

The Use of Action Research in EFL Socio-professional Context: Students-teachers' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The present study intends to shed light on student-teachers perceptions towards using action research in English language classes. This study aims at ensuring full understanding of the term "action research" by student-teachers, exploring their perceptions toward using it, identifying the problems that student-teachers may face in a socio-professional context in the intercourse to the use of action research, and showing if they have any future intentions to use it in their classes. Fifty students were chosen randomly from Diyala University, College of Education for Human Sciences, English Department to represents the study sample. A questionnaire of four parts that the researchers constructed was adapted as a primary study instrument. The final statistical results show that student-teachers have positive perceptions toward using action research in the English language teaching classes.

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1. Introduction

In the field of instructional research, various types have been widely recognized and implemented. One of them is action research, that was stated by Corey (1953) and Elliott (1991), a kind of staff development that emerges and enhances educators' skills to develop into more thoughtful practitioners, systematic problem solvers, and prudent decision-makers. According to Lewin (1946), Simmons (1985), and Hien (2009), action research is a comparative examination of the circumstances and outcomes of diverse types of social action and research that results in social action. This research method employs a "spiral step," each of which is "made of a circle of preparation, action, and fact-finding regarding the activity's outcome." Regarding the characteristic of action research, O'Brien (2001), cited in Hien (2009: 98), asserts that, while the term "action research" has been used interchangeably with terms such as emancipator research, participatory research, collaborative inquiry, action learning, or contextual action research, it is truly understood as "learning by doing," in which a group of people encounters a problem; they do something about it; and they learn from their actions.

According to Burns (2009), action research is the synthesis and connection of the two forms of activity, action and research. The activity takes place inside a continuous social process within a specific social environment, whether classrooms, schools, or whole organizations, and generally involves developments and interventions into such methods to effect betterment and change. This type of study entails the systematic examination and observation of results and changes that occur to ascertain the reasons for action and to effect necessary adjustments depending on the outcomes. The primary objective of action research is to close the gap between the ideal (the most effective ways to do things) and the real (the actual methods to do things) in a social setting.

Action research is more applicable than research defined in traditional senses. That is in line with a research conducted by Nashruddin and Ningtyas (2020). An action research is applied to increase the teaching and learning process, reflective practice, critical, and creative thinking. By applying conversation analysis approach, the researchers

found that questioning strategies used by the EFL teacher in classroom interaction successfully improved the process and results of teaching and learning activities.

Gebhard (2006) also states that "it is a type of research which authorizes educators to investigate and pose problems in their teaching, to work at solving these problems, and generally to gain more awareness of teaching and classroom interaction". That statement has been confirmed by Rahman, Amir and Tammasse (2019) by focusing on technology in teaching, and Barnawi, Junaedi, and Rido (2019) through their two cycles research on teachers at a school at Cantilan. They used observation techniques and document study to collect the research data. They found the increase of the quality of the classroom action research from the 1st cycle to the 2nd cycle. Therefore, that research indicated that the skilled teachers in preparing action research for teaching could improve the learning results in classroom interactions.

Action research on the part of an English language teacher "has been seen as a way to bridge the gap among academicians, researchers, and teachers and to encourage teachers to adopt an investigative stance towards their own classroom practices" (Burns, 2009:290). According to Johnson and Johnson (1984), the purpose of action research is to inspire instructors to research reflective and critical examination of their practice. Its contextualization, collaborative nature defines action research and, most importantly, focuses on the participant's pedagogical change in a setting. For implementing that theory, Al-Obaydi (2014) tried to train student-teachers to apply it in their practicum period. In the same way, Celce-Murcia (2001) adds that "the broad goals of action research are to seek local understanding and to bring about improvement in the context of understudy".

Concerning the socio-professional context, where the learners and teachers can associate and communicate, it directly affects their perceptions and how they can accept the idea of doing action research.

Based on the above explanation and statement, the current study attempts to answer the following question:

1. What are the perceptions of student-teachers toward using action research in English language teaching classes?
2. What are the main problems that student-teachers may face in a socio-professional context that push them to use action research?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Action Research

The main three, of the many, definitions for action research are, a "systemic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry" (McCutcheon & Jurg, 1990). It also can be defined as "a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1990). Rapoport (1970:499) as cited in McKernan (1991) states that "action research aims to contribute to both practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework". All of these definitions include four fundamental elements of action research: participant empowerment, cooperation via participation, knowledge gain, and social change. The researcher accomplishes these goals through a spiral of action research cycles comprised of four key phrases: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. (Zuber-Skerrit, 1992).

