve individual support.

What will I do next?

Although I tried to make my instructions clearer and more effective, I still need to work on ensuring that everyone followed the instructions and completed the tasks as expected. I have decided to continue the same methodology when designing future sessions that have complex instructions and simplify them.

Reflection

I found this action research a catalytic strategy for improving my performance, especially during giving instructions, as effective instructions helped me achieve the desired objectives of the sessions. The participants were focused on the task and specifically the contents. It made it easier to run the session as planned and maintain pace and fluency of activities. However, I still found it challenging to introduce some new contents and strategies since the participants were accustomed to a particular training style. To summarize, the most important lesson I learnt is that effective instructions is a crucial way of making training sessions and task activities effective.

Strategies to enable participants to do tasks effectively



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The problem

There is a vast difference between the participants attending the teachers' training in terms of their qualifications, knowledge of the content and level of English. Due to such diversity, some participants are quicker to grasp concepts and accomplishing the tasks, while others can struggle.

Usually when I deliver training, I find that many participants are unsure about the task and unable to do it efficiently. They give the indication that they have understood but are unable to perform and they don't finish the given work on time. As a result, they hesitate to share the answers and feel too shy to express their views. This stops me from moving ahead with the session, as I have to spend more time repeating the instructions and then I feel discouraged and lose self-esteem. In addition, the participants who manage to finish early start making noise and disturbing the others. Hence, my problem is that all of my participants are not clear about the objective of my sessions and as a result, they have difficulty doing the given tasks.

What did I do?

To address this problem, I had to understand the causes behind it. Firstly, I felt that my instructions were not clear enough as they were too long and I said them too quickly. I also didn't use instruction checking questions (ICQs), but instead relied on a choral reply of the participants. I also didn't check their understanding with concept checking questions (CCQs) before starting the task; neither did I give much chance for the participants to demonstrate their understanding.

Therefore, I did the following to enable my participants to do the given tasks effectively.

I gave clear instructions and asked ICQs. For example, after dividing them into groups as A and B, I asked some of the participants individually if they were in A or B, as well as asking CCQs in between the activities.

I asked short questions and focused on the especially shy ones for the answers. For instance, after teaching what TPR (Total Physical Response) activity means, I asked participants, “Does TPR involve body movement? Can singing a rhyme with action be considered a TPR activity?” etc. After asking a few closed questions like these, I also asked some open questions like, “What TPR activities can you include in your lessons? How do you think they would be beneficial?” I thought this strategy would help my participants demonstrate their understanding individually and help me understand whether the session aims were thoroughly clear to them or not.

In addition, I also focused on grading the language so that everyone could understand what I was saying by using simple sentence structures and at a slower pace. I also switched from L2 to L1 at times to support comprehension and encouraged the participants to do so as well. This helped me not only to know how much they had understood, but also compelled the participants to express right from the start if things were not clear to them.

The other thing I did was scaffolding the sessions. I tried to move from the simple parts of the session to the more complex ones gradually in stages. For instance, while teaching PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) and TBL (Task based Learning) approaches, I first divided the participants into two groups. Then I asked one group to be my students and the other group to observe what I did and make a note of how my lesson was staged. I then used the PPP approach to teach them about the topic, in this case, the difference between wild and domestic animals. Next, I changed around the role of the groups and taught the same subject using the TBL (Task based learning)



I used to blame the learners when there were little learning outcomes and didn't try to find out what I lacked as a trainer. After doing this action research, I realised that if we analyse the problem honestly, we can understand the real problem, including what we lack and what changes are necessary in our approach and strategy.



approach and later asked participants to share what they had observed. I explained to them what these two approaches are called and elicited how they differ, but only after them sharing their observation. At the end of the session, I gave them the task that was given in the book and also asked some participants to do a short demonstration of teaching using these approaches. I think the scaffolding made the complex content simpler and helped everyone to understand the given task much better.

I used three tools to learn whether my action plan worked or not. First, a checklist to figure out what were the above mentioned problems, which also acted like a self-reflection form. A second questionnaire sheet for each participant, and the third was a feedback form to be filled in by participants and co-trainers.

