Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Collaborative action research: Teacher and curriculum development

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Although action research for teacher development has gained prominence in the current literature, there has been little documentation as to how action research influences teacher and curriculum development. This study aims at showing how EFL teachers in Japan engaged in collaborative action research organized by university teachers and how, as a result, they changed their teaching practices in their school contexts.

　教師教育のためのアクション・リサーチが注目されているが、アクション・リサーチが教師の指導力の向上およびカリキュラム改革にどのような影響があるのかはほとんど研究されていない。このフォーラムでは、大学の教員のサポートを得て、3名の高校・中学校の英語教員がどのように協力的なグループ・アクション・リサーチに取り組み、自分たちの指導力を向上させたのかを報告した。
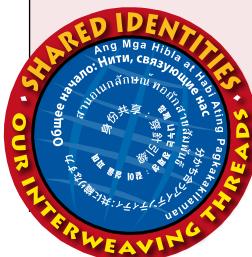
Mills (2003) defines action research (AR) as "…any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers to gather information about the ways that their particular school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn. The information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment and on educational practices in general, and improving student outcomes" (p. 4). The recursive cycle of AR consists of identifying a teaching problem or issue, finding a possible solution (a new learning activity or new type of assessment), planning (how to adapt it to a teacher's own class), trying it out, reflecting on the results, revising, and trying again. The power of action research lies in its recursive nature. Repeating the cycle lets a teacher build on previously gained insights and improvements, rather than lurching from one new idea to another. Burns (1999) identifies two advantages of collaborative, as opposed to individual, action research. "Collaborative action research processes strengthen the opportunities for the results of research on practice to be fed back into educational systems in a more substantial and critical way. They have the advantage of encouraging teachers to share common problems and to work cooperatively as a research community to examine their existing assumptions, values and beliefs" (p. 13).

Burns (1999) also observes that little is known about the extent to which Action Research changes teachers' beliefs and practices or how it affects students' learning. Valuable answers to these questions have been found during the eight-year development of a collaborative AR program at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS) for in-service teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). A symposium was organized by university advisors and three participants in the AR program to share their experiences with others. As in the symposium, this paper first presents an overview of the AR program, followed by first-person narratives of the three teacher-participants, two high school teachers, Hiromi Tsuji and Seiji Shintani, and one junior high school teacher, Aki Hakamada, describing their experiences of collaborative AR in 2007. In conclusion, interview data of all program participants, collected by Kazuyoshi Sato, is reported.

Evolution and annual cycle of the AR program
Creation of a teacher learning community

In 2000 a local study group, Communicative Language Teaching Kenkyukai (CLT Research Group) was formed by Sato at NUFS (Sato, 2003). The first annual NUFS Summer Workshop was held in August 2001. In September 2005 the university founded the Center for EFL Teacher Development and started a monthly Workshop. An MA in TESOL program was begun in 2006, and in 2007, 15 teachers (1 elementary, 7 junior high school, and 7 high school teachers, including native English speakers) completed year-long AR projects. Of these, 10 were MA students or were registered and taking MA courses as non-degree students, while 5 others were in-service teachers who were interested in AR. Currently 10 teachers are enrolled in the MA TESOL program, with ten non-degree students also taking courses. The distinguishing feature of the MA program is that ongoing AR is a required multi-year course, culminating in an MA Action Research Project, equivalent to a thesis. In addition to being required of MA TESOL students, participation in the annual year-long

AR project is also open to non-degree students and other interested in-service teachers who attend the monthly NUFS Workshop.

Annual action research cycle

In May, one month into the Japanese academic year, teachers attend an overnight study trip to receive an orientation to what AR is and how it is done and to the year-long AR cycle. On this intensive study trip, new and experienced AR participants discuss teaching issues and possible AR topics. Soon after the study trip, teachers choosing to do a year-long AR project submit an Action Research Plan and a draft lesson plan to program advisors, who give feedback. Teachers revise their lesson plans before using them in their first action research class of the year.

