

THE PALÍNGUAS PROJECT (AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM)*

Resumo

O objetivo principal deste trabalho é descrever o Projeto PALÍNGUAS (Projeto de Pesquisa-Ação na Sala de Aula de Línguas), ora em andamento no Curso de Mestrado em Lingüística Aplicada da Universidade Estadual do Ceará (CMLA/UECE). Focalizaremos sua fundamentação teórica, seus objetivos e sua metodologia, e relataremos alguns de seus primeiros benefícios para alguns de seus participantes. No Projeto PALÍNGUAS, trabalhamos com a hipótese de que a pesquisa-ação, em sua dimensão de auto-observação sistemática de sala de aula de línguas, pode trazer inúmeros benefícios para a melhoria do ensino-aprendizagem de idiomas.

Palavras-chave: pesquisa-ação; observação em sala de aula; auto-observação.

Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to describe the PALÍNGUAS¹ Project (an action research project in the language classroom), now in progress at the Master of Arts Course in Applied Linguistics of UECE (Universidade Estadual do Ceará). We will focus on its underlying principles, purposes and methodology, and will report on some of its early benefits for some of its participants. In the PALÍNGUAS Project we work with the hypothesis that action research, in its dimension of systematic language classroom self-observations, can bring about numerous benefits to the improvement of language learning and teaching.

Keywords: action research; classroom observation; self-observation.

1 Introduction

Although the main purpose of this paper is to describe the PALÍNGUAS Project, in its first eight sections we will review briefly several issues which are related to the project. The paper is thus divided into the following sections: approaches to classroom observation (Section 2); what is self-observation and how is it done in the language classroom? (Section 3); why is research a scary word for teachers? (Section 4); what is action research and how is it done in language classrooms? (Section 5); why do action research? (Section 6); what basically distinguishes action research from other types of research? (Section 7); what does action research basically involve? (Section 8); rationale for the PALÍNGUAS Project (Section 9); project justification (Section 10); purposes of the project (Section 11); project methodology (Section 12); the action research cycle for the project (Section 13); project implementation schedule (Section 14); more information on the progress of the project (Section 15); conclusion (Section 16); references (Section 17), bibliography for the implementation of the project (Section 18).

2 Approaches to classroom observation

How many different approaches to language classroom observation have there been in the history of language teaching?

Upon reading the literature, one can identify at least seven different approaches to language classroom observation: (1) the teacher may be observed by a supervisor in order to be recommended for rehiring; (2) The teacher may be observed by outside

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¹"PALÍNGUAS" is a Portuguese abbreviation for "Pesquisa-Ação na Sala de Aula de Línguas" ('action research in the language classroom'). This acronym was created on the analogy of the SALÍNGUAS Project: "Projeto Integrado de Pesquisa na Sala de Aula de Línguas" ('an integrated research project in language classrooms' in existence at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro [cf. Moita Lopes, 1996:100]). (For an extended meaning of the SALÍNGUAS Project, see Moita Lopes, 1998:147, Note 1).

"experts" or by professional researchers who are interested in testing general theories of language learning and teaching but not directly in improving the action of the teacher being observed; (3) the teacher may want to be observed and asks a colleague to do this job; (4) the teacher may work with other colleagues so that they might observe one another's teaching (reciprocal or peer observation); (5) an individual teacher may work alone and observe another teacher's class or other teachers in the classroom (individual observation); (6) a group of teachers may work together as observers of other teachers in the classroom (collaborative observation); and (7) an individual teacher may systematically observe himself/herself in his/her own action in the classroom (systematic classroom self-observation).

The PALÍNGUAS Project, as will be explained in more detail later in this paper, adopts the last kind of approach (7), in that it is restricted to systematic language classroom self-observations.

3 What is self-observation and how is it done in the language classroom?

According to Brown (1994:431),

self-observation is no more than a systematic process of monitoring yourself, but it's the systematic part that is crucial. It requires discipline and perseverance, but the results are worth it. How do you go about observing yourself?

