Does teaching vocabulary noticing strategies lead to greater learner autonomy?

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Abstract

In this article, we report on an action research project we facilitated with modern language teachers and teachers of English as an Additional Language working in secondary schools in Ireland. We outline the rationale for the project as well as the structure we put in place for the project. We wanted teachers to increase students' engagement in their own learning and to support them to become more autonomous language learners by teaching them vocabulary noticing strategies. The project also aims to improve ALL students' overall level of literacy and confidence in dealing with text, especially in the CLIL classroom where the teacher does not share the same L1 and students are responsible for handling volumes of academic language independently. We felt that supporting teachers in action research would help them reflect and find ways to improve students' overall language competence – fluency and accuracy. Our aim was to help teachers become more aware of how engaging in action research can enhance their day to day practice and in turn, result in better outcomes for their students. We conclude by reflecting on some of the impacts of action research on the teachers' practice and on our own thinking as teacher educators.

Keywords

Action research, learner autonomy, vocabulary learning strategies, reflection, classroom practice

Rationale

What was the reason for your interest in this issue?

Language learning autonomy, competence, independent learners, support students, maximising class time, transferring language learning skills across languages

Impact of action research in classroom practice, supporting teachers to engage in professional development

What did you want to change and why?

Dependence on the teacher, lack of independence in dealing with language, develop awareness of the different strategies what one can use to learn vocabulary.

Encourage students to become more independent. Support students to reflect on their language learning strategies.

Encourage teachers to engage in small-scale action research projects to reflect and makes changes in their classroom practice. Encourage teachers to work together in small communities of practice and link in with each other. To discuss common issues.

What was your research question?

Does teaching vocabulary noticing strategies lead to greater learner autonomy?

Can teachers see the benefits of action research as a means to improve and change their classroom practice?

What were your assumptions underlying the question? (your theoretical assumptions)

Action research is about reflecting, observing, and planning one's practice. Through action and discussion, individuals create an opportunity to understand and develop their practice. Teachers are encouraged to engage in action research to improve teaching and learning with a view to achieve better outcomes for their students.

"Action research provides teachers with a philosophy and practice that allows them to systematically study the effects of their teaching on student learning." (Mills, p.4)

AR is not about testing ideas by trial and error but rather to take deliberate action after examining a concrete praxis. AR relates directly to an individuals' practice and for this reason it is very a

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powerful tool for teachers in the classroom. It offers a pathway to professional development which is rooted in their immediate needs and perceived challenges and it provides a framework and tools for doing so. This AR project not only set out to examine the effect of teaching vocabulary noticing strategies but is also aims to offer MFL and EAL teachers with an opportunity to engage in AR and reflect on how it can enhance their practice.

In recent decades, we have seen a shift in foreign language teaching and learning which places the student at the centre of the learning, moving the focus away from the teachers. Developing lifelong language learning skills and a capacity for autonomous learning are now at the core of language teaching and learning and the student is considered an agent of hers or his own learning.

"The research shows that students need multiple and various exposures to a word before they fully understand it and can apply it. They also need to learn new words in context. One of the biggest mistakes we teachers make in vocabulary instruction is selecting all the words for the students and not giving them a say in the matter" (Marzano, 2010).

EAL students who are A2 and B1 need to be active in learning vocabulary in CLIL classrooms where the teacher does not share the same L1 as them and where they are exposed to language which is beyond their current language competence. They need to first notice vocabulary and record the chunks, collocations that they themselves consider most useful. They need to be taught strategies for learning vocabulary to become autonomous language learners.

"Research shows that transferring a word from the source you encounter it in to another source such as a notebook or a workbook to be one of the best ways of learning. Chunks should be at the centre of vocabulary learning. Vocabulary is not just single words". (McCarthy, 2005).

Students are largely unaware of strategies they can use to become more able at noticing and learning vocabulary. We set out to support students to develop strategies to deal with the vast amounts of vocabulary they are exposed to when learning curricular content through a language which is not their first language.

Describe the setting

This action research project took place during in the academic year 2017-2018. Two cohorts of teachers working in post primary schools took part in the project.

