

ACTION RESEARCH IN A GRADUATE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING PROGRAM

By Cristina Frodden

El artículo muestra los resultados de una investigación en torno al proceso de una investigación-acción cooperativa con estudiantes en un nuevo programa de especialización para profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera. Mediante entrevistas y análisis de actas de reuniones con estudiantes y con asesores se detectaron problemas que afectan el desarrollo de la investigación. Como aciertos del proceso, se mencionaron las ganancias en términos de aprendizaje y empoderamiento.

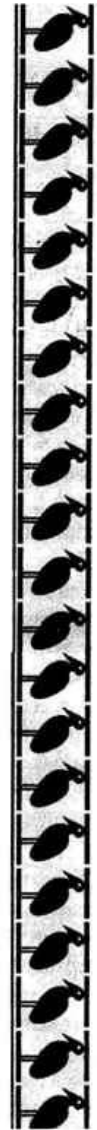
Palabras claves : investigación-acción, proceso de asesoría, profesionalización, empoderamiento.

Cet article présente les résultats d'une recherche-action portant sur les processus de recherches-actions menées de façon coopérative par des étudiants, professeurs d'anglais débutants, inscrits dans un programme de professionnalisation dans une université colombienne. L'analyse des entrevues et des minutes des réunions entre étudiants et directeurs de mémoires a révélé les difficultés qui ont marqué le processus de leurs recherches. Mais, elle a également permis de montrer comment ces étudiants, tout en se professionnalisant, ont pu mieux s'approprier de leur rôle comme professeur.

Mots-clés : recherche-action, , processus de direction de mémoire, professionnalisation appropriation du rôle-professeur.

This article presents the findings of an investigation on the process of carrying out collaborative action research with teachers of English as a foreign language in a newly created graduate program, in a Colombian university. From the analysis of interviews and minutes of meetings with students and advisors, important issues that impinge on the successful development of the research process were found. The difficulties notwithstanding, participants emphasized the benefits of this experience in terms of empowerment and learning.

Key words : action research, , supervision process, profesionalization empowerment.



For some time now I have been promoting action research in the context of language teacher preparation, because I hold the view that “teachers’ involvement in research into the ecology of their own classrooms” (Burton & Mickan 1993, p. 113) is probably the most effective way to tackle the conflict between theory and practice, and to enhance teachers’ professional development (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994; Crookes 1993; Nunan 1993; Wells, 1994). For two years I was the director of a recently created one-year graduate EFL teacher education program (*Especialización*) in Colombia. I also taught and observed courses, and advised students with their monographs—a report of a piece of action research on a problem our students find in their own classrooms. However, introducing action research to our students and initiating faculty in the process of advising students created a lot of tension among faculty and between faculty and students. Therefore, I decided to carry out action research on this experience with the aim of (a) understanding the issues involved in learning how to do action-research, (b) learning how to advise students engaged in it, and (c) exploring how teacher-friendly action-research really is. Advisors and students of this program were involved in this research because I share Gregory’s (1995) view that

professionals learn more effectively reflecting on their own experience, trying to solve the problems encountered in their particular setting and through interaction.

BACKGROUND

Our students in the *Especialización* were mostly experienced teachers working in schools, private language institutes, and universities who graduated from our language program where they had received no training in research. They generally held the view that research is something done by academics on topics that have little or no relationship to what teachers do (Crookes, 1997), and requires statistics in order to be valid and reliable. The *Especialización* lecturers’ experience with research had been mainly the one we had acquired to obtain a graduate degree in the USA or in France, e.g. with experimental research requiring complex statistics and/or with a state of the art study requiring an extensive review of the literature. Few of us had carried out action research and none of these experiences had been published.

For the first semester in our curriculum the graduate committee had planned a Seminar on Classroom Research with an emphasis on collaborative action research, in which students were

supposed to be introduced to this type of research, learn some basic research skills and write their proposals for the monograph, which should be the report of a piece of action research carried out in their classrooms. During the second semester, they were supposed to carry out the project and write the report under the guidance of the advisor who was assigned by the graduate committee taking into account the students’ suggestion, and the advisor’s knowledge of the topic of the proposal and of action research.

When the advisors started working with the students on their projects, we realized that the Seminar on Classroom Research had probably been too theoretical and too ambitious, and that our students lacked academic writing skills. During this seminar some students for whom the technical aspects of doing research were the most relevant ones, started collecting data and taking actions without having defined the research problem adequately, without a clear purpose and with instruments that were not carefully designed. They also had problems analyzing the data collected. Some students had taken actions and had not monitored them; others started

taking actions too late. As a consequence, most research proposals presented by the students had to be reviewed and redirected when the advisor was assigned.

When the advisors started working with the students on their projects, we realized that the Seminar on Classroom Research had probably been too theoretical and too ambitious, and that our students lacked academic writing skills.

By the time the students were supposed to have their monographs evaluated, some were still collecting data and taking actions,

others were overwhelmed by the amount of data they had collected and had to analyze, and few had started the painful process—‘labor’—of writing the report. When the first two monographs that were evaluated were given back with suggestions to be substantially reformulated, there was debacle.

The graduate committee discussed the evaluation reports and decided to issue some recommendations to be taken into account before sending monographs to the evaluators. These recommendations were sent to the students of the first and second cohort, and to the advisors. Students whose monographs had to be reformulated felt very discouraged and distanced themselves from the advisor. Other students who thought they had almost finished their report and who realized they had to take into account many aspects they had not paid attention to asked for a change of advisor.