(1) Select an element of your teaching to "keep an eye out for" as you teach. Make sure it's one finite element, like teacher talk, eye contact, teaching predominantly to one side of the classroom, or blackboard work. If you try to take in too many things, you could end up becoming too self-conscious to the detriment of the rest of the lesson.

(2) Monitor that particular element during the class period. If you can, video tape yourself (or have someone come in and operate the camera).

(3) After class, set aside a few moments to give these elements careful assessment.

In the next section, we will follow Douglas Brown on his convincing reasons why research should not be a scary activity for language teachers.

4 Why is research a scary word for teachers?

Brown (op. cit.:437) argues that

research is a scary word for many of us. It is something that we are just as happy leaving in someone else's hands because it involves statistics (which we hate), experimental design

(which we don't know), and the interpretation of ambiguous results (which we think is best left to the "experts"). Unfortunately, leaving all the research in the hands of researchers is an upside-down policy, as Meek (1991:34) recently noted:

The main thing wrong with the world of education is that there's this one group of people who do it - the teachers - and then there's another group who think they know about it - the researchers. The group who think they know about teaching try to find out more about it in order to tell the teachers about teaching - and that is total reversal. Teachers are the ones who do it and, therefore, are the ones who know about it. It's worth getting teachers to build on what they know, to build on what questions they have, because that's what matters - what teachers know and what questions they have. And so anybody who wants to be a helpful researcher should value what the teachers know and help them develop that.

Brown (ibid.) goes on to argue that

actually, research does not have to be a scary prospect at all. You are researching ideas all the time, whether you know it or not. If, as a growing teacher, one of your goals is to improve the quality of your teaching, then you will ask some relevant questions, hypothesize some possible answers or solutions, put the solutions to a practical tryout in the classroom, look for certain results, and weigh those results in some manner to determine whether your hypothesized answer held up or not. That's research. Some classroom research is an informal, everyday occurrence for you. You divide up small groups in a different way to stimulate better exchange of ideas; you modify your usual non-directive approach to getting students to study harder and take a bold, direct, no-nonsense approach; you try a video tape as a conversational stimulus; you try a deductive approach to presenting a grammar point instead of the usual inductive approach. (...)

*This kind of "action research," better known simply as **classroom research**, is carried out not so much to fulfill a thesis requirement or to publish a journal article as to improve your own understanding of the teaching-learning process in the classroom.*

5 What is action research and how is it done in language classrooms?

'Action research' means, literally, 'research on one's own action'. According to Johnson & Johnson (1998:5),

action research (AR) derives from the work during the 1940s of Kurt Lewin, who used it as a method of research into social issues. In education, it has become closely associated with the broader area of **TEACHER RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT**. Its underlying rationale is to encourage teachers in the reflective and critical investigation of their own practice. AR is characteristically context-specific and collaborative and, most important, oriented to pedagogic change brought about by the participants in a setting. Most models of AR are conceived in terms of a cycle or 'spiral' which offers a sequential set of research steps.

Richards, et al. (1992:4-5) have defined action research as

1) research which has the primary goal of finding ways of solving problems, bringing about social change or practical action, in comparison with research which seeks to discover scientific principles or develop general laws and theories.

2) (in teacher education) teacher-initiated classroom research which seeks to increase the teacher's understanding of classroom teaching and learning and to bring about improvements in classroom practices. Action research typically involves small-scale investigative projects in the teacher's own classroom, and consists of the following cycle of activities:

The teacher (or a group of teachers)

a) selects an aspect of classroom behaviour to examine in more detail (e.g. the teacher's use of questions)

b) selects a suitable research technique (e.g. recording classroom lessons)

c) collects data and analyzes it

d) develops an action plan to help bring about a change in classroom behaviour (e.g. to reduce the frequency of questions which the teacher answers himself or herself)

e) acts to implement the plan

f) observes the effects of the action plan on behaviour.

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, apud Nunan, 1992:17),

the three defining characteristics of action research are that it is carried out by practitioners (for our purposes, classroom teachers) rather than outside researchers; secondly, that it is collaborative; and thirdly, that it is aimed at changing things.