3 modern foreign language (MFL) teachers of French and Spanish in a secondary school. Modern foreign language students were at A1 level in the CEFR scale. Language classes are usually scheduled 3 times a week for a period of 40 minutes.

8 English as an additional language (EAL) teachers working with students who are A1 and A2 levels on CEFR. Students are withdrawn for 4 x 40 minute language support classes a week. The rest of the time, they are in mainstream classes with native English speakers. In mainstream subject classes, these students are exposed to a large amount of language which is beyond their current language level. Subject teachers do not always differentiate content in order for EAL students to access the curriculum.

Describe the action research process

Step by step

Two groups of language teachers (MFL and EAL) worked on this project. The EAL teachers are members of an established EAL network (teachers from 18+ post primary schools), which meets 3 times a year as a community of practice. The MFL group was formed by a group of teachers of French and Spanish. The teachers met briefly to discuss the project for a session. After that they used Padlet to share resources, such as texts to use and reading material on both action research and language learning strategies.

Questionnaires were given out to capture teachers' current practice in relation to teaching vocabulary noticing strategies. Teachers used the questionnaires to reflect on their practice.

Teachers were trained in vocabulary noticing strategies. The EAL teachers worked on a History text as well as a recipe from a Home Economics book and looked at the language of the texts.

For their classes, teachers identified 2 or 3 texts to use to train their students in vocabulary noticing strategies.

Students chose to read one of the given texts. They then identified and recorded useful vocabulary they would like to learn. Teachers collected the list from the students.

Teachers and students spent one class working on different strategies i.e.: noticing language chunks, collocations in context etc.

In the next session, students worked on another text to identify and record a new set of vocabulary which they considered useful.

Teachers collected the new lists and evaluated the quality of the vocabulary chosen by the students.

A Padlet wall was created for MFL teachers to share resources on action research and vocabulary learning strategies. Teachers were encouraged to share their texts and comments.

Teachers gave students questionnaires to evaluate how effective the intervention had been and whether students' competence and confidence handling vocabulary had improved.

On observing the impact of the training on the students, teachers filled in a questionnaire relating to the impact of action research on their classroom practice.

Research participants consented to take part in the project and answered a questionnaire anonymously. They cannot be identified in this report.

When was the action research project carried out?

November 2017 to February 2018.

Who were your participants?

3 modern foreign language teachers (MFL) and 8 English as an additional language teachers (EAL). Research participants consented to take part in the project and answered a questionnaire anonymously. They cannot be identified in the report.

How did you collect your data?

Questionnaires were given to teachers in relation to their existing practice pre- Action Research.

Students were surveyed in relation to the strategies they used. Teachers observed students using strategies to record vocabulary.

Questionnaires were given to teachers (and to students for teachers to reflect on) post Action Research.

Action research tools used

- Questionnaires
- Interviews
- Classroom observations.
- Focus groups

Why did you choose these tools?

These tools were the most appropriate ways of capturing the findings of AR in the context of this project. The questionnaires were distributed via Survey Monkey and included a set of standardized questions which all participants answered allowing graphs and pie charts to be generated according to the responses given. It allowed for comparison of data and discussion of findings. Teachers found classroom observation useful for their action research as they could see the training and learning being implemented and the impact of this on student learning. The focus groups of teachers were able to discuss the impact of Action Research on their practice and the issues as well as themes that arose either face to face at the network meetings (EAL teachers) or on the Padlet wall (MFL teachers).

At which points in the process did you implement action research tools?

At the beginning of the process and at the end post-intervention.

How did you analyse your data?

Survey Monkey generated graphs and Pie charts to represent quantative feedback from each question asked on the questionnaire.
An analysis/collation of qualitative feedback (teacher comments) from questionnaires. Specific common themes emerged.
Informal discussions on the themes took place between project participants at 2 EAL network meetings.

What did you find out and how did you adapt your action research process? (Which action-strategies did you develop?)