To sum up, students of the first cohort took much longer than expected carrying out their research projects. Besides the problems already mentioned, they thought they could start writing the report once they had finished taking actions and gathering data. Students and advisors realized too late how much time the analysis would take and how important it is to analyze data as they are gathered so as to evaluate the actions taken, and decide on the future course of the research. A year and a half after students had finished their courses, only four monographs had been evaluated and approved, five were still pending.

Having learned some lessons from advising the first cohort, the graduate committee planned things better for the second cohort of students. The research seminar was less ambitious, focused just on action research, and included more practical exercises in collecting and analyzing data. For example, students carried out interviews and administered questionnaires to their students and colleagues in order to clarify the research problem they wanted to work on. By the end of the semester some students presented a well defined project; others had to work on it further with the advisor. Even though the situation improved, students still took too long to fulfill the requirements for graduation.

METHOD

As a first step in the inquiry I performed documentary analysis. I read the minutes of the meetings of the graduate committee in charge of the *Especialización*, in which experts, advisors, and students who had had problems with their monographs had stated their points of view. I also reviewed university manuals and letters dealing with the problem. The second step involved reading some relevant articles on postgraduate supervision (Zuber-Skerrit & Ryan 1994), collaboration (Aspland, MacPherson, Proudford & Whitmore, 1996; Kember et al. 1997; Peterat & Smith, 1996), and reporting research (Brown, 1994; Walker, 1997), which gave me a framework to analyze the documents mentioned previously. From this analysis some agreements and disagreements among students and advisors emerged. I then conducted unstructured interviews with three advisors and six students—four of the first cohort and two of the second one—about the relevant issues mentioned in the meetings with the intention to clarify the disagreements found. Finally, in order to validate the findings, a draft of this paper was submitted to the participants in this research, who commented on it and confirmed it represented the situation.

FINDINGS

In this section I present the major themes that emerged from the analysis of the information: time management, collaboration, views on action research, and students' and advisors' growth. I also discuss them in the light of the review of the literature.

TIME MANAGEMENT

Students had a lot of difficulty managing time in order to plan their research activities because of the multiple activities they had to perform in the different roles they play in society (Denicolo & Pope, 1994). As graduate students they attended courses and read extensively to prepare workshops, presentations and to write course papers. As teachers they had to perform a variety of duties such as preparing and teaching classes, attending meetings with parents and colleagues, organizing school events, and filling out qualitative reports on students' progress. As novice researchers they had to collect and analyze data to define the problem and to monitor the actions taken, meet with their co-researcher(s) and their advisor, and, last but not least, write the research report. As social beings they also needed time to attend to family concerns and meet friends. The conflict arising

from these competing roles was apparent and caused much concern in students and advisors.

When I thought I had finally handed in the final draft and got it back to rewrite it, that was horrible! I thought I would quit. I was angry at myself and at my advisor. I also got angry at my students. This research invades all spaces in your life. Even my family life was affected! (Beatriz)

Students are unable to work collaboratively because they work intensively, they have family duties, some hold two different jobs and have to respond to two or three bosses at different ends of the city. (Gastón)

Advisors also had multiple activities, and some were not available at the time students expected them to be, which were the hours they had devoted to take courses in the *Especialización*.

We were working on the research and, besides our job, doing other things, and the advisor, as we found out later, was not supposed to work after 6 p.m. or on Saturday, because that time was for the family. We were incompatible regarding available time. (Daniel)



COLLABORATION

In our view collaboration implies working together to achieve a shared goal or goals. In the context of educational action research, collaboration has usually involved members of the academic community working together with school teachers on educational issues that interest both parties (e.g., Aspland et al. 1996; Peterat & Smith, 1996; Sachs, 1997). In our context, however, collaboration among student-teachers, and among advisors also had an important role. Due to the fact that some of our students were carrying out joint research projects, discussing and helping each other were key elements in order to develop the reflective and learning capacities of all individuals involved. Being relatively new to the field of action research, collaboration among advisors was also found to be important not only to support each other in this endeavor but to share views and establish common criteria to guide our students. These three instances of collaboration—student-student, advisor-advisor, and student-advisor—will be discussed below.

Students who teamed together to carry out the research benefited from collaborative work in that they played the role of critical friend to each other, clarifying ideas, and helping in the data

gathering procedure (Altrichter et al., 1993).

We discussed everything, if we were going to prepare a class, we prepared it together, and if Freddy taught the class first, he told me: 'This is what happened in my class, I think we can change this for yours'. So we changed it. We played the role of critical friend to each other. We also observed each other's classes. (Francisca)

Learning develops through interaction, therefore, good communication among members of a team, which implies listening to each other and being open to one another's points of view, is crucial.

Difficulties arose when members of the team lacked time or showed lack of commitment to the project. In this case a more traditional approach to cooperation was found as the solution: A leading member of the team assigned specific tasks to each member.