Nunan (ibid., p. 18) argues, however, that *collaboration* is not a defining characteristic of action research:

While collaboration is highly desirable, I do not believe that it should be seen as a defining characteristic of action research. Many teachers who are interested in exploring processes of teaching and learning in their own context are either unable, for practical reasons, or unwilling, for personal reasons, to do collaborative research. The work that such people carry out should not necessarily be excluded as action research.

Nunan (ibid.) also denies the claim that action research must necessarily result in change of some sort, even though he states that he knows "of few such studies which have not resulted in change of some sort":

I would also dispute the claim that action research must necessarily be concerned with change. A descriptive case study of a particular classroom, group of learners, or even a single learner counts as action research if it is initiated by a question, is supported by data and interpretation, and is carried out by a practitioner investigating aspects of his or her own context and situation. That said, I know of few such studies which have not resulted in change of some sort.

In the **PALÍNGUAS** Project, as will be explained later in this paper (see Section 9), we have essentially adopted Nunan's view of action research as expressed in the last two quotations above.

In the next section, we will quote several authors who provide good reasons why we should do action research in the language classroom.

6 Why do action research?

- 1) Because "it is a powerful form of professional development" (Linda Ross, apud Burns, 1999:7).
- 2) Because "it is practice to theory rather than theory to practice" (id., ibid.).
- 3) Because "action research is refreshing as it is concerned with classroom as it really is" (ibid., p. 11).
- 4) "It is rewarding because it validates classroom observation and encourages you to value your own judgements" (ibid.).
- 5) Because "action research is a powerful medium of reflection" (ibid. p. 12).
- 6) Because it is "a form of research which is becoming increasingly significant in language education" (Nunan, 1992:17).
- 7) Because "action research is different from other more conventional or traditional types of research in that it is very focused on individual or small-group professional practice and is not so concerned with making general statements" (Wallace, 1998:18).
- 8) Because "it is therefore more 'user-friendly' in that (for example) it may make little or no use of statistical techniques" (ibid.).

- 9) Because it "may provide an effective method for improving professional action" (ibid.).
- 10) Because "one way of encouraging teachers to develop research skills is to get them to adopt an *action research* orientation to their classroom" (Nunan, 1990:63).

7 What basically distinguishes action research from other types of research?

Allwright & Bailey (1991) discuss three different approaches to language classroom research: experimental studies (with intervention and a high degree of exerted control), naturalistic enquiry (interested in seeing what happens without any degree of intervention), and action research (with intervention but a low degree of exerted control).

The same authors (ibid., p. 52) "want to make it clear that each of these approaches to understanding has its place and its value, and that choosing the appropriate means of addressing an issue is much more productive than adhering rigidly to one or another approach".

8 What does action research in classrooms basically involve?

"Although it can take many forms, action research in classrooms basically involves taking an action and systematically observing what follows" (Allwright & Bailey, ibid., p. 42).

More precisely,

action research in classrooms follows a series of repeated steps. Strickland (1988:760) discusses the following sequence: 1) identify an issue, interest or problem; 2) seek knowledge; 3) plan an action; 4) implement the action; 5) observe the action; 6) reflect on your observations; and 7) revise the plan. The cycle then begins once more, with the revisions incorporated in a new action, which is itself observed, and so on. This process allows teachers who wish to investigate events in their own classrooms to take constructive steps towards solving immediate problems, systematically reflecting on the outcome. Thus the goals of action research are achieving local understanding and developing viable solutions to problems (Allwright & Bailey, op. cit.: 44).

The action research cycle for the PALÍNGUAS Project is, in the most part, similar to the one above, as will be seen later in this paper (see Section 13).