We found out that teachers welcomed the opportunity to engage in Action Research as an opportunity to step away from the day to day of the classroom.
Teachers commented that engaging in this project made them aware of the need to constantly reflect on their practice.
Teachers commented that being encouraged to take part in the project was crucial. It is hard to make the time and space otherwise.
Teachers commented that perhaps they should have guided students more when completing questionnaires but were afraid of prompting replies.
We were aware that EAL students (A2, B1) may not able to give much detailed feedback (qualitative) as they found it difficult to express themselves in English. However, this was planned

for to some extent by including quantitative feedback also on the questionnaires. Teacher observation also helped determine whether students had benefitted from the training.

Engaging teachers to participate. Not all teachers were familiar with Action Research and how they themselves would benefit. Some thought this would be extra work and it was hard to chase up the questionnaires.

Some teachers at the meeting may have needed a second input session before they implemented the training with their students.

Final findings
What did you find out? How are your findings linked to the evidence?

Teachers were given the choice of completing a questionnaire online using Survey Monkey, or on hard copy. Ten teachers completed the questionnaire and all responses were collated for analysis. Teachers were also given pre-prepared questionnaires to distribute to their students with a view to gathering student feedback on the impact of learning to notice vocabulary. Teachers were encouraged to use the students' questionnaires to reflect on their practice and to report on their own experience of engaging in AR. Teachers' were not expected to report on their individual students' responses, therefore for the purposes of this publication we will discuss the teachers' questionnaires for what they tell us about teachers' findings in relation to teaching vocabulary learning strategies and their views on engaging in AR for the purpose of reflecting and improving on their practice.

The teachers' questionnaire included the 5 following questions:

1. Before undertaking this action research, did you routinely teach students to record vocabulary by noticing it in context?
2. What are the benefits of training students to notice and record collocations?
3. Have you noticed students are more confident/competent in managing vocabulary for themselves?
4. Has this Action Research impacted on your teaching? Will you do anything different in relation to vocabulary?
5. Did you find Action Research a useful tool for reflecting on your practice?

In what follows, we will briefly discuss the key findings of the project.

As shown in figure 1.1 there were individual differences in teachers' practice in relation to the teaching of noticing vocabulary in context. The purpose of this question was to prompt teachers to consider their current individual practice before embarking on the project. While 1 teacher reported that this was a regular occurrence in his/her lessons, most teachers reported that this only happened on occasions. This reflected the fact that teachers often report feeling under

pressure to deliver the curriculum within a very tight timeframe and find it difficult to make the time to teach language learning strategies in general. Other teachers remain unaware of the benefits of doing so.

Figure 1
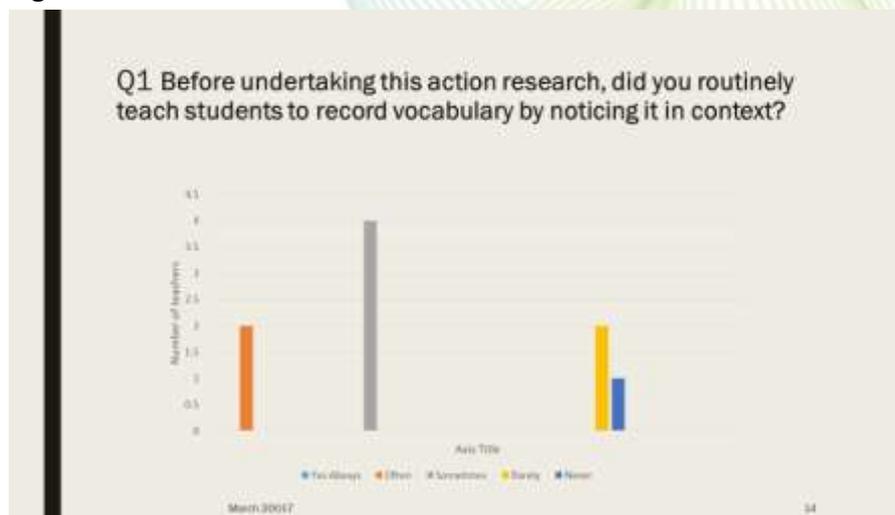
Question 2 and 3 looked specifically at the teaching of vocabulary strategies. Teachers were asked to reflect on the benefits of training students to notice and record collocations and asked them to consider if they had noticed students being more confident and/or competent in managing vocabulary for themselves after engaging with the texts and activities proposed. They reported that after engaging in a lesson that showed students how to notice and record vocabulary, students were more aware of the language they encounter and how to become more independent in managing vocabulary as well as being able to transfer learning from one subject area to another or from a language they already knew to a language they were learning.