I didn't want to go on working with my team. I had separated a specific slot during the week and told them 'Let's save this slot so that we can work on our project'. But they decided to teach courses or take courses at that time. It was our advisor who convinced us to go on working together. ...Then I would tell Ricardo:

'Since you worked on the interviews, you take care of them'. 'Eduardo, you administered questionnaires, so...' I worked a lot on the theory. Then we would get together on the weekend and comment. (Cecilia)

Unfortunately, collaboration among advisors was almost null. This was evidenced when the first students' monographs were suspended and debacle came. Students complained that there were no unified criteria on the format of the report, the extent to which reference to the literature should be made, or the depth required in the analysis. Even though some meetings had been held in order to discuss the progress of the monographs, key issues such as the ones previously mentioned had only been superficially treated, probably because of the advisors' fear to show their insecurity. This shows that we had not succeeded in creating the supportive environment necessary for peers to challenge each other's ideas in order to self-develop, which is essential in action learning (Gregory, 1995).

I sometimes went to your office with some questions and I went out even more confused with what you had told

me. 'What's happening to her? Is she also insecure?' I also felt that you didn't trust Myriam and me either. You didn't trust us for collaboration, for support. (Emma)

It's good that people think you know a lot and that besides that you show that you know a lot. This is an important part of my image. When I say 'I don't know' it's because there is no response to the question in the field, I am not updated and have to read... There is another kind of 'I don't know': when I have to ask someone. Then I feel fear. (Hilda)

Lack of collaboration among advisors had a strong influence on the debacle, since advisors had differing views regarding what constituted the monograph. For some, who had not been

involved much in action research and in the discussions on the *Especialización manual*, it was just a reflection on students' teaching practice; for others, it was a fully-fledged report on a piece of action research. Some held the view that pivotal works in the field needed to be referred to; others required quite an exhaustive coverage of the literature. It turned out that the criteria to evaluate

In our view collaboration implies working together to achieve a shared goal or goals. In the context of educational action research, collaboration has usually involved members of the academic community working together with school teachers on educational issues that interest both parties



monographs, which had served me, for example, as a guide, had been too vague. Therefore, having discussed the evaluators' comments, the graduate committee decided to write some recommendations to be considered by students and advisors before having monographs evaluated. These recommendations provided a more detailed description of the criteria included in the manual: scope and social impact, innovation, methodological rigor, coherence, and linguistic correctness. However, the effect of this document was that some advisors lost credibility, which caused them to feel even more estranged from their peers.

When those guidelines came out, which we could have discussed earlier, I felt I had lost authority. In fact, my students... debacle. My students didn't believe me any more. (Emma)

There were moments when I felt I had to get out: 'I can't fall under the label of the bad advisor. There are bad advisors and good advisors. I can't fall under the bad ones. (Hilda)

This debacle, in turn, played an important role in the relationship established between the students and their advisor, since effective collaboration between advisor and student(s) was found to rely heavily on the advisors'



FLOR Y ROSTRO II. Serie "Flor y rostro"
(1995. Óleo y pastel. 42.5 x 35 cm.).
Marta Elena Arango P.

credibility as defined by Crookes (1992), which was based not so much on their knowledge about the problem under inquiry, but on their experience with action research.

The advisors should show us alternatives. They don't need to know the topic, but the research process should be clear to them so that they can guide us when we have difficulties, when we are confused. ... Our advisor had very good intentions, but things were not clear to her. She wasn't clear, she was inconsistent. (Cecilia)

The advisor knows more than I do, that's why she is my advisor. I have the experience of the context and all that and the thing is 'Come on, let's sit together' because an outsider—the advisor—and an insider can clarify things. If the insider and the outsider reach a consensus it's because they are on the right track. (Beatriz)

This could be viewed as the students carrying out 'first order action research': they, as insiders, focus on the classroom and are concerned mainly with improving their teaching, while the advisor, as an outsider, plays the role of critical friend and does 'second order action research' concentrating on facilitating the progress of the research and promoting the student's reflective capacity. Both parties then are undergoing a process of professional learning (Elliot 1985, cited by Kember et al. 1997). Similarly to what Kember et al. describe in their article, the level of involvement of student and advisor and the amount of support needed by the student varied according to the people involved in each research project. In order to describe the different facets of the role of the supervisor, I will use some of the metaphors for the role of the critical friend provided by Kember et al., and add others that appeared in our context.

MIRROR

Perhaps the most relevant facet of the role of the advisor was to enhance reflection, challenging students in a positive way, in order to make them think and stretch their understanding of the situation being studied. This was crucial in the initial stages of the research. Due to their «fragile sense of professional competence» (Anderson et al. 1994) students found it difficult to define a research problem because they did not see the problems which had become part of their daily lives, or they did not see their relevance. On the other hand, once they had been introduced to research others had carried out, they had so many interests that it became difficult to focus their attention on just one problem at a time.

The research question changed many times. I was thinking about very abstract or very improbable or very impractical things. (Amanda)

As an advisor I insist on emphasizing the initial stage: the premise to state the problem. As an advisor one should not let anyone take any action until there is clarity in the formulation of the problem, which is based on some previous actions. (Gastón)

Students, who saw the supervisor as a



Cristina Frodden

guide, highlighted the role of questions as a way of forcing them to see things from another perspective and deepen their understanding of the problems.

The advisor asked key questions that showed me where I had to go deeper in the analysis. ...I learned to analyze interviews, to see things beyond the words that had been said, to interpret information. (Amanda)

RAPPORT BUILDER.