The method of action research may be characterized as the process by which participants analyze their own educational knowledge deliberately and thoroughly, employing a variety of research approaches. Typically, it is predicated on the following assumptions::

- The determination of problems by teachers.
- Teachers become more effective when examining and assessing their own work and then find ways of remedial work.
- Collaboration can support and enhance teachers' work.
- Sharing is an important aspect for professional development.

The importance of action research clarified well in Carr (1989), Borgia and Schuler (1996), and Mills (2000) cited in Hien (2009: 104) who admit the importance of action research in education by stating that it:

- Helps for change in schools.
- Encourages a democratic approach to education.

- Trains individuals through collaboration on projects.
- Deals with teachers and other educators as learners who wish to narrow the gap between practice and their vision education.
- Empowers educators to reflect on their practice; and promotes a process of testing new ideas.

a. Models of Action Research

Many types of action research define the steps similarly (as shown in the details of the models) but simultaneously have a variety of differences. They incorporate five steps, including taking action on an identified problem and data collection and analysis. According to these numerous models, action research is a spiraling process that is characterized by methodical but flexible planning, acting, collecting, observing, pondering, analyzing, responding, and evaluating. Among them are the following:

1) Lewin (1946)

Lewin's approach is spiral in nature, with each stage consisting of a circle of planning, acting, and fact-finding regarding the outcome of the activity. 1948, p. 206. Traditionally, Lewin's (1946) stated model of action research, as described in Hien (2009: 101), entails a cyclic cycle consisting of two primary phases: diagnostic and therapeutic. The fundamental cycle is as follows:

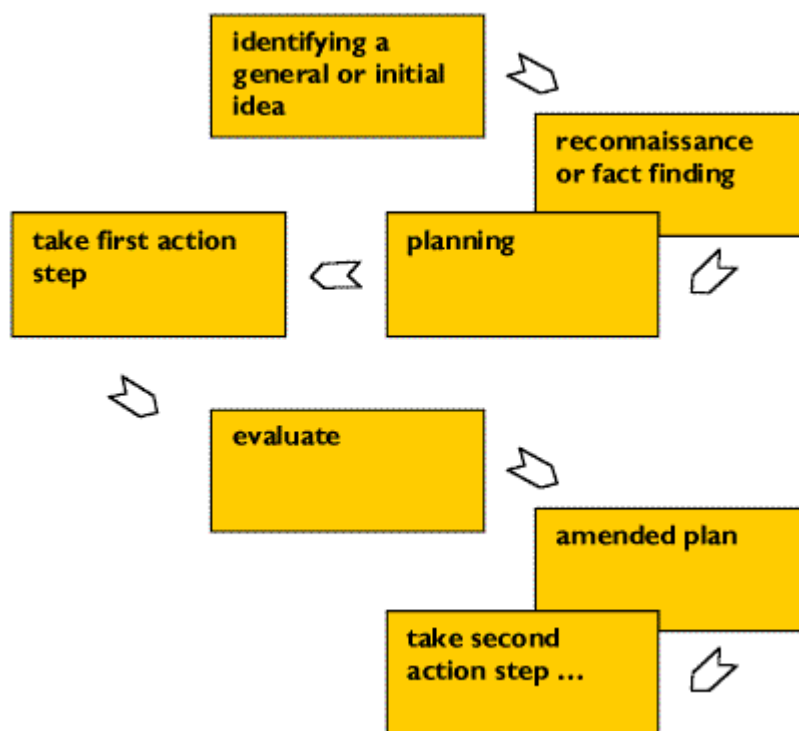


Figure 1. Lewin's Basic Cycle

2) Elliott (1991)

The type engaged by Elliot (1991: 71) cited in Koshy, Koshy, and Waterman (2010) and Nashruddin, Ningtyas, and Ekamurti (2018) is built upon Lewin's 1940s work. It entails establishing a broad concept, doing reconnaissance or fact-finding, planning, acting, evaluating, revising the plan, and initiating the second action phase, among other things. Elliott's methodology stresses continuous evolution and reinterpretation of the initial objective through a recurrent sequence of surveys. Reconnaissance entails some level of analysis.