9 Rationale for the PALÍNGUAS Project

As we stated at the end of Section 2, the PALÍNGUAS Project is concerned with systematic language classroom self-observations. This kind of action research is quite new in the literature of language teaching and learning.²

In the PALÍNGUAS Project, as we stated at the end of Section 5 above, we have essentially adopted Nunan's view of action research as expressed in the last two quotations of that section. More precisely, even recognizing the value and importance of collaborative action research, we have chosen (for personal and practical reasons) to work with individual action research, that is with individual teachers doing systematic classroom self-observation, under our guidance, with the main purpose of identifying and trying to solve some specific teaching and/or learning problem or to improve an aspect of their classroom performance.

We consider this to be the most practical and viable dimension of action research in our educational context, where it is defined as a task or process of classroom self-observation and self-intervention, done without the collaboration of colleagues and without the interference of external observers or researchers, since we believe that it is more efficient, easier, and less embarrassing for the teacher in our educational environment to observe his/her own action than to observe the action of others.³

It is a known fact that in our educational context, where teachers are usually overloaded with many classes every day, there is little or no possibility for them to do group (or collaborative) research. Moreover, to observe another teacher's class is usually a very embarrassing task, not only for the observing teacher but also for the observed teacher and for his students. We believe that this problem can be totally avoided if one practices classroom self-observation. Another even more serious difficulty in observing someone else's classes, in our educational context, is the fact that very few teachers willingly permit external observers to do research in their classes, and many teachers do not even allow external observers to come in and observe their classes.

In the light of the above reasons, we think that we are well justified in adopting in our project the kind of individual classroom action research described and explained in this paper.

10 More on the Project justification

It is a known fact that, for several reasons, few (if any) language teachers in our community are in the habit of doing classroom research. Most teachers, instead of becoming researchers of their own ac-

² As a matter of fact, "action research is a relatively new research approach, particularly in the field of second language education" (Burns, 1999:152).

³ In other words, there is no space in our project for the so-called 'triangulation' in classroom research.

tivity, with all its resulting benefits, still prefer to be simple consumers of research done by external researchers. Even fewer (if any) are those language teachers who do **action research** in its strictest sense (adopted by the PALÍNGUAS Project) of a systematic classroom self-observation, that is, research done by an individual teacher on his/her own action in the language classroom with the purpose of identifying and trying to solve some specific teaching and/or learning problem. As already stated, this kind of action research (in the sense of a **systematic classroom self-observation**) is quite a new development in the area of language teaching and learning.

The PALÍNGUAS Project is an attempt to meet the challenge of encouraging language teachers in our community to do systematic classroom self-observations aiming at improving some aspect of their classroom practice.

We firmly believe that one way of motivating language teachers to do classroom action research is by training them how to do it, and especially by persuading them of the numerous benefits of such a practice to their own professional growth and development as language teachers. We think that this goal can be achieved if training courses for language teachers, especially graduate courses, try to develop in their student teachers the ability to do action research in the language classroom, thus motivating them to become researchers of themselves, that is, researchers of their own professional practice. As Nunan (1990:63) has pointed out, "one way of encouraging teachers to develop research skills is to get them to adopt an *action research* orientation to their classroom".

The PALÍNGUAS Project is thus based on the fundamental assumption that teachers who practice the methodology of action research in their language classrooms will always be growing professionally and will be contributing to the improvement of language learning and teaching.

11 Purposes of the project

From the perspective outlined above, the PALÍNGUAS Project aims to achieve the following four main objectives:

- 1) to improve the professional development of the student teachers of UECE's MA Course in Applied Linguistics;
- 2) to encourage them to develop research skills;
- 3) to train them in the ability to do action research in their own language classrooms;
- 4) to empirically investigate some of the benefits of action research for language teaching and learning, through the analysis of a *corpus* of thirty (30) action research reports produced by them, from 1999 to 2001.

⁴ See project implementation schedule (Section 14).

⁵ See, for example, Alwright & Bailey 1991:42; Nunan 1992:19; Ur 1996:329; and Moita Lopes 1996:187, among others.