Rapport, "the harmonious and mutual-trusting relationship between people" (Goldhammer et al., 1980, cited by Kember et al., 1997: 467)—'empathy' according to participants in this study—was perhaps a major factor that determined the success of the process of carrying out the research and reporting it. After all, as Tak says, to be a critical friend one has to be a friend first (Kember et al., 1997). Students and advisors who emphasized its importance could develop their projects in relatively harmonious ways, whereas those who took a more distanced attitude towards each other, had more difficulty.

Empathy is very important. If empathy is not established from the beginning, if the advisor is just doing it because it's his job, that undermines the process. This is perhaps what happened with

some students: there was no empathy between advisor and student. (Beatriz)

Sometimes the academic relationship between advisor and students was being overlapped with one of congeniality, which was perhaps misinterpreted by the students. (Emma)

However, there were instances when some students took advantage of the trust the advisor had laid on them. Instances ranged between not meeting deadlines agreed, cancelling appointments at the last minute, not changing things in the report which had already been discussed and agreed, to covertly blackmailing the advisor with asking for a change of advisor if she insisted on requiring higher methodological rigor and coherence in the report.

My advisor sometimes got desperate because of my lack of commitment. I would simply say: 'Let's not have a meeting today' or 'I didn't do anything'. (Beatriz)

I asked Pedro and Calixto to cite authors in order to support what they were saying. They responded: 'But why do we have to cite? What we say is not valid?' They still haven't accepted that even a personal idea has to be validated and located in this

network of knowledge. ... After another team had changed advisor Pedro and Calixto told me that one of the members of that team had asked them: 'Are you going to continue with her? You can also send a letter and ask for a change of advisor'. I see that as blackmail on the part of Pedro and Calixto. (Emma)

RESEARCH ADVISOR.

Due to students' inexperience, advisors' main role was that of research advisor. Students needed help in refining and redirecting the research design, planning data gathering procedures, and monitoring actions. Especially with students of the first cohort, the advisors spent a lot of time, discussing procedures to design instruments and collect information, and teaching them how to analyze the information.

I knew this was a piece of action research, but I thought I was supposed to take actions at the end and not from the beginning. This is why I collected too much information, some of it before I started teaching the course. ...I started the course without knowing what actions to take because I hadn't

analyzed the information. (Amanda)

RESOURCE PROVIDER

Students expected the advisor to suggest titles and sources and, due to the limited bibliographic resources in our university, they also relied heavily on the advisors providing support with books and articles from their personal collection. It was not uncommon for advisors to contact people through e-mail in order to obtain the articles the student needed, or teach them how to use internet in order to find the information.

However, there were instances when some students took advantage of the trust the advisor had laid on them. Instances ranged between not meeting deadlines agreed, cancelling appointments at the last minute, not changing things in the report which had already been discussed and agreed, to covertly blackmailing the advisor.

I had to recommend readings and reading strategies. They were getting a lot of materials and didn't know how to read them. I had to teach them how to use the internet, to navigate,

to do a search in ERIC, to download information, to read without reading from the first word to the last. (Hilda)

WRITING CONSULTANT.

One of the roles of the critical friend mentioned by Altrichter et al. (1993) is giving feedback on the draft of the report. In our case, writing the report was the



stage which took students longer than any other due to their lack of academic writing skills and to the fact that the report is required to be written in English, which is a foreign language for all of us. The advisors' lack of experience writing action research reports, and the absence of a specific format to write such reports made the process of advising students on how to write the report a process of trial and error.

At the beginning I just thought writing was a matter of sitting down and telling the story. I could have it ready in one or two weeks. I hadn't understood yet that I was writing for an academic community. When I finally sat down and wrote, I realized that although I had written a lot I had written nothing. I had no theoretical support... the way I wrote... it was not for a story-telling event, it was meant to be put in a library. (Beatriz)

Besides, this was the stage for which there was more disagreement regarding the amount of support the advisor should provide. Support depended on the students' characteristics and skills. How autonomous are they? How responsible? How open to advice? Do they have adequate academic reading and writing skills? Can they analyze and interpret data?

What was good about the advisory sessions was that the idea wasn't just 'Take this out', 'Put this in' but support why and we do it together. (Beatriz)

I don't think the advisor should write, he's not the one to do the students' job. I have always held the view, and acted consequently, that I never take the student's place. I talk with him, I am his interlocutor. When I read the draft, I show where things should be changed, what needs to be done, but the actions of changing and finding out how to change things is a job where the advisor doesn't have to stick his nose in. I have never done it and I think I will never do it. That's where I feel that the student's autonomy has to be proved. That's how I learned: I went to my advisor to give him some reports, he received them, provided some criticism and let me loose: Do what you can. (Gastón)

Two metaphors not mentioned by Kember et al. (1997) emerged in this study. The first one is related to the amount of support the students are provided, and to the degree of independence the students are required. The second one deals with assessing the quality of students' work.

MOTHER OR PEER.

Two extremes appeared in this collaborative relationship, and as common sense says, extremes are dangerous. If, trying to help, advisors are too protective and assume responsibilities that are their students', they may run the risk of not challenging the students' capacities in order to learn and become independent researchers. On the other hand, if the advisor assumes an equitable stand and tries to develop students' autonomy and initiative, but disregards the fact that students have not been prepared for this kind of relationship, many problems may arise.