What did I learn?

The responses clearly showed that the participants had no problem with my use of English and my instructions were clear enough for the majority of them. They gave feedback, including my co-trainers, showing that I had used a lot of questions to check their understanding before setting the task. Also, because my session was clear enough, participants felt that they could use them in their classrooms too.

After completing my action research, I came to the following conclusion:

- I cannot expect every participant to do the given task as desired if I rush in setting them up. Prior to this, I must make sure whether they have understood or not and take a lot of things into consideration.
- Clear instructions must be given before setting the task and they should be short and simple. Also, my voice must be clear and I should be aware of the speaking pace. Code switching between L1 and L2 could also be quite helpful, especially for teachers from rural areas.
- Using ICQs helps to make sure that everyone is clear about what is to be done and how, and once the task is set, the participants are immediately engaged in it.
- The participants must have a clear understanding of what the task is and overall, what the session is about, in order to perform at their best. So, to ensure that, asking concept checking questions is a must.

- Scaffolding the content by understanding the needs and level of the participants is also important. Thus, I must have clear and logical stages in my plan to move from simple to more complex parts of the sessions. In addition, I should also adapt the provided content to help participants become clearer of what is being taught.
- Participants must be given chances to demonstrate what they have understood or learnt often. The easiest tools for that are asking them open and closed questions, and giving them a chance to demonstrate it.

What will I do next?

As per the goal of my research, I enabled the participants to do the given tasks more effectively. This was because of the strategies that I implemented like giving clear instructions, speaking simpler English, asking questions in between, moving from simple to more complex parts of the content, and giving participants a chance to demonstrate what they have learnt. In the future, I will ensure that I follow these approaches so that all my participants will have a better understanding of the assigned tasks and complete them competently. Likewise, I will think about other problems too and try to do action research for them accordingly.

Reflection

Many trainers may have similar problems but they might not be aware of it. I used to blame the learners when there were little learning outcomes and didn't try to find out what I lacked as a trainer. After doing this action research, I realised that if we analyse the problem honestly, we can understand the real problem, including what we lack and what changes are necessary in our approach and strategy. Only then we can solve them and the teaching-learning process becomes more successful.

Enabling trainees to complete tasks in time and correctly



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The problem

I strongly believe that task accomplishment within the allocated time and the task being done correctly is of paramount importance in every training session as it directly affects task performance by the participants. From my observation of and reflection on the training sessions I have facilitated in EMI (English as the Medium of Instruction) along with other training events, I noticed that I couldn't facilitate my trainees to accomplish the assigned tasks within the given time frame and at times, I had to give them extra time. In addition to this, the participants often did the task differently to what was instructed. Some participants performed the task so fast while the others were stuck. Due to this, I started to ask myself how I could ensure that all trainees perform the assigned tasks timely and in the correct way. Driven by this question, I decided to explore and experiment with some strategies to address this problem for a better delivery of training events in the future.

What did I do?

I was enthusiastic to resolve these issues and consulted with senior trainers, researchers and colleagues. Additionally, I went through some scholarly articles published on similar concerns like Oliver and Reschly (2007). Having got some useful insights from numerous resources, I came up with the following strategic action plan to address the issues:

1. Planned training sessions staging the tasks into different comprehensive steps to sequentially deliver them.
2. Prepared instructions in advance. For this, instruction checking questions (ICQs) were prepared to check participants' understanding.

3. Set time limits for every main task and other related sub-tasks, such as 'balloon debate', 'describe and draw', etc.
4. Developed some task demonstrations to model teaching behavior in order to empower them to carry out their activities more confidently.



To begin with, I collected actual classroom problems and needs from the teachers using a need analysis form. The most frequent needs the teachers faced were task/project-based teaching, teaching vocabulary, teaching young learners, the classroom language, and teaching through games/songs/ rhymes. Then, I developed training sessions addressing these needs.