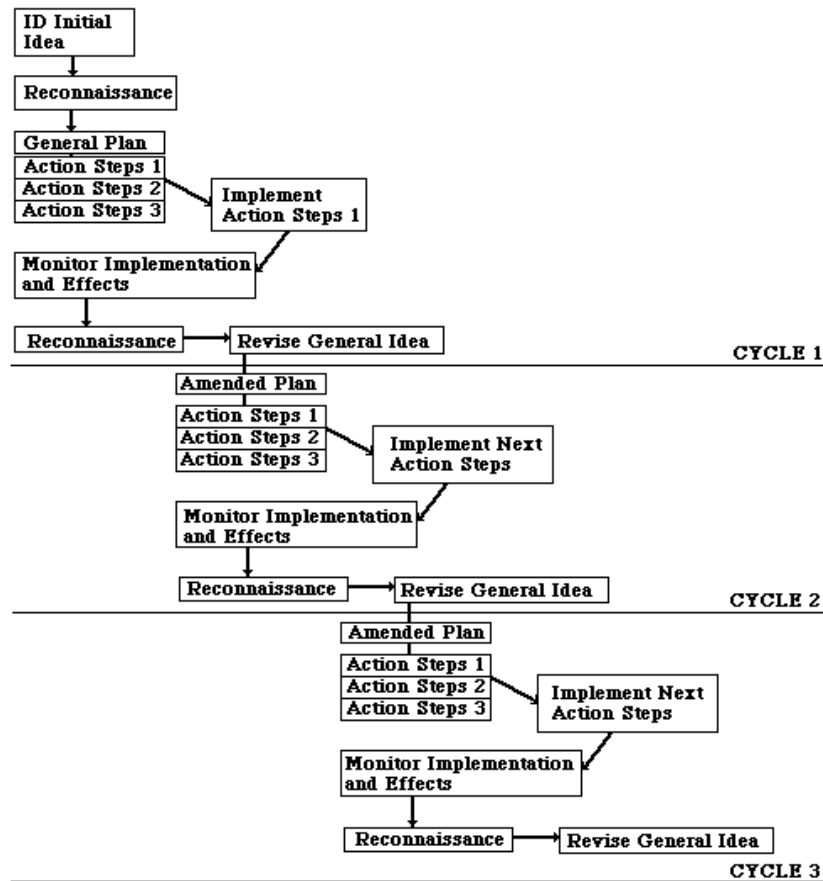


Figure 2. Action Research by Elliott cited in Hopkins (1985)

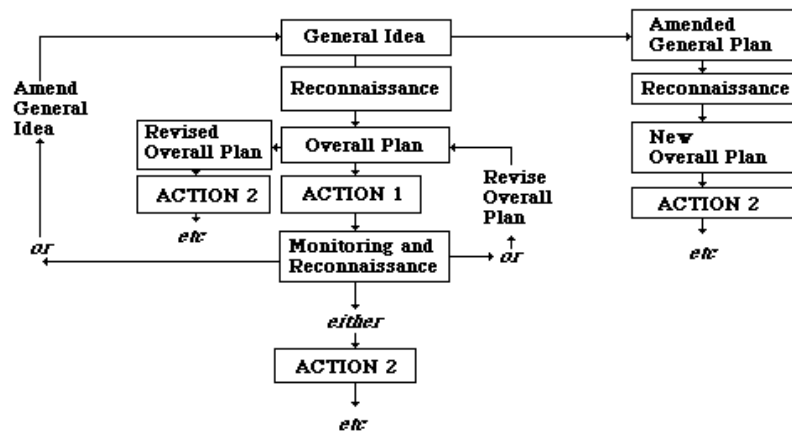


Figure 3. Action Research Protocol by Ebbutt (cited in Hopkins, 1985)

3) Ebbutt (1985)

The action research as stated by Ebbutt (1985) is the systematic study of attempts to increase the educational practice by groups of participants through their own practical actions and through their own reflections on the effects of those measures. (cited in Hopkins, 1985) .