In theory, I shouldn't correct their English or review their lesson plans or teach them how to use the internet. But reality requires it. And I don't care. I think I am too motherly. (Hilda)

I was sincere. I was confused and did not hide my doubts. I hold the view that as a teacher I don't know everything. (...) It's their job to find the information. There's when we can talk of collaboration between student and advisor. The advisor doesn't know all the topics. Students have to find the information and we share it. I share what I have and they share the information they found. That's how the relationship between student and

advisor should be. That's perhaps why there were misunderstandings with all my students. That's when I talk of dealing with egos of children who don't want to grow. ... Why can't we work as peers? Some of our students are our colleagues, they work here at our university. Is it just because administratively we have been assigned different statuses, and I am the advisor and he is a student? (Emma)

In order for students and advisors to have a clearer idea of the amount of support they should provide, and to avoid the misunderstandings that arise from wrong expectations about what the other person is supposed to do, we developed a checklist (see Appendix).

READER.

The first one to judge the quality of the students' monographs is the advisor. Since their name is written on the front page of the monograph, their academic reputation is at stake. Therefore, it is the advisor who determines when the report is ready to be sent to the readers/examiners. This role not only conflicts with the idea of collaborative research being equitable - i.e. that power and authority over design, process and outcomes should be shared, as Aspland et al. (1996) propose, but also stresses the structural aspect of power in which



individuals, because of their institutional position, are seen to have more than others (Grant & Graham, 1994).

One has to be very humble, or if one has a strong point of view, one should share it with the advisor, because later on there will be conflict when the advisor will insist on the same comment, and until you include that idea, or correct it, or omit it, the advisor will not accept that the monograph is ready to be evaluated. (Daniel)

It was perhaps this role of reader that drove some advisors to take more responsibility over the monograph than was desirable if they wanted to help their students develop as independent researchers. Seeing the students' limitations regarding analytical and writing skills, and sometimes the lack of commitment or the discouragement that were leading them to leave the process unfinished and forget about graduation, advisors had to take up responsibilities that were clearly the students', e.g. divide the task of writing the report into more manageable parts, set deadlines for each sub-task, and rewrite parts of the report.

A crucial point was the style, the grammar. It didn't look nice to me, but I wasn't sure whether I should write that part for them, give them

suggestions, or let them express themselves. I ended up writing parts of the monograph. (Hilda)

The dilemma of playing the role of mother or peer, and the role of reader are clearly related to the issue of power. Kember et al. (1997) recognize that many problems arise due to issues of power and authority in the kinds of collaborative relationship established between teacher-researcher—in this case, the student—and research-facilitator—in this case, the advisor. They also mention the difficulties facilitators have in determining the extent to which they should provide support. In this study, besides stating in very general terms that they are the ones who have to do the work, students stress the structural power difference based on the advisor's authority in the relationship, i.e. the advisor knows more and assesses the student's work.

The student has to be open to suggestions and willing to accept them. In so far that we are doing something new, something that we don't know, something we will learn about, we have to be receptive to any comment. There is no point in me asking for someone to be my advisor and then start thinking 'I am not going to do what he or she says, because it requires more work or more time

because he or she requires me to read things'. If I accept the advisor it is because I trust the person, I trust what he or she is going to contribute. (Francisca)

The importance of a receptive attitude on the part of the student in order to have a fruitful dialogue between advisor and student was also stressed.

We are obliged to take into account the advisors' suggestions, because if they are advisors, they know more than us. However, this shouldn't be done blindly, but in a critical way, understanding what one is doing and why one is doing it. (Amanda)

One has to have a dialogue, be receptive to what the advisor says and if one doesn't agree, one has to show why. It's not just because I don't like it, and I am like that, stubborn. (Cecilia)

For this dialogue to be successful it is crucial that people's ideas be communicated in a clear and precise way, and that any breakdowns in the communication be clarified (Phillips, 1994). Students should know exactly what they are expected to do, and vice versa.

A mistake in all this process was that

it wasn't made clear that when you write the report you are not just narrating a story. That story should be related to the literature. This was something that wasn't clear since the beginning, and that's why we thought it would be very easy. (Beatriz)

Ryan (1994:158) proposes the use of contracts and checklists in order to take care of the potential problems between "disaffected students and disgruntled supervisors". Contracts are negotiated agreements which involve both professional and personal matters dealing with the relationship between advisor and student, and are periodically reviewed to monitor the student's progress in the research. An alternative to contracts, which may be quite time-consuming, is checklists. Ryan considers checklists as more prescriptive instruments, because they state each party's obligations and are used to verify if they have been undertaken. However, negotiation can occur before the checklist is applied. This is what we did in order to design a checklist in which responsibilities of advisors and students are specified in a detailed manner (see Appendix A). It was developed taking into account students' and advisors' opinions and was piloted to check if all parties agreed.



VIEWS ON ACTION RESEARCH

Due to the fact that there was scarce collaboration among advisors, and that neither students nor advisors had seen the relevance of the manual, this manual was not discussed thoroughly. As a consequence, neither students nor advisors knew exactly what was meant by each one of the criteria to be used to evaluate the monographs.

We later learned from the advisor that the criteria the readers had used had been too demanding: 'This is not a Master's program, nor a Ph.D.' (Daniel)

Of the criteria included in the manual—scope and social impact, innovation, methodological rigor, coherence, and linguistic correctness—perhaps the one that provoked most distress was methodological rigor. The main point under methodological rigor was "considering alternative perspectives" (Altrichter et al. 1993, p. 74), which was viewed as an indispensable substitute to the concepts of reliability and validity, with which we were more familiar.

