

**WAYS OF IMPROVING STUDENTS' ENGLISH WRITING  
PROFICIENCY**

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## Ways of improving students' English writing proficiency

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### Introduction

The word 'research' refers to the systematic activity of collecting required information and finding out something new in the researched field. In the present time, research has occupied very significant place in each sphere of human life. Some of the important purposes of research activity entail like: search for knowledge, scientific investigation or inquiry of knowledge, to study something thoroughly, collection and analysis of information, establish novel facts, discovering new knowledge, solve existing problems, prove new ideas, test or discover new theory. Therefore, it is needless to say that research in education realm deserves great value. There are different types of researches that can be carried out in the education field. Some of them include: survey research, historical research, case study, experimental research, correlation research, action research, etc.

Action research is one of the terms that we hear quite often in today's educational circle. Action research is a teacher, trainer, curriculum developer and researcher learning strategy. It continuously assists these people to update their professional knowledge. From this and following discussion we will understand that it is a major avenue for professional development. Action research like other type of research seeks to find out something new in the researched area. There is no dearth of the definitions of the term 'action research', each one giving it a different emphasis and focus. The central focus of each definition will be immediate classroom problem and its solution for the future improvement or betterment. When we see available definitions of action research we find some common features. Gebhard J. G. (in Kral, T. 1994) says "action research refers to self-reflective inquiry that seeks to clarify and resolve practical issues and problems. Similarly, Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 171) advocate that "action research refers to a systematic approach to carrying out investigations and collecting information that is designed to illuminate an issue or problem and to expand and improve classroom practice." Similar view is presented by Halsey (1972 as cited in Cohen and Manion 1994, p. 186) "action research is a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention." It takes place in the teacher's, trainer's and curriculum developer's own place or it is conducted in naturally occurring settings, primarily using methods common to qualitative research such as observing and recording events and behaviors. It involves in a cycle of activities centering on identifying a problem or issue, collecting information about the issue, devising a strategy to address the issue, trying out the strategy and observing its effects. Moreover, when we see the characteristics of action research we broaden our understanding regarding it. According to the Richards and Farrell (ibid, p.171) action research encompasses the following common types of characteristics:

- ✓ Action research is contextual, small-scale and localized- it identifies and investigates problems within a specific situation.
- ✓ It is evaluative and reflective as it aims to bring about change and improvement in practice.
- ✓ It can be carried out by an individual teacher or in collaboration with other teachers in particular and by the trainers and curriculum developers as well in general. Therefore, it

is participatory as it provides for collaborative investigation by teams of colleagues, practitioners and researchers.

- ✓ Changes in practice are based on the collection of information or data which provides the impetus for change.
- ✓ Its primary goal is to improve teaching and learning in schools and classrooms and it is conducted during the process of regular classroom teaching or training.

From the above mentioned definitions and characteristics of action research what we came to know that is action research is "teacher initiated small-scale, self-reflective localized inquiry or research about immediate classroom problem." However, in reality many, not all, teachers do not carry out action research as it should be carried out. There are myriad reasons behind it. Teachers often have a very high workload and they often complain of not having sufficient time to prepare for their classes. Preparing report of action research is extra load. On the other hand, the incentive system to the researcher is weak. Similarly, the expertise or on-site professional support is not available to the teachers.

## 2. Purposes and benefits of action research

Action research can be a worthwhile pursuit for teachers and teacher educators/ trainers for a number of reasons. First and Foremost among these is simply the desire to know more. Good teachers and trainers are, after all, themselves students or learners, and often look for ways to expand upon their existing knowledge. By and large, the purposes or benefits of action research as a teacher and trainer learning or professional development can be encapsulated in the following points:

**Focus on issue, problem, or area of collective interest:** As we have said somewhere else that action research can be carried out by an individual teacher or trainer or in collaboration with others. If it is the issue or problem related with school, textbook, students, training and curriculum we can carry out action research to improve and make them fit into the local real world of the target groups. It is also noteworthy to know that a trainer is not just blindly following what the latest study seems to suggest, but is transforming the knowledge into something meaningfully and struggling for knowledge creating as well. This can be achieved through action research.

