

摘 要

“行动研究”是美国的柯利尔(J. Colier)和勒温(K., Lewin)提出的一种应用于社会科学的研究模式。50年代开始用于教育领域。作为一种研究方法和理论联系实践的桥梁,行动研究的主导思想是引导教师通过观察和反思,运用教学理论和方法对课堂上遇到的问题进行分析,并采取一定的行动加以解决,提高教学效果,最终达到教师与教学同步发展的目的。行动研究的特点为解决当前教师迫切需要发展专业技能与培训手段陈旧低效的矛盾的提供了可能。

把行动研究作为教师师资发展的手段,在西方教育界已有很多成功经验。但在中国还只能说是处于起步阶段。90年代初期北京师范大学王蔷教授首次将其引入中国以来,教学行动研究已成为外语教学研究中一种越来越重要的研究形式。在东部地区行动研究蓬勃开展的同时,西部地区一所高校——宁夏固原高等师范专科学校,自2001年起在国际行动研究专家指导下开始了对行动研究的实践和探索。

2004年4-6月,作者对师专行动研究项目的开展情况进行了深入调查并把焦点集中在行动研究对教师发展的作用上。本研究以定性研究为主,通过对教师进行访谈、观摩教师的课堂收集大量信息。为保证研究结果的客观性,在收集数据的过程中也采用了定量研究的方法。定量研究主要是指对19名教师和一百多名学生进行的问卷调查。教师问卷旨在从不同侧面了解教师开展行动研究前后在教学理念方面发生的变化。学生问卷则对行动研究前后的课堂气氛、教学效果及学习自主性展开了调查。

通过对访谈结果以及教师日记和研究报告的定性分析和对调查问卷的定量分析,作者得出以下结论:

1) 师专的实践证明,行动研究是师资发展的有效途径。教师行动研究后产生的变化包括:教师的专业技能提高,自信心的增强,反思意识的提高,教学理念的变化等等。

2) 行动研究可以克服西部地区相对落后的教学条件等不利因素,最终成为改善教学环境,促进教师专业发展的最直接,最有效的手段。

3) 根据对教师教龄及课堂行动研究效果的相关性分析,两变量之间没有显著的相关性。这说明除了教师的教学经验之外,还存在其他因素影响教师的行动研究效果。这一发现为下一阶段的行动研究提出了新的研究方向。

除对教师进行调查之外,作者在自己的课堂上开展了问题为“如何提高非英语专业学生的学习兴趣 and 动机”行动研究。通过这次行动研究,作者记录并反思了自己专业发展的历程并最终提出了自己对兴趣与动机两者关系的理解,作为对情感动机理论的补充。同时,这一理论的提出很好地验证了行动研究 LIVING THEORY 流派关于教师有能力创造自己的教学理论的论断。通过亲身经历的行动研究,作者认识到“行动研究”工作是一种解决理论与实践脱节的有效方法,更是达到专业发展的有效手段。

最后,作者指出了对行动研究与新课程标准的关系进行了探讨。简言之,新课标与行动研究目标是目标与手段的关系。此外,行动研究可以避免在执行新课标过程中出现的理解上的偏差,新课标可以拓宽参与行动研究教师的思路,防止研究的范围和对象过于狭窄,从而为行动研究的提供方向性指导。因此,只有两者有机结合才能真正使目前的外语教学改革工作落到实处。

总之,行动研究为教师的自我发展提供了有效途径。这种由对教师的外在驱动向内在要求的转变对师资发展有着不可估量的推动力。针对目前西部地区师资力量相对薄弱的现状,行动研究在西部地区开展更具现实意义。在强调行动研究对师资发展的推动作用的同时,在论文的最后部分提出了在广大教师中推广行动的几点建议,同时向教学管理机构提出了新要求。

关键词: 师资发展, 行动研究, LIVING THEORY, 新课程标准

Abstract

“Action Research”, a research model was initiated by J. Colier and K. Lewin in America to research on social science, was applied in the educational field in the 1950s. As a research approach and a bridge over theory and practice, action research is learning by doing — a group of people identify a problem, work out to resolve it, see how successful their efforts are, and, if not satisfied, try again. With these distinctive features, action research echoes the new trend of improving professional skills from the inside and changing a traditional training system into an efficient one.