Monthly AR reports

From June to February, AR participants attend the monthly Workshop at which they learn about a variety of teaching ideas, such as integrated-skill language learning activities, communicative grammar teaching, extensive reading, conversation strategies, and methods of assessing writing and speaking skills. An AR report session follows each Workshop. Action researchers report on their own AR activities, showing their class handouts. The AR advisors and fellow in-service teachers comment and discuss.

Mid-term and year-end presentations with student data

Before the end of July, AR participants give surveys in their classes to understand their students' assessment of their own learning and their feelings about the new way of learning. Results of this survey are included in the mid-term AR report, presented at an August overnight study trip. Participants submit their mid-term reports and the new lesson plans for advisor feedback.

The AR participants administer the same survey to their students near the end of the academic year. At a March overnight study trip, they present their final AR reports, handouts and comparison of mid-year and year-end survey results. These are collected and published in book form.

Aki Hakamada's story: Never give up. Try again!
Collaborative action research and I

I joined Dr. Sato's Action Research group in the spring of 2006. It was helpful to hear AR reports of other workshop members, although most of them were high school teachers. Even so, I, a junior high school teacher, could still get some useful advice. In 2007 more junior high school teachers joined the AR group. Coincidentally many of them taught the same grade and same textbook as I did. Although I found preparing monthly reports difficult, I looked forward to attending each meeting because I got many ideas for my own lessons. Through the years, I got much advice and encouragement from the members. I want to thank them. Without them, I could not have continued my action research and improving my teaching.

My action research

A big first step: Communicative activities in the "Challenge Sheet"

In 2006, my school had serious discipline problems. Because controlling my students was so difficult, I usually gave them a handout, which I called a "Challenge Sheet," containing 7 activities for individual in-class study. These included activities such as copying the English text, reading the English text aloud, and practicing the new words by writing each one five times.

When I reported on my Challenge Sheet to other AR members, Dr. Sato said those activities were boring, mechanical drills and memorization. He advised me to make the activities more communicative. At that time, I couldn't imagine my students doing communicative activities, even though at the Workshop I heard how important it was. A Workshop member who was teaching communicatively reported that her students got higher test scores than students in other classes. The other AR members often reported the success of a communicative activity in which students first write their own information and ideas and then talk about them. That sounded too difficult for my students, but I resolved to have them try.

I encountered two issues when planning the write-and-talk activity. Students felt that writing their own original sentences was too difficult. An AR member suggested that scaffolding was necessary, that I needed to give students models and useful expressions, so I did. With those, more students were able to write more. Next I wondered who my students would speak to. I remembered that several AR members had put their students into small groups, so that

they would feel more relaxed as they spoke. I decided to try that. At first, a couple of students refused to say anything. When they saw members of other groups talking, however, they changed their minds and spoke! Working in small groups led to success.

Soon after this, I introduced a real conversation activity in which each student had a turn talking with my Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) for the first time. Students wrote "I enjoyed the activity a lot. It was like a normal conversation" and "I was very nervous because I couldn't speak English well, but I am glad that I could speak better than I expected. I think I am closer to the ALT now." After about a year of AR, I was finally able to try out communicative activities in my own classes because the good ideas from other teachers had given me enough confidence to take the risk.

More communicative teaching in my new school

In 2007 I transferred to a different junior high school, where I could use more of the communicative activities that I had learned about in my AR group. I discovered, however, that new activities seldom went smoothly the first time. Advice from advisors and fellow AR teachers helped me improve them. A communicative grammar activity was improved by such suggestions. To teach the grammar point "How many …" I had students ask each other "How many CDs [and other things] do you have?" In the first class, I let students have a conversation with a partner of their choice. I observed that some were not having a conversation at all; they were simply copying each others' prepared answers. I recalled the Workshop technique of changing partners several times by rotating according to rows. After some initial confusion, my

students came to understand the rotation pattern, and started having real conversations. The variety of random partners seemed to have created a positive social pressure to do the activity the right way.