These are a sample of some of the teachers' replies:

- They become more independent outside of my language support class. They can work things out for themselves and learn for themselves and not wait for me to point things out.
- They build up the vocabulary they can USE. They have a deeper understanding of the English language and also the mistakes that they themselves make when they write.
- They become self-sufficient in handling vocabulary they meet in mainstream classes
- It brings awareness, aids recall and memory
- They are understanding language in context that they can then reapply to similar and/or different situations. it also enables subsequent language learning.

Figure 2 shows how, through classroom observation and interaction, teachers noticed that their students showed an increase in confidence and competency in handling vocabulary.

Figure 2

Q3 Have you noticed students are more confident/competent in managing vocabulary for themselves?
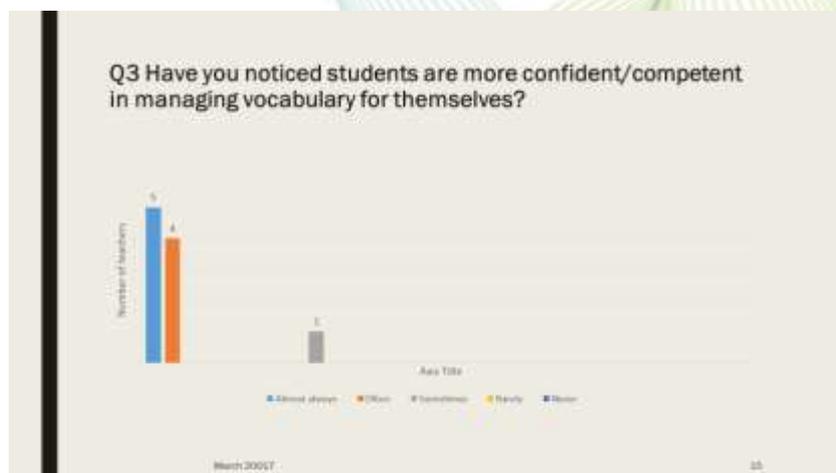
Questions 4 and 5 specifically looked at teachers' perception of how engaging in this AR project had impacted on their teaching and asked them to consider if they would incorporate any of the learning into their practice. Teachers' responses were very positive as teachers realised the importance of engaging in the teaching of strategies that help students in vocabulary learning as well as the impact the project had in developing their students' autonomy as language learners.

- Yes, I will support students to be able to work alone. They are not with me all the time - only 3 x 40 minute periods a week. They will become better language learners and be able to cope with the vocabulary of their subjects better.
- I will now ALWAYS support students to notice language in context. Before I didn't do this. I thought they would automatically see language patterns but now I will teach them explicitly
- I will continue to prioritize supporting students to notice vocabulary.
- I'll be more active in teaching vocabulary learning strategies again
- Yes it has highlighted the importance of enabling students to build their own vocabulary, thus empowering their learning.

Question 5 asked teachers to consider AR as a tool that allows teachers to systematically study the effects of their teaching on student learning. We wanted to find out if after engaging in this guided AR project, teachers were likely to engage in AR to think critically about their practice. As figure 3 demonstrates, teachers were very positive about their experience, describing AR as an extremely

or very useful tool. Teachers were also asked if they were likely to continue to engage in Action Research. Some of their responses were:

- I feel energised as a teacher and will now look for a new project
- It was an interesting project and I learned a lot from it. I will reflect more on how and what I teach. I would definitely like to do more Action Research in my classroom. Both my students and I benefitted from the experience
- I will be more careful not to assume things about teaching and learning. This has impacted on my teaching in my class. I discovered something I didn't know.

Figure 3

What were the positive outcomes?