**Form of professional development:** Research and reflection allow trainers to grow and gain confidence in their work. Action research projects influence thinking skills, sense of efficacy, willingness to share and communicate, and attitudes toward the process of change. Through action research, trainers learn about themselves, their participants, their colleagues, and can determine ways to continually improve. It is also one major source of developing training professionalism.

**Potential to impact change:** Through the findings of action research we redefine the role of the trainer by giving the trainers the means to set their own agenda for improvement and by shifting the responsibility for change or improvement from an outside agency. By changing the role of trainers we can profoundly change the training and learning process in our educational training centers. Ultimate impact we can see in school change through students' learning outcomes.

**Reflect on own practice:** Opportunities for trainers to evaluate themselves in training centers are often few, and usually happen only in an informal manner. Action research can serve as a chance to really take a look at one's own training in a structured manner. While the focus of action research is usually the students, educators/ trainers can also investigate what effect their training has on the part of their participants.

### 3. Processes of action research

Action research is essentially spiral process. It continuously goes on to quest something new. But, one important thing to be considered is that there is high dispute regarding the steps or processes of action research among scholars. There is not hard and fast model of action research. It defers from one department to another department where it is in practiced. To be concerned in the teaching field and with the teachers, in the current unsupportive teaching climate, we cannot impose the professional expert model of action research (Dornyei, 2007) to the teachers. It should be seen as a flexible and teacher-friendly version (Dornyei, 2007, Burns, 2010). Many scholars have given different processes of action research. Richards and Farrell (2010) have given the eleven steps of action research. They include:

- ✓ Exploring
- ✓ Identifying
- ✓ Planning
- ✓ Collecting data
- ✓ Analyzing/ Reflecting
- ✓ Hypothesizing/Speculating
- ✓ Intervening
- ✓ Observing
- ✓ Reporting
- ✓ Writing
- ✓ Presenting

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), action research occurs through a dynamic and complementary process, which consists of four essential moments. They are:

- ✓ Planning
- ✓ Action
- ✓ Observation, and
- ✓ Reflection

They further claim that these four moments in action research are the fundamental steps and are always in spiraling processes through which researcher goes on exploring the reality of change in his or her practice.

Teacher Service Commission (TSC) in Nepal has made a kind of format of action research. This looks like this:

- ✓ Research topic
- ✓ Background of the study
- ✓ Review of the reference materials
- ✓ Objective of the study
- ✓ Methodology or process of the study
- ✓ Information collection and analysis
- ✓ Self-reflection and report writing
- ✓ Future direction for improvement
- ✓ References

Similarly, Mayo, D. (in Richards and Farrell 2010) has provided the five steps of action research.

They are:

- ✓ Setting
- ✓ Focus
- ✓ Investigation
- ✓ Response, and
- ✓ Reflection

From the above mentioned steps of action research I have followed the flexible and teacher-friendly version of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). This means four steps: planning, action, observation and reflection.

#### **4. Statement of the problem**

Teaching English in Nepal seems to be similar to other subjects. In our existing English language teaching class it is the teacher who practices his or her own English and most of the time in the classroom is spent on teacher's talk. The students get no or very little time to listen/speak/read/write in English. This is the reason why public schools students often find themselves in difficult position while using English. Moreover, teaching English language to the Nepalese learners seems apparently easy in the teacher centered classrooms particularly when the teacher teaches only as a classroom activity and does not keep in mind that learners will have to listen/speak/read/write on their own not only during the examination but also in the outside the school setting. The teacher explains everything and even dictates the answers to 'test potential' questions and learners note down everything the teacher gives. Interestingly enough, learners seem to enjoy being 'spoon-fed' imposed upon them by the teacher himself. As a result, learners rarely try speaking/reading/writing in the classroom. Consequently, the effect of this kind of practice appears in the examination.

