Learning languages, learning life skills: Autobiographical and reflexive approach to teaching and learning a foreign language


Reviewed by Rebeca E Tapia Carlin

Learning languages, learning life skills presents an autobiographical reflexive approach to teaching and learning in foreign language education. This book is the result of two decades of reflection concerning the meaning of a holistic conception of human life and autobiographical knowledge. The author read about and reflected on these topics and realised that there were new ways of making meanings about historicity and human growth and how they relate to teaching and learning in a foreign language.

The content of the book is organised into seven chapters. Chapter one presents the introduction to the volume by describing the purpose of the study that forms the main focus, as well as the theoretical and methodological foundations of the research. In it, the reader is presented with part of the writer's own autobiography, which led her to develop her research in the field of language education. The study was done by analysing both background and empirical material. The background material was collected by the researcher from 14 courses of English for students of health care and social services at a polytechnic university of applied sciences from 1997 to 2000. It was in those courses that the author developed the autobiographical reflexive approach to teaching English. This material consists of three parts: (1) the researcher's experiences as a teacher and the discussions with students in English courses, stored in memories and notes; (2) students' experiential and autobiographical writings at the beginning of the courses; and (3) course evaluations written by students and by the teacher/researcher.

The empirical material for the study was collected from one English course for the students of health care and social services. This material consists of a research diary in which the teacher of the course described her experiences in the form of autobiographical narration; students' experiential and autobiographical narrative writings produced at the beginning and in the middle of the course; students' evaluation of the course; autobiographical material written by students; and autobiographical and biographic teaching materials collected in cooperation with students and partly prepared by the teacher in 1997 – 2000 and used in the course.

The study was initiated because of the willingness and courage of this group of students to share their autobiographical experiential knowledge with a wider audience. The students were the researcher's own students from the English course focusing on health care and social services. They wrote about themselves, their lives and experiences both in Finnish and in English. Having analysed their narratives, the researcher was able to deepen her knowledge of their life worlds, and their ways of thinking, feeling and learning. This analysis made the research process a very special experience for the researcher.

In chapter two the author discusses ‘teachership’ (p 8) and the knowledge and knowing concerning this concept from an autobiographical perspective. As she states, ‘Conceptualisation and interpretation of one’s experience and the developing “teachership” based on such activity has been one of the most central starting points both in pre-service and in-service teacher education in the late 1980’s and 1990’s’ (p 16). This view echoes the concept of the reflective professional that is found elsewhere in the literature. For example, the reflective approach outlined by Wallace (1991) includes both received and experiential knowledge. Bertaux (1981), cited by Jaatinen (p 17), mentions that autobiographical knowledge is experiential knowledge of oneself, and, thus, it can be used by the teacher to reflect on his/her professional development.

Chapter three discusses the foundation for inquiring into autobiographical reflexive language teaching as research on meanings. The author defines first the holistic conception of humans, taking the ideas of Varto (1992a, 1992b), Kauppi (1994) and Rauhala (1996). From the perspectives of these authors, meaning is seen as derived from experience and analysed through the human
mind. Language is described as an instrument that can reach tacit knowledge in our consciousness. Meaning, experience and language are the most important concepts in the study described in this book, which was based on the phenomenological conception of an individual’s inner world consisting of meaning relations or meaning structures. Thus, reality is the subjective way humans give meanings to the phenomena they encounter: ‘We select and interpret the information that comes to our life worlds through and in the frame of reference of our meaning structures’ (pp 37–38).

The methodological commitments of the study are the focus of chapter four. The starting point for these commitments is the target of the study, which is human beings and their experiential lives, in this case a teacher and students; also, Jaatinen is interested in the world of human beings, and their meanings, their being and their changing in foreign language situations (p 47). Interestingly, in this study the researcher – the teacher – is both a researcher and a subject being researched. A major focus is the analysis of the conception of humans as bodily, conscious and situational, as described by Rauhala (1983, cited on p 48). The study constitutes an analysis of meaning-making by the participants, of their individually experienced world through language and narration.