However, the "ask-a-partner" activity still had problems. I was waiting for all the students to finish their conversations before changing pairs, but I saw that some pairs finished more quickly and became bored. I remembered Dr. Sato's comment that it is more important to keep everyone talking than to wait for everyone to finish. In the third class, I set a time limit of one and a half minutes. Suddenly, students seemed to talk more quickly and with more concentration. Thanks to suggestions from others, my imperfect activity was reborn as a better one! I was proud of my students.

Another good idea from the AR group was noticing the "right teaching moment." During talking activities, I saw that some students used Japanese for expressions such as "What did you say?" or "Please say that again." So after the pair conversations, I told students the English equivalents and encouraged them to use those phrases. I had heard at the Workshop that when students want to know how to say something in English is the very time to teach it. In every class most of my students did the interview activity eagerly and enjoyed the experience of speaking English. Students wrote comments such as "Interviewing is enjoyable." and "It is interesting that everyone has different answers."

With small changes in the way I conducted the activities, the students became much better at doing them and more successful at speaking English. These experiences showed me that good procedures are necessary for activities to be successful. Good procedures are needed to make pairs, to keep the pace lively, to start an activity, to finish it, and to connect it to the next activity. For students to report to one partner what they learned from a different partner is an excellent follow-up, for example, to an interview activity, another good procedure that I learned from the Workshop.

Student comments

Below are my students' translated comments, grouped by type, about their English learning experience. They were collected at the end of the 2007 academic year.

A positive experience

> I enjoyed the activity a lot. It was like a normal conversation.
> I am glad that I could ask his birthday.
> It was interesting.
> I enjoyed using English.
> I listened carefully to understand.
> It is effective learning through conversation.
> It was good to talk.
> It was fun to ask.
> It is interesting to ask everyone.
> Interviewing is enjoyable.
> It is interesting that everyone has different answers.
> I was surprised that she has many comic books.

Difficulties encountered

> Real English was quick.
> It was hard.
> Conversation in English is difficult. It was too quick.

A desire to improve

> I think it will be more fun if I could speak more.
> I wish I could speak better English.

Conclusion

I received much good advice and encouragement from fellow teachers doing AR. Without their collaboration, I do not think I could have continued. In the process, I learned important lessons. One is never to give up. Always try again. There are often problems when trying new things, but it is important to continue trying. By adopting new ideas, making lesson plans carefully, and arranging activities in detail, classes can become more successful. After a while students get used to new ways. From students' comments, I learned that they are happy to discover the fun of using English. A second lesson was that learning communicatively is effective. I was convinced by the evidence of AR members who showed that their students who learn communicatively score higher on tests than other students. My own students' success with communicative activities proved to me the power of this approach. Lastly, I learned how necessary scaffolding is. With models and suggestions, students understand and express themselves in English better. This gives them the confidence and desire to engage in the communicative activities that improve their learning of English.

Hiromi Tsuji's story: Voices of peers and students
I wanted to change my teaching

I used to teach English in a very old-fashioned, grammar translation way. Students would just sit at their desks quietly and listen to me. I knew that it was out of date and I wanted to change, so I attended many workshops and observed other teachers' English classes. However, as these were all one-off occasions, I could not grasp the outline of their teaching approach or curriculum. I was still at a loss about what to teach and how, so when I heard about the Action Research program, I jumped at it. That was three and a half years ago.

I am changing it!

In the Action Research program I found that the role of teachers was not to teach but to give learners as many opportunities to learn as possible. This idea changed my teaching greatly. Gradually I saw the importance of creating a well-designed curriculum and teaching plan. I also realized that, as English is a language, it is very important to cultivate students' communicative competence. As a result, I decided to give much time to pair work in English.