The effort I made to overcome my problems offered me some priceless insights. I realised just how much action research was effective in making the training sessions a lot better. Now I understand how much inquiry, planning, collaboration, research, reflection, and sharing experiences are all vital to enhance teaching methodology and foster professional growth.



In the training sessions, every task was first modeled by a demonstration, as well as divided into smaller subtasks to help the participants to set them up easily. Afterward, I delivered precise, simple and understandable instructions using ICQs. I also set a time limit for each task and encouraged the participants to finish within the given time.

I implemented the above plan in two cycles. First, I conducted two-day training events in three areas of Nepal: Educational Training Centre, Inaruwa, Sunsari, Sankatmochan Resource Centre, Janakpur, Dhanusha, and CTF Training Centre, Itahari, Sunsari. Next, I facilitated similar two-day training events in three different venues of Sunsar District, namely Himshikhar Boarding school, Tarahara, Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA) Sunsari branch office, Halgada, and Sainik School, Dharan.

I prepared a questionnaire to aggregate authentic data from the participants. Twenty teachers from the Inaruwa training responded to the questionnaire in the first phase whilst twenty-four teachers of the Tarahara training filled out the form in the second cycle. The participants from every training event were interviewed to gather reliable evidence concerning the effectiveness of the training session. I also invited two of my trainer colleagues, Mr. Keshav Prasad Bhattarai and Sajan Kumar Chaudhary, to observe my training sessions and provide feedback. I also used self-reflection to record the progress of my course of action using a daily diary.



What did I learn?

After reviewing the participants' responses from the questionnaires, interviewing them, feedback from the trainer colleagues and self-reflection in the first cycle, it seemed like my intervention was effective. Mostly, I observed that staging tasks into smaller sub-tasks worked well as sixteen teachers out of twenty said that it made it easier for them to complete. Eighteen teachers also stated that demonstrating the tasks before attempting them was practical. Moreover, the use of ICQs was also said to be effective as seventeen teachers said that it supported them.

However, despite this positive feedback, I still found that the majority of the participants could not finish the tasks within the time frame, the tasks were still not being done the way they were supposed to be and that the language used for instructions wasn't being fully understood, so I still needed some improvements in areas like simplifying instructions and setting the right task time. I was suggested to write the instructions on the board so that the participants could read and understand them more clearly. I was also advised to make smaller groups and assist every group/individual that had problems. To allocate sufficient time, I planned to try the tasks myself beforehand and estimate the time needed.

So, I simplified language of the instructions to make them concise, clear and understandable. I even wrote instructions on chart paper and stuck it on the wall, and also set the appropriate time limit based on my trial of the task. I started making smaller groups, four or five members, and instructed them to delegate group roles. I always helped every group and/or individual to keep them on track. By doing this, as well as the previous techniques used, I got the desired result; participants were completing the tasks as they were supposed to and within the time frame set.

What will I do next?

The effort I made to overcome my problems offered me some priceless insights. I realised just how much action research was effective in making the training sessions a lot better. Now I understand how much inquiry, planning, collaboration, research, reflection, and sharing experiences are all vital to enhance teaching methodology and foster professional growth.

Based on my what I have learnt from the action research project, I will deliver training sessions using these newly learnt techniques by planning thoroughly. After every training session, I will get feedback from the participants and

critically reflect on my training approach, as I'm committed keep improving. Perhaps most importantly, it has made me realise that self-initiation is vital for everyone's professional maturity and therefore, I am determined to continue my CPD and share my learning experiences to the wider community through discussion, publishing articles, and so on.

Reflection

The current action research project firstly strengthened my classroom-based research skill. The whole effort of reflection on research based writing with planning, drafting, revising and editing, proofreading, peer review and feedback, and producing a final draft, offered me a huge opportunity to enhance my academic writing skill. More importantly, it has shown me the value of collaboration, critical thinking, experience sharing, peer-review and reflection for professional advancement. This whole experience has made me confident that I can fix any classroom-based obstacles, implementing pragmatic strategies. Overall, the whole process has been a catalyst for me because it enabled my practical skills to conduct similar research and write articles sharing with the wider community.

Resources

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