The frame of reference for the study is presented in chapter five. In it, the author explains the way she applied the autobiographical reflexive approach in the context of teaching language and culture for specific purposes. The author used a dialogic approach in the planning and realisation of the language course; that is, she undertook curriculum planning based on negotiation with students to design and implement a learner-centred curriculum. Also, the teacher used task or problem-solving situations that simulated the situations in which students are expected to be engaged in their future working lives. Thus, the students who participated in this course experienced what it is to be a subject and how to support the other to be a subject in his/her own life.

In chapter six Jaatinen goes on to provide a description of the teaching process followed in this study. The author describes, discusses and evaluates how the autobiographical reflexive approach was implemented in a foreign language course. First, she justifies the use of this methodology in a foreign language course by claiming that this approach contributes to supporting a student orientation to learning, to developing students’ cooperation and to promoting their holistic growth (p 58). She then discusses the planning and implementation of the course in a dialogical way. Teacher and student experiences are used to describe how the autobiographical reflexive foreign language teaching occurred in this context. Her teaching was based on the assumption that teachers should concentrate on the way the world is and students are, and on the way the world and the students can be encountered, such as in future professional encounters of the participants. The teacher researcher planned her activities to pursue this goal by preparing simulations of real-life situations where the professional context of the participants was presented, but she was also open to taking advantage of non-planned events to help students develop the ownership of foreign language learning.

Finally, chapter seven is a discussion of the teaching and learning of a foreign language through three students’ autobiographical narrations of their personal stories; those stories include the experiences of the course described in chapter six. The chapter starts with a reflection about the implementation of the autobiographical reflexive approach in foreign language contexts and is then followed by the three autobiographies. An interpretation of the stories analysing the students’ experiences, their meanings and learning processes follows the presentation of the autobiographies. To ensure the accuracy of the analysis, the author notes that she held discussion interviews with each of the participants to check the interpretations of the texts. From the three personal stories, the author then draws out a discussion of what good language learning involves, an issue that she also asked the students to reflect upon in their autobiographies. In the final section of this chapter, she summarises ways to use personal stories as a pedagogic activity in foreign language learning.
To sum up, this book contains rich descriptions of a language-learning situation that illustrates the planning, implementation and evaluation of the autobiographical reflexive approach, and suggests how it can be applied in foreign language-learning contexts. It proposes a paradigm that integrates cognitive and affective factors in foreign language education. Thus, this book should be essential reading for foreign language teachers, teachers of English for Specific Purposes, student teachers, postgraduate students and researchers.

References


Value and validity in action research

Reviewed by Anne Burns

Action research has increasingly been integrated into tertiary preparation courses, practitioner research projects and teacher education programs over the past two decades. It is also figuring in educational policy documents internationally as a preferred approach for teacher training and professional involvement in the reorientation of curriculum policies and curriculum change. For many teachers it represents a feasible and attractive means to expand their professional development and research skills. For many more it still remains a mysterious and arcane concept that pushes them to undertake research, for which they feel unprepared and ill-equipped. Yet others might see it in the same way as a teacher I once worked with: What’s the point of just piffling little research in my classroom? It can’t be of any use to anyone!

Eileen Schwalbach’s Value and validity in action research not only provides an immensely teacher-friendly introduction to action research, explaining its rationale and relevance, but also raises some important, timely and challenging debates that surround it. The thesis of the book is that while action research and teachers’ involvement in it is to be welcomed, serious questions need to be raised about the value and validity of action research projects. Specifically, teachers need to be confident not just about carrying out action research but also that their results are valid. Similarly, they need to be able to ‘draw reliable conclusions and report them accurately and fairly’ (back cover of book). These are important considerations if action research is not to be relegated to an ‘under-class’ of research.

In a compact 116 pages and seven chapters, the book covers a substantial amount of ground in ways that teachers interested in action research will find both informative and reassuring. To supplement and make concrete the discussion in each chapter, Schwalbach provides practical exercises and descriptive case studies from four teachers with whom she conducted research projects. Each case study refers back to the
discussion in the chapter to extend and illustrate it from the teachers’ points of view. While not all of these studies are specifically focused on the language classroom, their ‘take-home messages’ have clear relevance for language teacher researchers.