4) Kemmis and McTaggart's (1990)

Kemmis and McTaggart (1990) describe action research as participatory research. The authors state that action research involves a spiral of self-reflective cycles of:

- Planning a change.
- Acting and observing the process and consequences of the change.

- Reflecting on these processes and consequences and then replanning.
- Acting and observing.
- Reflecting, and so on

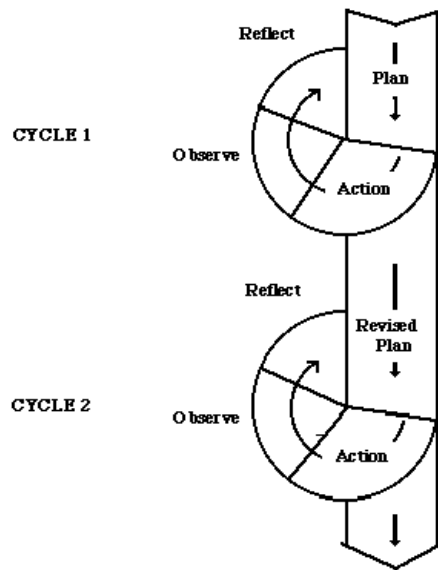


Figure 4. Kemmis and McTaggart's Action Research Spiral

5) O'Leary (2004)

According to O'Leary's approach, 'cycles converge toward a better knowledge of the issue and improved action implementation; and are built on evaluative practice that alternates between action and critical reflection.' Koshy et al. (2004) reference Koshy et al (2010). O'Leary viewed action research as an experiential learning approach to change, to continuously refine techniques, data, and interpretation in light of the understanding gained in previous cycles.

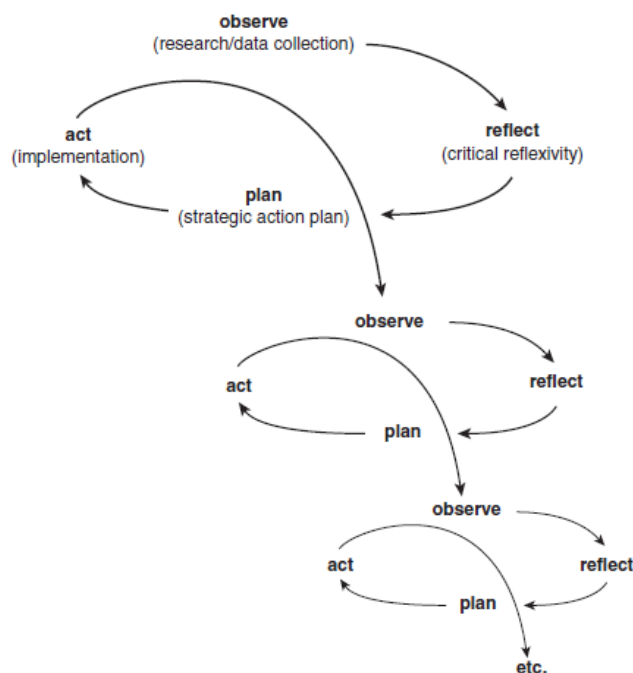


Figure 5. O'Leary's Cycles of Research

6) Sagor (2005)

Richard Sagor is a Washington State University Assistant Professor of Education. He describes action research as investigations performed by and for the individuals who are taking action to guide their future activities.

Sagor discusses the importance of the principle as both a facilitator of teacher action research and an action researcher. The principals who attended this workshop presentation found the step-by-step approach and templates for each stage to be quite relevant and appropriate to the duties they would be performing as part of the project. (Sagor, 2005).