An obstacle to implementing my action research program was the students. They had been so accustomed to the grammar translation method that they did not want to talk with classmates in English. Many were reluctant to do pair work, especially with classmates who were not close friends. In addition, a number just wanted to have the Japanese translation of the textbook.

The first thing I introduced was the use of handouts in class. They let me provide students with communicative activities that the textbook lacked. Now I alternate activities from the textbook and handouts, making all activities pair work. These include semantic mapping as a pre-lesson

activity, timed silent reading, read and shadow, comparing answers to reading comprehension questions, word quizzing orally in pairs, etc. In all, students read each text five times and see a great improvement in their reading speed.

After students understand a text well, I give them a thought-provoking opinion question on the same topic. They write their answers and why they think so, in ten sentences or more. When they finish, they do peer editing. They read three or four other classmates' essays, putting a small circle by their favorite sentence and writing a short comment. As soon as they finish peer editing, they rewrite their essays and practice reading them in order to memorize them. Finally, they have an interview with two or three classmates and summarize the classmates' opinions on an interview sheet. My students no longer translate the textbook. I give them the Japanese translation at the end of the lesson.

I have attended the NUFS Workshop once a month for three and a half years. I always learn new ideas, which I can use in my classes from the next day. Also, the teachers who attend the Workshops make AR reports every month about what and how they taught. We all try various activities and lesson plans that we heard about in the previous Workshop. Sometimes they work well and sometimes they do not. When they don't work, we discuss possible reasons and try to find a solution or give useful advice. Other teachers' advice is always helpful for me. We share our ideas and try to improve our teaching. Without the help of my fellow teachers, I may have given up on AR.

What I learned about teaching from my students

I gave my students a survey in July 2007 and again in February 2008 concerning their feelings about English and English class during the 2007-2008 school year. About half of the students said their most important purpose for learning English was to communicate with others. I had thought they simply wanted to earn enough credits to graduate.

Happily, students reported that their ability in English was changing for the better in all areas, but especially in writing. The number of students choosing "I cannot write at all" decreased from 43% to 7%, while those feeling that they could "write, with some errors" increased from 6% to 35%. Students who felt that they had "no confidence and could not speak" decreased from 24% to 3%, while those who reported being able to compose, memorize, and verbally give a short report increased from 4% to 31%. In reading, there was an increase from 4% to 21% of those who felt they could understand most of what they read in English. Ability to understand spoken English was also seen as much improved. Those choosing "I cannot understand at all" decreased from 29% to 6%. "I can understand half of what I hear" and "I understand most of what I hear" increased from 16% to 34% and 7% to 18%, respectively. Finally, the number of those who felt they couldn't understand English grammar at all fell from 27% to 9%, while those who replied that they could understand about half or could mostly understand grammar more than doubled. I was pleased to learn that the number of students who hated English decreased by two thirds over the course of the school year, from 16% to 5%. It seemed that students' success in learning English affected their attitude toward the language itself.

Unfortunately, dissatisfaction with my way of teaching also increased. The percentage of those who said they did not enjoy my class increased 16%. I believe this may be because the activities and sequence of them in my handouts were always the same. Although the activities were successful in terms of helping students improve their English, they felt the class was not as enjoyable as they would have liked. I learned that I need to vary the activities to prevent boredom. In addition, in response to "Do you understand English classes?" those answering "no" and "not so much" increased from 33% in July to 41% in February. I was troubled by this increase as well as by the relatively high numbers. One cause for this may be that, in a number of the tasks, students were to find answers by working together in pairs. For students who are used to having teachers give them answers, this may have left some of them feeling unsure.

There was consistency between students' written comments and their replies to the multiple choice survey questions. To the question about whether they felt their English ability had improved since April, 105 students replied affirmatively in July and 73 in February. There were no negative comments to this question in either survey. The most frequent comments in July were: I can freely express my own opinions and impressions in English (16 students). I can write English sentences (14). I could not read English sentences in April, but now I can read English, thinking about pronunciation and read fast (12). I can understand what teachers and ALTs say (8). Now I use my dictionary more often than before (7). I watch foreign movies with Japanese subtitles, not Japanese voice-overs (7).