12 Project methodology

The methodology of our project consists of two phases or stages. In its first phase, the student teachers of UECE's MA Course in Applied Linguistics are trained in the methodology of action research in the language classroom, through the thirteen (13) methodological steps (or stages) that will be described in the next section of this paper. In its second phase, we will analyse and evaluate thirty (30) action research reports (10 per year) produced by its participants, in order to identify the problems that they have diagnosed together with the respective strategies that they have developed to solve them. We will work with five informants per semester.⁴ With these data at hand, we will be able to empirically evaluate some of the benefits of action research for language teaching and learning.

We also intend to publish (in one or more volumes) all the action research reports produced by the participants of the project.

13 The action research cycle for the project

In this section, we will propose and describe a cycle of thirteen methodological steps for doing action research according to the principles of the PALÍNGUAS Project. These steps (or stages) are, in part, similar to the ones already proposed in the literature of action research.⁵ In at least three aspects, however, the PALÍNGUAS Action Research Model differs from the ones we have found in the current literature on action research, namely: (1) in the number of steps (totalling 13, due, in part, to the fact that we have subdivided some single steps of other models into more detailed steps); (2) in the nature of some steps (in our model the researcher does not start, as in most other models, with a previously selected research question, nor does he or she have to fill in any classroom observation checklist, as in some other models); and (3), as has already been stated, in our project a language teacher practices observation of his/her own classes (and not of someone else's classes, as is common in other models of classroom research).

We will now list and describe the action research cycle for the PALÍNGUAS Project, step by step, by using an instructive type of language.

(1) Background I (general theoretical background)

In order to do efficient action research in your language classrooms you need to familiarize yourself with:

- a) general principles of language learning and teaching;

- b) current research in the area;
- c) action research methodology in language classrooms;
- d) types of research questions for language classrooms;
- e) kinds of instruments for data collection.

(2) Investigation I (preliminary investigation)

Collect some data for a preliminary investigation. You can do this by recording (or video taping) yourself in a language classroom. Start, therefore, with data, and not with a research question or with a hypothesis. In other words, according to the principles of the PALÍNGUAS Project, the specific questions and the hypotheses to be worked out later in the process are not formulated *a priori*, but *a posteriori*, based on the data gathered and recorded during the present stage of preliminary investigation. As to the instruments for data collection, even though audio and video recordings are the best tools, you may also use other widely recommended types of valid instruments such as diaries, interviews with students, questionnaires, etc.

(3) Databank I (data transcription)

Transcribe the data, and set up a first database to serve as a useful research source not only at the present stage but also in later cycles of the process.

(4) Diagnosis (problem identification)

Identify a problem to be solved or an aspect of your class that might be improved. But even if you can identify more than one problem or difficulty in your classroom, you should "select only one specific problem or element, like teacher talk, eye contact, blackboard use, and so on" (Brown, op. cit.:431). Don't try to take in too many things but only one question or problem at a time. The question or problem selected at this stage becomes from now on the topic of your investigation. The problem or aspect to be researched can be related either to your action or to that of your students in the classroom or even to other elements that might be interfering with your activities, like the physical conditions of the classroom or other types of external interference.

(5) Background II (specific theoretical background)

After you have selected a problem or question to be worked out, you need (or may need) a new kind of theoretical basis (hence the label 'background II' to designate this step), this time on the specific problem to be solved. How is the problem or question treated in the literature? This attitude does not mean that you are not able to develop by yourself the necessary strategies to solve the problem under investigation. What it does mean is that you may learn a lot from experts, from research and from reading, provided all this can be in-

tegrated into your own reflection-based theories (cf. Ur, 1996:7). By reading materials on the specific problem to be solved, you can certainly base your research on solid theoretical foundations.

(6) Hypothesis (or hypotheses)

Suggest an idea (or some ideas) as a possible explanation for the problem. In other words, formulate a plausible hypothesis (or a set of hypotheses) to try to explain the cause of the problem you have selected to investigate. For example, if the problem is related to lack of motivation in the class, you may formulate the hypothesis that the students are not motivated because the lesson content is not of much interest to the students, since it does not meet their needs (cf. Nunan, 1992:19).