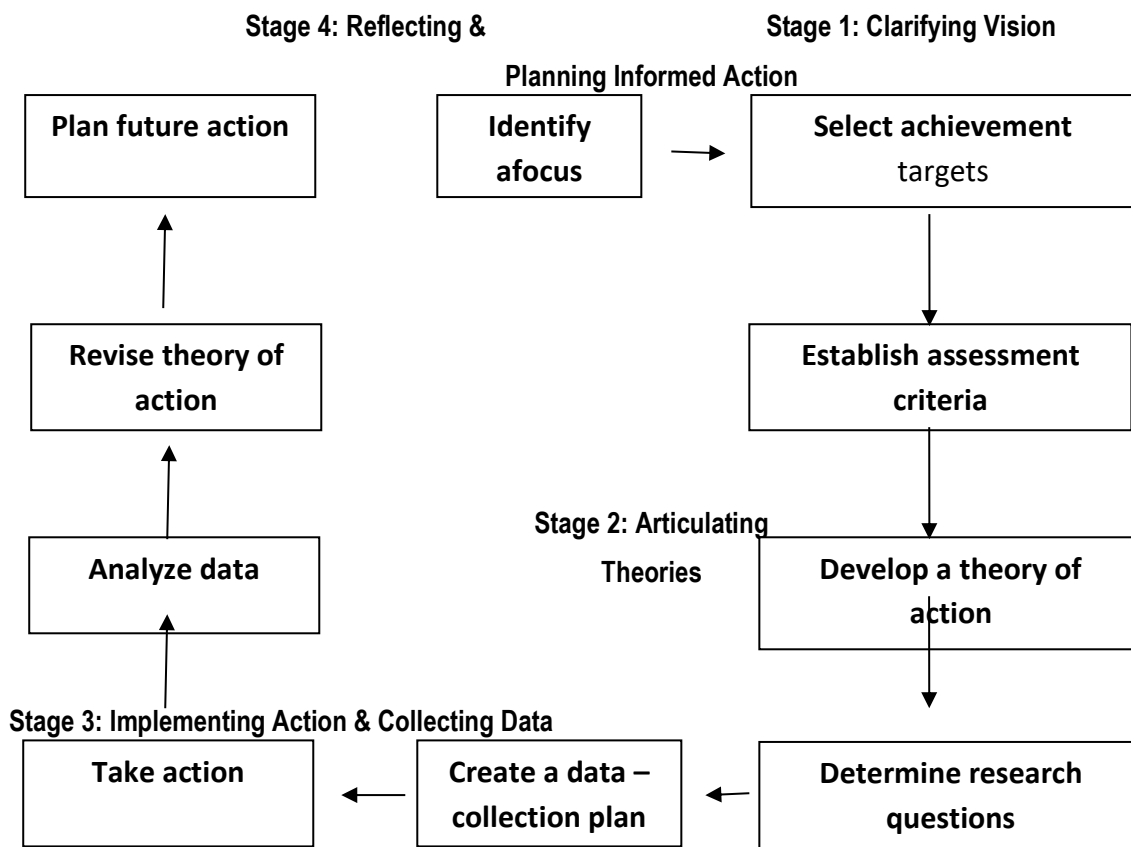


Figure 6. Sagor's Model: The Action Research Cycle (Sagor, 2005)

2.2 Socio-Professional Context

Socio-professional context refers to the community that exists around and in direct touch with student-teachers. Student-teachers typically work and engage with various agents in this type of educational environment, the socio-professional context, such as teachers, other student teachers, college professors, and other school staff. This contributes to the development of the personality of both pupils and teachers. Student teachers' interactions with other teachers in the school system are social and professional in nature. The notion of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), as referenced in (Mtika, 2008), is also essential for comprehending the socio-professional environment of teaching practice. Wilkin (1992) believes that whether long-career instructors function as an occasional resource, delegate guardianship, or are authorized to assume active and professional duties for student teachers is highly dependent on the institutional and interpersonal character of the institute-school collaboration.

In the socio-professional environment, student-teachers rely on at least three primary sources of support. They often rely on college professors, school teachers who may function as mentors or cooperating teachers, and, thirdly, workshops or seminars planned during their school placement.

The overall goal of assistance in a socio-professional setting is to give psychological and instructional support to student teachers (Sabar, 2004). Calderhead and Shorrock (1997), as mentioned in Mtika (2008:63), define the function of mentors in student teachers' socio-professional interactions. Mentors may impact student teachers in five distinct ways: coaching, practical, focused conversation, context structuring, emotional support, and design learning experiences (ibid).

At the interpersonal level, interactions between school instructors and student teachers vary in terms of duration and frequency, the location of the encounter, and the subjects discussed. Student instructors may be fearful of asking for assistance because they believe they have nothing to offer in return and that seasoned teachers are eager to assist but do not wish to intrude. These predicaments significantly impact how the student teacher progresses throughout their school-based teaching practice (Wang, 2001).