The students had no journal, the information had not been verified, had not been triangulated appropriately. ... Which criteria had been used to gather

the information? Methodological rigor is not required just in high budget research projects. ... I think I still have traces of my background in quantitative research. They come out once in a while. (Hilda)

Looking back I realize that practicality, which is another criterion used to assess the quality of action research mentioned by Altrichter et al. (1993), had not been included at all. Considering the multiple roles our students have, this should have been a major aspect taken into account, especially when we think of all the responsibilities involved in our students' role as teachers.

I was concentrating more on the research and I was leaving the teaching aside. That was the feeling I had at that time. The research had to do with the process of observing, collecting data, analyzing, writing the journal... Instead of including it in the process of teaching I was separating them. (Beatriz)

Perhaps we have to find a compromise between methodological rigor and practicality. This is especially true if we want to encourage our students to continue doing action research and if we want other teachers to become involved in it as well. If our students have such a hard time getting a video recorder, and

transcribing lessons or interviews, for example, this research experience will probably not be repeated. They will not want to undergo such stress again, nor will any of their colleagues want to follow their example.

The student should be aware that he is doing a reflection exercise which is consistent and allows him to enter a new stage in his professional development. If he wants to continue doing research, he will know he will have to be more careful with the procedures. ... The Especialización should produce a stimulated individual who knows that he has gained something. (Gastón)

Coherence and linguistic correctness are influenced greatly by our students' limited command of the language and their unfamiliarity with academic discourse. Besides, we found it difficult to define standards that met the diversity of the audience of this type of action research. On the one hand, being collaborative research, this piece of research should be read by other teachers who are our students' colleagues or are working in a similar context. If we want our students to disseminate what they have done in their educational community, they should write «simply, but not simplistically» (Walker, 1997:140) in order to enable others to access their texts. However,

our students were writing in a foreign language, and most teachers in Colombia — even some English teachers — could have difficulty to understand their report. This is why we included as a graduation requirement an oral presentation in the institution where they carried out the research in the language most suited to their audience. We also encouraged our students to present at local and national conferences.

In order for them to present at the English Language Teaching Conference I had to motivate them a lot and help them write the abstract. (Hilda)

On the other hand, since the report of this project was a requirement to graduate, it also needed to meet the standards acknowledged by the academic community. The problem was to define the academic community. As Beatriz said, the monograph would be put on a shelf in the library of the School of Languages. But if we require our students to refer their research experience to that of researchers in other parts of the world, should teachers and researchers in the 'global village' not know about our endeavors? Some of our students participated in action research networks through the internet and sent their monograph to be included in such journals. This is why linguistic



correctness was so important for us.

Another source of concern was the lack of a format for reporting action research, which made the writing process extremely strenuous. Students were referred to Bell (1993) and provided some reports to analyze and find the most suitable format according to their writing style. Students of the first cohort had the most difficulty organizing ideas and reporting their research in a coherent way. Advisors, who had no previous experience writing this kind of report, could not provide much support. After advising these students, a format seemed to emerge: Introduction, Context, Problem and Aims, Action Strategies, Method, Discussion of Findings, Reflection on Doing Action Research, and Conclusions. I did not recommend a separate chapter with a review of the literature, but required students mainly to support their actions with other researcher's ideas and to relate their findings to the literature in the field as Day et al. (1996) suggest. However, this format needs to be discussed among advisors and a consensus be reached.

STUDENTS' AND ADVISORS' GROWTH

Even though students complained about the difficulties they had struggling with the language in order to write the report, they rejected the idea of writing it in Spanish because they realized how much the writing process helped them stretch their language development, an objective of the program.

I typed taking into account their [my co-researchers] ideas and I told them:

'Let me write and you will tell me if it's correct or not'.

Then they would tell me: 'Add this idea here or that part there', 'This verb doesn't fit that structure', 'This is how you say that'.

We would consult the Oxford dictionary, we

would look for synonyms and antonyms. (Cecilia)

Students' empowerment through this experience of carrying out action research was evident in their personal and professional development. The knowledge gained about research and the skills developed to carry out research helped them improve their teaching and develop more confidence in themselves.

Even though students complained about the difficulties they had struggling with the language in order to write the report, they rejected the idea of writing it in Spanish because they realized how much the writing process helped them stretch their language development, an objective of the program.

I learned how to design instruments, how to gather and analyze information, how to present a research report, and how to support it. I also learned general things, like now I can approach someone and ask him: 'So you are doing research? What kind of research? What instruments are you going to use? And how do you plan to analyze the information? What's the scope?' There are lots of things that are clearer to me now, not just the instruments but a little bit about theory and objectives and all that. (Daniel)

Just reflecting on what we are doing has changed all the process we are leading in our classes. ...It has helped us grow as professionals, as teachers. Basing the monograph on reflection makes us change as teachers, and I think our students have also learned. At least they don't see the English class as something boring and difficult. (Francisca)

I gained a lot both personally and professionally. I got carried away with research. But also as an individual: I gained confidence. I had very low self-esteem, I lacked self-confidence. I even lacked humility. Now I can say: 'I don't know that, can you explain that to me?' I learned to talk to people, to communicate. To sit down and invite someone to tell me things and I

tell her things. To discuss and to refute. (Beatriz)

Regarding advisors, one of the gains of this experience was the realization that time management should be a major concern not just of students but of advisors. We should not be so flexible with deadlines as we were, and we should demand students more responsibility regarding the tasks that are agreed on.