In answer to the question about how the classes could be improved, there were 19 comments in July and 8 in February. I found two types of comments. One showed dissatisfaction with two aspects of my new way of teaching, pace and variety. In July, 8 students commented that they needed more time to complete certain tasks. In fact, I had decided to keep the pace fast, in order not to force the majority to wait for the slowest students to finish, so I set time limits for many tasks. By year-end, however, no one had that complaint. Students had become able to complete the tasks within the allotted time. In addition, in July, 4 students commented on the need for more variety to make classes more interesting, while 3 did so in February.

The other type of comments requested a return to the more familiar grammar translation approach. Requests for more grammar explanations were made by 3 students in July and 1 in February. There was 1 request in each survey for more speaking in Japanese by the teacher and more correction of writing mistakes. More vocabulary practice was requested by 2 students and translating of textbook sentences into Japanese by 1. One student summed up this feeling at year-end by lamenting, "I want to learn in *normal* English classes." (italics added). The results of the two surveys reveal that by year-end, most students had come to understand the new approach and felt that their English had definitely improved.

Conclusion

Through my attempts over the course of three and a half years, I have learned that there are a lot of things to improve. Firstly, I know that the final goal of English classes is for

students to become able to express their thoughts and to communicate with others in English. I would like to have an integrated English class to develop all four skills. Secondly, according to the survey last year, it is boring to do the same activities over and over again. Variety is necessary. Students wanted to do different kinds of activities, such as singing songs, watching DVDs or playing games. I would like to try some of these. Thirdly, careful planning is essential. I tried some extra activities related to yearly events or topics that seemed to attract students' interest. However, as I decided to do them suddenly without a proper plan, they sometimes did not work well. Finally, self-evaluation or reflection by students is valuable. It gives them an opportunity to review their own participation in English classes and encourages them to do better. As English classes should be student-centered, it is important to let students know that they should be responsible for their learning. Students' self-evaluations also help me understand them and improve my teaching plan and activities appropriately. For this reason, I would like to keep giving self-evaluations to students.

Again, I want to emphasize that I learned a lot from other teachers. Trying to improve my teaching alone would have been impossible. Sharing ideas, discussing problems together, giving advice to each other and trying to improve our teaching together have been the most important.

Seiji Shintani's story: On the "light truck" or the "right track"?

About 5 years ago, I didn't like my teaching style, so I attended a 3-day Summer Workshop for English teachers at NUFS. I was surprised to find that Japanese teachers of English were discussing English education in English! There should be nothing surprising about English teachers speaking English, but in my experience, few teachers were using English in any real sense at school. In class they spoke in Japanese to explain grammar and meaning. Naturally students could not develop practical English skills that way.

Then I started attending the monthly NUFS Workshop, where I learned a variety of ways of teaching. I adopted some ideas in my class. It was exciting to try new ideas! It was risk taking! I often wondered if I was doing the right thing. I wanted to make sure that I was on the *light truck*. Workshop members encouraged me even if I was making mistakes. Dr. Sato always encouraged us by saying, "Yes, you are on the *right track*!" Without professional advice and encouragement, it would have been difficult to continue to take risks at school. I joined the Action Research program, where I have had opportunities to share ideas, and get advice, encouragement, and energy from other AR participants. What I learned from AR is the importance of risk taking, encouragement, and collaboration.

In 2006 and 2007, I thought the fundamental problem with English classes was that students had too little opportunity to use English. At Dr. Sato's suggestion, I adopted three major changes. One was an integrated teaching approach, balancing all four skills. Second was a change from the authorized textbook to others that were more interesting and better organized, plus the addition of worksheets that we made ourselves. The result was satisfying to both students and me. They had lots of opportunities to use English, both individually and in pairs or groups, and most of them enjoyed integrated activities as they found themselves actually using

English! The third suggestion was to provide students with more scaffolding. I was lucky because I was able to follow the successful procedures of a more experienced action researcher, whose writing curriculum we largely adopted.