Additional difficulties that student teachers may have in the socio-professional setting may arise due to student teachers being excluded from school teachers' biographies (Sabar, 2004:145). This stems from the belief that student teachers are new members of the school teachers' team and may lack an understanding of the school teachers' semiotics. Additionally, it has been noticed that school instructors frequently see student teachers or novices as threats to established norms and routines (ibid). As a result, Sabar (2004:161) proposes that school instructors may attempt to mitigate the impact of student teachers by stressing their marginal status and rebutting their recommendations during professional contacts. Ritonga, Nasmilah, and Rahman (2020) emphasize the importance of students' motivation in reducing their school anxiety.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Fifty student-teachers represent the participants in this study. They are fourth year students/ English department / College of Education for Humanities/ University of Diyala in the academic year 2018-2019. They all are exposed to practicum as they join the period of practice in schools.

3.2 Instruments

The researchers construct a questionnaire based on the theoretical background of the subject under investigation and the context of the study to be used as a main study measurement tool. The questionnaire consists of four parts. The first one gives a general definition to the term action research to ensure full understanding by the sample of the study. The second part consists of fifteen items that intend to clarify the perceptions of students -teachers toward using action research in English language teachers. The third part of the questionnaire deals with identifying the problems that student- teacher may face in a socio-professional context concerning action research. It consists of ten items, each of which represents a problem. The final question of the questionnaire is about the attitudes of student-teachers towards applying action research in future time. The questionnaire was submitted to the jury of experts to ensure its face validity before applying it. The reliability of the questionnaire is made by using test-retest method.

4. Results and Discussion

The Final version of the questionnaire was distributed to the participants at the end of April 2019 when the students finished their practicum period.

In the first part of the questionnaire, the researchers provide the participants with a clear definition of the term action research to ensure that all of them understand its meaning and avoid arbitrary answers.

In the second part, the participants are asked to answer the perceptions questionnaire rating the items by choosing either agree, neutral or disagree. After dealing with the data statistically by investigating the mean and the theoretical mean, it is found that the mean score of the subjects was 52 which are compared to the theoretical mean (40). This shows that the student-teachers have positive perceptions toward using action research in their classes as they look at it as a solution to many problems that ace them in their professional life.

The third part of the questionnaire deals with the problems that student- teachers may face in a socio-professional context to the use of action research. The participants are asked to answer the scaled questionnaire concerning this area of study. The data was collected and investigated to find the problems that student-teachers suffer from. 76% of participants agree on point number 5, which reads, "The school teachers do not look serious to my suggestions as I'm not a member of school biography". The other problem that gained 12% of agreement is point number 2 "The experienced teachers look at my teaching ideas as marginal most of the time". The other 12% of responses were separated between the other points of the questionnaire.

The last part of the questionnaire was a yes/no question related to the desire of student-teachers to apply action research in their future teaching. The results show that 80% percent of the participants answer "yes", and 20% answer

“no”. This means that most of them satisfied that action research can solve many socio-professional problems that they may face in their actual work.

5. Conclusions

Based on the study results, the main conclusions stated that student-teachers have positive perceptions towards using action research in Teaching. Action research can be an effective solution to many problems that face the student-teachers in a socio-professional context and the use of it helps to insert the culture of research in schools. This happens by encouraging student-teachers and teachers to continually evaluate their work and search for their weak points to find possible solutions.

Most participants agree that they suffer from the following socio-professional problems; “The school teachers do not look serious to my suggestions as I’m not a member of school biography” and “The experienced teachers look at my teaching ideas as marginal most of the time”. And also, most student-teachers have the desire to apply action research in their future work.

Finally, the study shows that when student-teachers and teachers themselves face a real problem in their practice, they can take responsibility for resolving it and therefore become directors of their own professional improvement.

This study recommends the following:

1. The interest of applying action research shows a need for real chances to share ideas and experiences amongst the teachers of EFL contexts both nationally and internationally.
2. Student-teachers should be encouraged to represent various instructional materials inside their classrooms during their teaching practice period, depending on themselves to provide such materials if they are not available at schools. Each instructor should provide their students with a list of further reading books and certain websites to be consulted.
3. Student-teachers should be given complete freedom to choose any topic, strategy, activity, and instructional material to be researched to reinforce autonomy and self-assessment inside them. This will provide them with a great dose of self-confidence during their teaching practice time.

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