(7) Action plan

Devise a number of strategies which might give a solution to the problem. For example, if the problem is lack of motivation (as hypothesized in the last stage), you may devise a number of strategies for encouraging your students to relate the content of the lessons to their own backgrounds and interests (cf. Nunan, *ibid.*).

(8) Intervention

Implement your action plan during a certain period of time, which may vary according to the particular circumstances of each case.

(9) Investigation II

Record your class again for analysis and evaluation.

(10) Databank II

Transcribe the new data, and set up a second database to serve as a second useful research source not only at the present stage, but also in later cycles of the process.

(11) Evaluation

Analyse and evaluate the result(s) of your action (or reaction) to the solution of the problem. Has the problem been solved? If the answer is no, go back to Step 6, and reformulate your hypothesis (or hypotheses) or make a new one and go on by following the other steps.

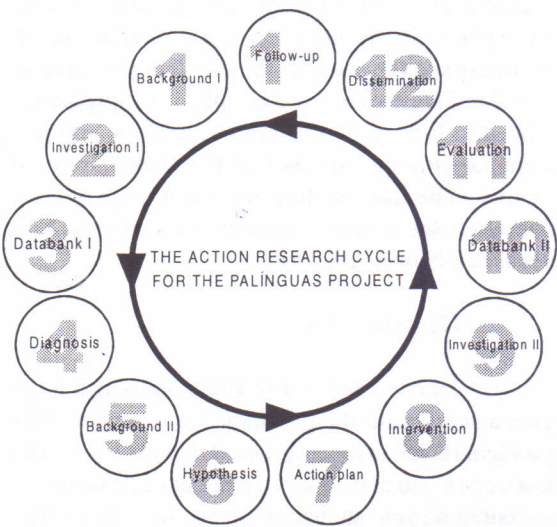
(12) Dissemination

Report your action research in seminars, conferences or in journals, so that it can reach other professionals who may be interested in this method of language classroom research.

(13) Follow-up (continuation of the process)

Begin work on another problem. You may select it either from your Databases I/II, or from a new investigation, and the action research cycle is repeated.

We will close this section with a cyclic diagram of the 13 steps used in the PALÍNGUAS project:



We are very happy to announce that the project is achieving its goals with some success. Some of its early participants have already presented their own action research reports in seminars and/or conferences around the country. Moreover, most of them have shown great enthusiasm and eagerness to continue doing action research in their own language classrooms, which undoubtedly proves that the kind of action research adopted by the PALÍNGUAS Project seems to be on the right track. As another good result of the project, we are glad to inform that one of its early participants, Jocely de Deus Pinheiro, is now developing a language classroom self-observation MA thesis project in some language schools of Fortaleza.

16 Conclusion

We conclude by inviting as many language teachers as possible to do action research in their language classrooms since its benefits are numerous. The evidence we have had so far from the reports produced by some of the participants of the PALÍNGUAS Project indicates that the results are quite rewarding in terms of professional growth and development. Why don't you try it yourself?

14 Project implementation schedule

YEAR	1999/1				1999/2				2000/1				2000/2				2001/1				2001/2						
MONTH/ACTIVITY	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Training of 5 informants in the methodology of action research	X	X			X	X				X	X			X	X				X	X			X	X			
Implementation of action research in language classrooms			X	X			X	X				X	X			X	X				X	X			X	X	
Partial report I									X																		
Partial report II																		X									
Final report																											X

15 More information on the progress of the project

As was shown in the project implementation schedule, the PALÍNGUAS Project started in the first semester of 1999 and is intended to end in the second semester of the year 2001. We have chosen to work with ten (10) participants a year (five per semester), so that thirty (30) student teachers of UECE's MA Course in Applied Linguistics will have a chance to take part in the project. The ten (10) participants whom we have worked with in the current year (1999) have already concluded at least one cycle of their action research, and whose reports will soon be published by UECE in a collection of papers organized by us. We intend to organize and publish three collections of papers (one per year) with the action research reports produced by the participants in the project. We are also planning to hold a seminar or a conference open to our whole community of language teachers in which each participant of the project will present his or her own action research report.

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