Here, the important concern with us is why the public schools students feel very difficult in dealing with English? Therefore, my research foci are why public schools students have very poor English proficiency? Why they always face problem in English? Can't we improve their English proficiency if we change our teaching strategies? In order to pursue the answers of these questions I conducted an action research to find out the better ways of improving students' English writing proficiency.

## **5. Alternative and priority of the strategies**

In order to find out which strategy/ies work/s best in improving the students' proficiency I first reflected on the current teaching styles. Then, I asked myself the following strategies could work well to improve students' English writing proficiency. They are:

- ✓ Making them aware of the well-formed structures, i.e. subject-verb agreement of English sentences
- ✓ Making them aware about how to initiate the answers of the reading text-related questions?
- ✓ Answers initiating from the reading text-related questions and providing immediate feedback by correcting students' copies.
- ✓ Answers initiating from the reading text-related questions and providing immediate feedback by correcting students' copies. The frequency of this kind of focused practice is increased.

These alternative strategies will be applied one after another. At the same time the effects of the implementation will be checked.

## **6. Objectives of the study**

The objectives of this action research were:

- ✓ to find out the weaknesses of students' learning strategies regarding English;
- ✓ to find out the weaknesses of current English language teaching ways;
- ✓ to find out the better teaching ways that develop students' English writing proficiency.

## **7. Methodology**

In order to obtain the required information and experiment the above mentioned strategies I followed the following steps.

### **7.1 Planning**

I am a teacher educator or trainer. I educate or train the English teachers for the sake of improving students' English proficiency. There will be different types of teacher training programs for this purpose. We do hard labor to educate/train/update to the teachers through training. But in ground reality, students are struggling tough time in learning English language. They have very measurable condition.

For example:

- ✓ Students cannot speak a couple of sentences which are grammatically well-formed.
- ✓ They cannot share their ideas.
- ✓ They cannot read the text and answer the text-based activities.
- ✓ In the same way, their writing is very poor.
- ✓ Finally, they will be upgraded without required standards.

In this kind of scenario, I selected one public secondary school. I made one month's teaching strategic plan in order to see my teaching's impact. Then, I selected grade 10th students who were SLC holders. Then, I planned to intervene the first strategy that I have mentioned in my alternative of strategies. My plan was like this:

**Table No.1**  
**Making students aware of the well-formed structures, i.e. subject- verb agreement**

S. N.	What to do?	Why to do?	How to do- Process?	When to do?
1	Making them aware of the well-formed structures, i.e. subject-verb agreement of English sentences	To improve their reading, speaking capacity, but most importantly writing skill.	By providing ample examples and if necessary giving them clear oral instruction regarding the subject verb agreement structures.	From 2070-11-02 to 06 – one week

**Interventions/actions:** According to my plan I strived to use new strategy. For example, at the beginning I wrote some sentences on the board and asked them to check whether those sentences were grammatically correct or not. Then, again I asked them that if the sentences were correct why if not why? Here, I just wanted to know how much confidence and competence students have about the English sentence patterns. After getting their ideas I orally informed them that singular subject takes singular verb whereas plural subject takes plural verbs. For example,

- ✓ Ram eats rice.
- ✓ They eat rice.
- ✓ He is a boy.
- ✓ You are students, etc.

Then, I gave some questions based on the poem 'Patriotism'. I checked their answers. However, only few students were right. Most of the students were facing problem. I frequently made them aware about the patterns of questions and answers.

**Observation:** From this kind of teaching what I found is that all the students were curious listen my voice. They also tried to write the answers of the questions as I instructed them. However, they could not write grammatically correct answers. They wrote answers like this:

- ✓ **Question: No.1** How does an unpatriotic person die?
- ✓ **Students' answer:** person die unpatriotic doubly dying
- ✓ **Possible correct answer:** An unpatriotic person dies two times.
- ✓ **Question No.2** What do you mean by doubly dying?
- ✓ **Students' answer:** Doubly dying to times dying.
- ✓ **Possible correct answer:** Doubly dying means two times dying.
- ✓ **Question No.3** Who does the poet want to mark well?