Chapter one fills in the background and provenance of action research, tracing its history from the early 20th century and the fluctuations in how it has been regarded over time. This chapter also places it in relation to paradigms of research in teaching and the philosophical assumptions of qualitative versus quantitative research. The issue of validity in research, and in action research in particular, is raised immediately in this first chapter and thus sets the course for responding to the key challenges for research by teachers raised by the author.

Chapters two to five present, respectively, ‘Finding a problem’, ‘Reviewing the literature’, ‘Designing the methodology’ and ‘Findings’. Thus, readers are taken systematically through different stages of conducting a research project. The strength of these accounts is that the author avoids vague and abstract descriptions of research processes that must be unpacked by the reader. Instead, she provides questions, examples and ways of checking decisions that offer real practical assistance to teachers struggling with the messy processes of doing research. For example, in chapter two, on identifying research areas and then narrowing the focus of the topic, Schwalbach poses several questions that can be used as criteria for evaluating research questions:

- Is the question open-ended?
- Does the question assume an answer?
- Does the question have appropriate scope – not too broad or too specific?
- Is the question based in research literature?
- Is the question stated clearly and concisely?
- Can the question be answered by collecting data?
- Is the question ethical?
- Is the connection between your ‘action’ and your expected outcome strong enough?
- Is the question significant?
- Is the question feasible?

However, rather than leaving readers to puzzle out their own responses to how each of these questions might apply to their own concerns, she provides clear-cut guidance. For example, this is the format of the response to the first question above (p 19) and for each one that follows:

Don’t ask questions that can be answered by a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response. Sometimes you just need to change the wording. Which question is better?

Will cooperative learning affect students’ ability to engage in academic discourse in social studies?

How will cooperative learning affect students’ ability to engage in academic discourse in social studies?

The second question allows for a richer response. It requires the teacher-researcher to think about the quality as well as the quantity of students’ verbal interactions.

Having provided this level of guidance for each question, she then brings in the four case studies to show how the individual teachers dealt with these decisions in their own research. She follows up the cases with a succinct summary of the main points to reinforce them further.

Chapter six and seven, ‘Validity revisited’ and ‘Value of action research’, return readers to one of the main challenges: how to achieve validity – usually referred to as trustworthiness in qualitative terms – of action research. In chapter six, to reiterate and reinforce the responses provided throughout the book, and to offset the usual way in which books on action research discuss validity ‘in terms of data collection’ (p 93), the author turns again to the four teachers. Rather than providing individual accounts as in other chapters, this time she unites the teachers in an interactive discussion where they share perspectives based on their research experiences. Prefacing this discussion, she alerts readers to the major themes that reinforce the teachers’ views on what gave their projects validity. These themes include collaboration with peers,
revisiting theory in the literature, revisiting research questions, triangulating data, remaining objective and not claiming causality or generalisability, each of which is pointed out and commented upon as it is raised in its reported conversation.

The final chapter draws again on the teachers’ personal viewpoints to discuss the value of action research, which ‘can best be determined by the ways in which it affects students and teachers’ (p 111). Increase in content and research skills, professional progress into further training and accreditation, positive changes in practice and in student achievement, development of deeper insights into student understanding and learning, increased confidence as a teacher, greater appreciation of the importance of metacognition, and the central importance of literacy development to early academic growth are mentioned as particular areas of value and development that action research offered these teachers.

If there is one constraint in this book it is that its brevity is both a strength and a weakness. Readers looking for depth of academic debate about action research validity and value will not find it here and are likely to see the treatment of some of the concepts as simplistic. However, such readers are not the primary target audience, and ultimately the match between content and readership is overarchingly well designed.

Schwalbach’s experience as an action researcher, both in undertaking action research at doctoral level herself and in working with teachers at masters level and in other teacher education programs, shines through this book. It is evident in the clear, direct, inclusive and informal way in which she addresses her readership, as well as in the plentiful guidance and explicit direction she offers, making no assumptions about what previous knowledge or skills readers should have. While it is not specifically directed at language teachers, this is exactly the kind of book that any teacher, including those in the field of TESOL, will want as an invaluable aid to taking the first steps into doing action research.