SELHi

Usually it is not easy to get colleagues' participation in starting a new curriculum, but I was lucky to be in a school designated as a SELHi (Super English Language High School) by MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). My co-workers were innovative and cooperative, so we did not hesitate to try new ways such as timed conversations, peer editing, and speaking tests. For all the teachers, every idea was new, but we had a collaborative atmosphere, which was our greatest advantage.

For curriculum development, I realized that we needed to create a good cooperative relationship among teachers. Before every lesson we discussed what activity was most suitable for students and how we could offer them more opportunities to use English in class. We shared ideas about how and what to teach. I believe firmly that teacher collaboration is a must. It is also necessary that we listen to other teachers' opinions in order to reflect on our lessons and improve them. For this purpose, the Workshop and AR have been indispensable for every participant.

Writing curriculum

We made an integrated-skills, communicative writing curriculum with writing classes of about 20 students. The result of the "Survey of Students' Change in English Skills and Attitude through Writing Class" showed how effective this class was for students to acquire the skills necessary for improving their English and attitudes about learning. For this achievement, I owe a lot to the Workshop and AR program.

Each unit of the writing curriculum was made up of several different communicative activities including the following:

1. Listening (including pre-listening activity)

2. Silent reading (scanning) and vocabulary check

3. Retelling of the story according to the pictures

4. Recounting personal experiences

5. Q & A to prepare for the conversation and essay

6. Introduction of conversation strategies

7. Timed conversations in pairs by rotation

8. Process writing (first draft, second draft, and "fun essay," that is an essay illustrated with photos or drawings) Essay topics were about students' own lives. Examples are About Me, My Favorite Place, Letters to US High School Students, and School Trip to Okinawa. By the end, students wrote essays of 300 words or more.

9. Peer editing (in pairs and editing several times) Peer editing was one of the most popular activities, though some students worried about structure and grammar. We provided them with a handout of common grammatical and structural errors, an idea from the action research program.

10. Tape-recording, transcribing, and self-evaluation of conversations

11. Fun essay (posted on the board)

12. Speaking test in pairs (video-taped for later use) We conducted speaking tests, of increasing length, five times per year. As students acquired the different conversation strategies, most of them were able to expand the length of their conversation. Though students were uneasy doing timed conversations at the beginning, they soon found pleasure in talking with different people and gradually understood the effectiveness of this practice. Then everyone started participating in it earnestly.

13. Peer feedback by watching the video of the speaking test

14. Portfolio including a questionnaire at the end of each semester

2007 year-end interviews of action research participants

This paper concludes with an overview of program participants' reflections on their year of action research. To ascertain the effects of AR on participants' teaching practices, year-end telephone interviews were conducted. Fifteen teachers (1 elementary, 7 junior high school, and 7 senior high school teachers), including two native English speaking teachers, were interviewed after their final AR presentations in late March 2008, the end of the school year. The interviews, which lasted 20 to 30 minutes each, were conducted by Sato in early April. There were 11 questions, developed by Sato and Mutoh, including "How was your action research? Did it help you to improve your teaching skills? What did you learn from your action research? What were some of the difficulties you faced in implementing action research?" All the interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed for data analysis. Below is a summary of respondents' descriptions of how they found new teaching ideas through collaborative AR and what kind of difficulties they encountered in implementing them.

How did EFL teachers get new teaching ideas through collaborative AR?

All 15 teachers reported that collaborative AR provided the need to reflect on how they taught and to discuss their ways of teaching with fellow AR participants. One senior high school teacher commented that such reflecting had become a habit for her:

> In a nutshell, AR was useful. It was not easy to make a monthly report regularly. But I made a habit of reflecting on how I taught after each class and making some notes in the staff room. I revised my lesson based on the notes.