In the future I would make students respect the chronogram we devised. If the chronogram is not respected, I would send them a letter with a copy to the coordinator. Even though I don't share these police-like attitudes of cohesion, one has to prevent possible outcomes and this is the only way for some people, until we receive more autonomous generations and one can trust them. (Emma)

But perhaps the major realization has been the need for space and time for collaboration among us in order to clarify ideas and provide support.

A space should be created where one can simply say: 'I don't know', 'How can I approach this issue?', 'How can I guide students?' Because in theory we all know about action research, but there are times when one has doubts. (Hilda)



It's not necessary for advisors to have carried out action research, but they need to understand the rationale of it. There should be a seminar for all advisors. (Gastón)

In its principles, action research is the principle of life itself. It's not a teaching experience isolated from everything else; action research is an everyday thing. (Emma)

CONCLUSION

Researching and reflecting on the process of learning how to carry out action research and teaching our students to do it I discovered that there are many skills which need to be developed but which are usually taken for granted, for example, managing time and working collaboratively. Bringing those issues out in the open and making them explicit objectives of the curriculum should help participants solve the problems encountered. Furthermore, working collaboratively implies developing empathy among the team so as to feel secure and be able to discuss our doubts without restraints. In this collaborative relationship it is important to be clear about what participants

Regarding advisors, one of the gains of this experience was the realization that time management should be a major concern not just of students but of advisors. We should not be so flexible with deadlines as we were, and we should demand students more responsibility regarding the tasks that are agreed on.

expect of each other and to negotiate the aims and procedures of their common endeavour. If we create an appropriate environment for collaboration, both advisors and students will benefit. Advisors will be able to come to agreements on students' requirements and will learn about the teaching of research, and students will not feel confused about what they are supposed to do and will be better advised regarding research procedures. The future plan of setting up a Master's program requires advisors to collaborate, and to look for a space and time where they can share views on how to advise, how to address problems, and look for solutions. The criteria used to evaluate students' research reports have to be redefined and refined, and different research requirements need to be established for the Especialización and the Master's program. As Emma stated, "This is a first experience. We have to learn from it, and this is what we are doing."

However, many questions still need to be answered and many problems have to be solved. Efforts are already being made at the undergraduate level, for example, by developing reflection and

research skills and including academic writing as part of the new curriculum. Through the interviews made for this study the discussion among advisors was opened. I expect it to continue in order to clarify ideas and release the tension that was created by all the difficulties encountered by students and advisors in this process. I also hope that the experience presented here will serve others engaging in similar efforts.

REFERENCES

- ALTRICHTER, H., POSCH, P. & SOMEKH, B. (1993). *Teachers investigate their work. An introduction to the methods of action research*. London-New York: Routledge.
- ANDERSON, G., HERR, K. & NIHLEN, A.S. (1994). *Studying your own school. An educator's guide to qualitative practitioner research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.
- ASPLAND, T., MACPHERSON, I., PROUDFORD, C. & WHITMORE, L. (1996). Critical collaborative action research as a means of curriculum inquiry and empowerment. *Educational Action Research*, 4/1, 94-104.
- BELL, J. (1993). *Doing your research project*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- BROWN, R. (1994). The 'big picture' about managing writing. In Zuber-Skerrit, O. & Ryan, Y. (Eds.). *Quality in postgraduate education* (pp. 90-109). London: Kogan Page.
- BURTON, J. & MICKAN, P. (1993). Teachers' classroom research: rhetoric and reality. In Edge, J. & Richards, K. (Eds.). *Teachers develop teachers research. Papers on classroom research and teacher development* (pp. 113-121). Oxford: Heinemann.
- CROOKES, G. (1992). *Social skills in ESL teaching*. Unpublished manuscript.
- CROOKES, G. (1993). Action research for second language teachers: Going beyond teacher research. *Applied Linguistics*, Vol 14, 130-144.
- CROOKES, G. (1997). SLA and language pedagogy. A socioeducational perspective. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 19, 93-116.
- DAY, Ch., ELLIOT, J., SOMEKH, B. & WINTER, R. (1997). Editorial. *Educational Action Research*, 5, 357-361.
- DENICOLO, P. & POPE, M. (1994). The postgraduate's journey - An interplay of roles. In Zuber-Skerrit, O. and Ryan, Y. (Eds.). *Quality in postgraduate education* (pp. 120-133). London: Kogan Page.
- GRANT, B. AND GRAHAM, A. (1994). 'Guidelines for discussion': A tool for managing postgraduate supervision. In Zuber-Skerrit, O. and Ryan, Y. (Eds.). *Quality in postgraduate education* (pp. 165-177). London: Kogan Page.
- GREGORY, M. (1995). The accreditation of work-based research: An action research/action learning model. In Smith, B. & Brown, S. (Eds.). *Research teaching and learning in higher education* (pp.125-138). London: Kogan Page.



KEMBER, D., HA, T., LAM, B., LEE, A., NG, S., YAN, L. & YUM, J.C.K. (1997). The diverse role of the critical friend in supporting educational action research projects. *Educational Action Research*, 5, 463-481.