If students get this concept of answering the question, they develop confidence in writing answers of the questions. In the above answer, there are two words students have to write from their mind or memory which will be acceptable answer.

**Observation:** After teaching students using the second strategy, I found students paid their due attention. They found it interesting. They were curious to learn the way of answering. Many students, i.e. out of 22 students, almost eighteen students did well. They developed their consciousness about the sentence pattern and the way of answering.

**Reflection:** From the above mentioned action what I realized is students gradually developed their writing proficiency. They almost came to the tract. However, I thought that I have to further go ahead to bring them complete change. It is, therefore, I have planned to go in third cycle of action research.

**Re-planning:** When I tested first and second strategies in order to develop students' writing proficiency I found many things improved. By the way, they have not developed their full competence and confidence in writing answers of the text-related questions. It is, therefore, I have planned to use the third strategy to improve the students' writing. Third plan looks like this:

**Table No. 3**

**Answers initiating from the text-related questions and providing immediate feedback by correcting students' copies**

S. N.	What to do?	Why to do?	How to do?	When to do?
2	Answers initiating from the text-related questions and providing immediate feedback by correcting students' copies.	In order to make their writing grammatically, as well as situationally appropriate answers.	Through modeling, explaining, copy checking and providing immediate feedback	From 2070-11-14 to 21- one week

**Intervention/Action:** According to the third cycle plan I started to use third strategy. I assigned the students poem and advertisement based questions. They wrote their answers. I checked their copies immediately. Some of the students still had some problems in answering the questions. I provided them immediate feedback. In doing so, students did their answers in competitive way.

**Observation:** After the implementation of the third strategy I observed many things. For example, students were doing their writing in competitive way. They asked me to assign many questions from the poem. They asked me when they were in problem. They did a lot of improvement. I found their active participation in solving the problem based on the reading text.

**Reflection:** When I reflected what I found is that almost all students could solve the text based questions. They have developed their competency in answering questions. I became satisfied with my third strategy along with the first and second. I thought that I need not to go in fourth step to improve my selected students' writing proficiency. Then, I brought my students in classroom practice by considering the applied strategies.

## **Findings**

From the above mentioned actions with strategic plan what I found is that in public schools English is problematic subject. However, if we teachers become aware even in very simple matters like "how can students make their sentences grammatically correct?" "How should an English teacher help students to initiate answers of the reading based questions?" How should an English teacher provide feedback to the students to improve their writing proficiency?" It automatically enhances students' writing proficiency. It, of course, minimizes the today's measurable condition which our students are facing. Most interesting, what I found in my research is that out of 22 students, all students passed English subject in SLC examination. This reveals to the fact that if English teachers pay their due attention toward the students' problems and learning, it is possible all students will get success in learning English language. It is, therefore, what teachers should remember is that "teach the students not the textbook." Think about the students problems and design the activities to support their learning.

## **Conclusion**

Action research is one of the major avenues for teacher professional knowledge updating. How does an action research facilitate in the process of updating teacher professional knowledge? How one trainer's or teacher's personal investigation of his or her own practice in his or her training context or teaching context can broaden his or her thinking power to consider the larger issues in the facilitation of trainer's professional development or teacher's professional development? In this regard, first of all, what we need to understand is that professional growth or development means enabling teachers and trainers to investigate and generate their own ideas about their practice. It is a major avenue of investigating and exploring new ideas which add new styles/dimension in teaching and training. It leads to trainers and teachers to delve into the deep of classroom reality in achieving local understanding and developing feasible solution to the problems. The following points will wrap up about the usefulness of action research.

- ✓ Action research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research.
- ✓ Action research offers a means for teachers to become agents rather than recipients of knowledge. This means action research assumes teachers not only to be theory consumers but also theory producers.

- ✓ Action research supports the maxim that "people are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they themselves have discovered than by those which have come into the minds of others."
- ✓ Action research is not simply about understanding something better. It is also about doing things differently. Therefore, it supports the maxim that "winners do not do different things, but do the things differently."

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