Further, 9 teachers reported that they heard good teaching ideas from other teachers, which they then implemented in their own classrooms. A senior high school teacher commented,

> I was always impressed and encouraged by other teachers' monthly AR reports. I learned many ideas from them. I also received advice about how to

modify my lessons. Actually I incorporated some of their ideas and procedures into my lessons and found that they worked well.

One junior high school teacher said that she used some of the new ideas immediately in her class:

Several JHS teachers taught the same grade level, so their ideas were very helpful. I was surprised to find that there were many different ways of teaching the same unit. Actually, I used some of them immediately in my class.

In addition, 6 teachers said advisors' comments were useful. One senior high school teacher said, "when I was at a loss, the advisor's comments were helpful to solve my problems, and I was encouraged by them."

Consequently, 12 teachers reported that they had improved their practices through the continuous AR cycle of implementation, reflection, and revision. Five teachers reported that they did not give up on a new idea if it failed to work well the first time, but rather revised the procedure of the activity and tried it again. Four teachers said that they changed their teaching styles. Two teachers reported improving their teaching based on students' comments in surveys. Finally, 1 teacher confirmed that she had expanded her repertoire of teaching activities through collaborative AR.

What were the difficulties in implementing AR?

Nine teachers indicated some difficulties implementing AR. Four reported that they were not sure how to make a survey. Two teachers said, "We had to use the same textbook and

test as other teachers, so it was not easy to introduce new ideas into my teaching." Other difficulties mentioned by teachers included, "I had difficulty adjusting new ideas to my teaching context," "It took me a lot of time to find good materials," and "I could not keep regular records of what I noticed in my class."

Summary and implications

The interview data above have important implications for the role that AR can play in practitioners' efforts to improve their way of teaching. Teachers commented in particular that the collaborative aspect of AR was important to them. They could risk trying fellow teachers' communicative activities because those activities had already succeeded in classrooms like their own. Such regular sharing of ideas among fellow action researchers has great potential to provide teachers with the impetus they need to make experimentation and reflection a part of their daily teaching routine (see also Mills, 2003). There is benefit, as well, in doing AR under the supervision of university teacher educators. Such advisors support teachers who are encountering difficulties in their AR, giving encouragement and suggesting activities and curricula that have proven successful in other teachers' classes and schools. They visit teachers' classes and offer ideas for activities suitable to each particular context.

Continuous teacher learning opportunities can lead to actual changes in teaching practices, the development of broader repertoires of teaching activities and an increase in teacher confidence. There are predictable and sometimes unavoidable difficulties in implementing AR. These include such problems as adapting new ideas to their classroom

contexts, finding appropriate materials, developing collaboration with fellow teachers at the same school, and learning how to make an appropriate survey.

Conclusion

The three stories above, representative for the 15 teachers who completed the action research program in 2007, describe how these teachers learned new ways of teaching from collaborative action research and expanded their teaching repertoires. In particular, as all 15 teachers reported, collaborative action research encouraged them to reflect on their daily teaching and to make it a habit in their professional lives. However, only a few teachers reported that they could share new ideas with their colleagues in their workplaces. As Shintani observed, teacher collaboration within a school context seems to be essential for successful curriculum development (see Murphey & Sato, 2005; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004; Sato & Takahashi, 2008).

We believe that this symposium, and the discussion that followed, allowed the audience to better understand the promise of collaborative action research for professional development. As Burns (1999) affirms,

> [E]xperimenting with collaborative action research builds a professional learning community with other teachers...the research process empowers teachers by reaffirming their professional judgment and enabling them to take steps to make reflection on practice a regular part of everyday teaching. (p. 234)

We do hope similar collaborative action research groups will be built so that more teachers will become lifelong learners for their professional development.

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