NUNAN, D. (1993). Action research in language education. In Edge, J. & Richards, K. (Eds.). *Teachers develop teachers research. Papers on classroom research and teacher development* (pp. 39-50). Oxford: Heinemann.

PETERAT, L. & SMITH, M.G. (1996). Metaphoric reflections on collaboration in a teacher education program. *Educational Action Research*, 4, 15-28.

PHILLIPS, E. (1994). Avoiding communication breakdown. In Zuber-Skerrit, O. and Ryan, Y. (Eds.). *Quality in postgraduate education* (pp. 134-142). London: Kogan Page.

RYAN, Y. (1994). Contracts and checklists: Practical propositions for postgraduate supervision. In Zuber-Skerrit, O. and Ryan, Y. (Eds.). *Quality in postgraduate education* (pp. 156-164). London: Kogan Page.

SACHS, J. (1997). Renewing teacher professionalism through innovative links. *Educational Action Research*, 5, 449-462.

WALKER, M. (1997). Transgressing boundaries: Everyday/academic discourses. In Hollingsworth, S. (Ed.), *International Action Research*. (pp.136-146). Washington, DC: Falmer Press.

WELLS, G. (1994). *Changing schools from within: Creating communities of inquiry*. Toronto: OISE Press.

ZUBER-SKERRIT, O. AND RYAN, Y. (Eds.). (1994). *Quality in postgraduate education*. London: Kogan Page.

APPENDIX

November 17, 1998

Dear advisors and students:

In order to improve the process of advising and the quality of your research, could you please do the following?

1. After each advisory session, check the behaviours you have performed.
2. Add any other behaviors you performed that you think are also important in the spaces provided below.

Thanks for your cooperation.

Check Advisor's behavior

1. Keep a record of each student's/team's progress in the research.
2. Discuss the *Especialización* manual with the student(s).
3. Discuss and clarify criteria for evaluating the monograph/report with the student(s).
4. Discuss the ethics of action research with the student(s).
5. Discuss formal aspects to be taken into account when writing the report with the student(s).
6. Suggest titles and authors to be read, or if this is impossible, sources.
7. Help student(s) understand texts, if necessary.
8. Check if student(s) is/are dedicating sufficient time to the AR project.
9. Discuss the plan of action and check it every week/fortnight.

10. Suggest possible lines of action in the research procedure.
11. Ask the student(s) for a monthly interim report of the research progress. 12. Do audit trail (students show their raw data).
13. Check how student(s) are systematizing and analyzing the data gathered.
14. Discuss the outline of the report.
15. Ask specific questions when the report is unintelligible or lacks coherence.
16. Point out problems in the organization of the information in the report.
17. Mark the microlinguistic (e.g. lexical, punctuation) problems in the report.
18. Write a summary of each advisory session with the agreements reached.
19. Give concrete, precise and clear written/typed feedback to the drafts of the report.
20. Discuss the written feedback with the student(s).
21. Help students prepare their presentations at local and national conferences.
22. Provide and receive support during the critical moments of the research process.
23. Clarify breakdowns in communication and relationship with co-researcher(s) and advisor.
24. Check for student's understanding of advisor's feedback.

Check Student's behavior

1. Discuss the *Especialización* manual with the advisor.
2. Discuss and clarify criteria for evaluating the monograph/report with the advisor.
3. Discuss the ethics of action research with the advisor.
4. Discuss formal aspects to be taken into account when writing the report with the advisor.

5. Look for bibliography relevant to the topic.
6. Use vacation time to review the literature.
7. Write a reference card for every text you read.
8. Read action research reports.
9. Ask for clarification of concepts which are not clear in readings.
10. Define time and days of the week dedicated to the AR project.
11. Ask for an appointment with the advisor when you need to discuss things with him/her.
12. Take notes of the advisory sessions.
13. Devise a plan of action and revise it every week/fortnight.
14. Keep an organized record of raw data.
15. Analyze data as you collect them.
16. Propose and analyze possible lines of action in the research procedure and support your choices.
17. Inform the advisor and the participants of any decisions made while carrying out the research.
18. Write a monthly interim report on the research progress.
19. Write an outline of the report.
20. Rewrite draft of the report taking into account the advisor's questions or suggestions.
21. Reorganize information taking into account the advisor's comments.
22. Inquire how microlinguistic problems could be solved and correct them.
23. Read and sign each summary of advisory session.
24. Discuss feedback given by the advisor with your (co-researcher and) advisor.
25. Take appropriate action on the feedback given by the advisor.
26. Inform the advisor of breakdowns in the relationship with co-researcher(s).
27. Provide and receive support during the critical moments of the research process.



Cristina Frodden

28. Clarify breakdowns in communication and relationship with co-researcher(s) and advisor.
29. Make a back-up copy of videos, cassettes, and diskettes with relevant information.
30. Share your experience at local conferences.
31. Share your experience at national conferences.

NOTAS SOBRE LA AUTORA

Cristina Frodden is a full-time instructor of the School of Languages of the University of Antioquia.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to all the participants in this research for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article, to Corinne Willis for her proof-reading, and to Graham Crookes for his support. I also want to thank the participants in the Third Round Table on Applied Linguistics Issues, Bogotá, November 3-4, 1998 for additional ideas included in the checklist presented in the Appendix.



FLOR Y ROSTRO III.
Serie "Flor y rostro"
(1995. Óleo y pastel. 50 x 35 cm.).
Marta Elena Arango P.