Teachers commented that engaging in this project made them aware of the need to constantly reflect on their practice. They gained new knowledge about their own practice and how it impacts on their students' learning. Teachers realised how reviewing and changing their practice leads to more positive outcomes for students. Teachers also found the students' questionnaires interesting and beneficial as they were able to gather students' views. Taking part in the project with colleagues also gave teachers an opportunity to collaborate which they welcomed.

- I had never asked students their opinion on how they learn vocabulary. it was interesting for them to reflect and share with their peers what they do to learn vocabulary. We all learned from each other. It was powerful.
- The students really enjoyed filling out the questionnaires as it made them reflect also on the way they learnt vocabulary. I completed the project with a colleague from my school,

so it gave us an opportunity to work constructively together.

- I feel energised as a teacher and will now look for a new project
- It was an interesting project and I learned a lot from it. I will reflect more on how and what I teach. I would definitely like to do more Action Research in my classroom. Both my students and I benefitted from the experience.

What were the problems and limitations?

One of the initial problems we encountered was engaging teachers to participate. Not all teachers were familiar with Action Research and how they themselves would benefit. Some thought this would be extra work so after an initial call some MFL teachers withdrew from the project. During the AR project we identified a small number of practical issues. Some teachers at the meeting may have needed a second input session before they implemented the training with their students. Teachers also commented that perhaps they should have guided students more when completing questionnaires but were afraid of prompting replies. Some teachers felt that some of the questions may have been outside the linguistic competence of some of the EAL students. Some students were not able to give much detailed feedback as they found it difficult to express themselves in English. However, this was planned for to some extent by including qualitative feedback also on the questionnaires. Teacher observation helped determine whether students had benefitted from the training. Another aspect of engaging in AR that poses a challenge for teachers is the time commitment. Teachers commented that although they could see the benefits of engaging in AR, it is hard to make the time and to convince colleagues to collaborate and therefore being prompted to take part in the project was crucial as it is hard to make the time and space otherwise. Teachers in secondary schools in Ireland are used to CPD as an external affair. Communities of practice for language teachers are not very well established and teachers working together in language departments is unfortunately still not a widespread practice.

- I found the project a very interesting way to reflect on my practice. As everyone knows, the life of a teacher is very busy, and it made me stop to think of methodologies I have been using and their effectiveness. I always enjoy opportunities to collaborate and share resources with teachers.
- Yes, but it is hard to make the time. It was good that we were prompted to take part in this project. I think it is hard to prioritize it when you are on your own. Day to day teaching and other school commitments take over

What did you learn?

As teacher educators, this AR project gave us an opportunity to introduce AR to language teachers. We were able to guide teachers through the process of setting up and carrying out AR which in this instance was looking at a aspect of vocabulary learning. At the same time, the nature of this project gave us an opportunity to carry out AR on teachers' views on AR as a tool for professional development. Teachers welcomed the opportunity to engage in Action Research as an opportunity to step away from the day to day of the classroom. It was clear from the participating teachers' responses that the best people to improve teachers' classroom practice is teachers themselves from within their own classroom. It is more powerful and brings about more change in learning than looking to attend external continuous professional development (CPD) sessions. Once teachers try Action Research in their classrooms, they feel more empowered.

Conclusions & Outlook

What is your overall conclusion?

As teacher educators this AR project gave us an opportunity to introduce AR to language teachers. We were able to guide teachers through the process of setting up and carrying out AR which in this instance was looking at a aspect of vocabulary learning. At the same time, the nature of this project gave us an opportunity to carry out AR on teachers' views on AR as a tool for professional development. Teachers welcomed the opportunity to engage in Action Research as an opportunity to step away from the day to day of the classroom. It was clear from the participating teachers' responses that the best people to improve teachers' classroom practice is teachers themselves from within their own classroom. It is more powerful and brings about more change in learning than looking to attend external continuous professional development (CPD) sessions. Once teachers try Action Research in their classrooms, they feel more empowered.

What will your next steps be?

As a next step we will encourage teachers to collaborate with colleagues or through communities of practice to engage in further AR and share their findings with their colleagues.

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