Educationists in the West have accumulated rich experience in using action research as teacher professional development, but this concept is comparatively new to China. Since the introduction of the notion by professional Wang Qiang in Beijing Normal University, educational action research has gained increasing importance in foreign language teaching research. Since 1991, Guyuan Teachers College, an institute in the western province of Ningxia, has sponsored an action research center under the guidance of AR experts from England.

From April, 2004 to June, 2004, the author spent three months there investigating the AR center and with a focus on the impacts of action research on the teachers’ professional development. In this study, priority was given to qualitative study as the main approach to get information through the means of interview and observation. To maximize objectivity, quantitative study is also used on the basis of two sets of questionnaires. The teachers questionnaire was designed to gain evidence of their changing beliefs. The students questionnaires were distributed to more than one hundred students to get their evaluations on classroom atmosphere, teaching effects and students’ autonomy before and after AR.

Several findings came to light after the data collection and analysis:

1) This action research exercise has equipped participants with the means to further their quest for professional recognition. The participants reported that they have improved professional skills, increased confidence, increased reflectivity and changed teaching beliefs.

2) In western regions, unfavourable factors such as lacking teaching and human resources will not impede action research as teacher development. On the contrary, action research can greatly facilitate the teachers’ professional development and improve the teaching environment.

3) According to the correlation analysis of teachers’ experience and their effect on their classroom AR, the two variables are not significantly related, indicating that there must be some other factors which influence the impact of AR. This new finding presents AR practitioners with a new research orientation.

In addition to the investigation on the teachers AR project, an independent case study was conducted with a focus on how to foster non-English majors’ interest and motivation. In the process, the author adjusted teaching behaviour to the unpredictable classroom and achieved a deeper understanding of the theory of action research. The professional development process was recorded and the study was so productive that the author finally presented her new understanding about the relationship between interest and motivation.

The finding not only serves as a complement of current educational theory but also can be seen as evidence that teachers are capable of creating their own theories, a process which is valued by the Living Theory approach. Therefore, this personal experience of AR is consistent with the outcomes of prior investigations on teachers, pointing to the fact that AR is a potential means of professional development for language teachers.

It is concluded that, in relation to the New Curriculum, AR can serve as a means to an end. However, the relationship goes beyond this in the sense that, on the one hand, AR can help teachers avoid departing from the original intention when implementing the NC. On the other hand, the NC can broaden the vision of teachers and prevent teachers' AR concerns from being too narrow. Consequently, a combination of the two is helpful to the current foreign language teaching reform.

Based on the investigation and the author's own experiences in action research, the hypothesis that action research can be an alternative for teachers' professional development is testified. The shift from the outside demand to inside request is a powerful force that will push the cause of teachers' professional development forward. Furthermore, considering the unfavourable teaching situation in China, AR is more meaningful for teacher development in western regions. In the end, suggestions are put forward for the expansion of AR, which places new demands on the part of administrators at different levels of language teaching organizations.

Key Words: teacher development, action research, Living Theory, the New Curriculum

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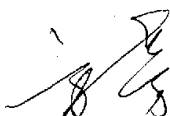
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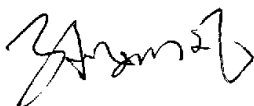
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Part One Introduction

1.1 New Demands and Challenges on Language Teachers

The foreign language teaching profession today is facing the challenges of ever increasing enrolment of students and a shortage of qualified educators. Meanwhile a nationwide education reform including the development of national standards for foreign language learning has also created new tasks on foreign language teachers to accomplish. The new curriculum, which is scheduled for nationwide implementation by the year of 2005, has made it clear: "The new curriculum has a new rationale; the new curriculum targets, new learning and teaching approaches and a new evaluation system." "They[teachers] will have to update their views on language and language education, and adopt new approaches to language teaching...(NC, 2002)".

However, the present situation for teachers' professional development in China is far from satisfactory. The current problems include limited channels for training teachers, the mis-perception about teachers' training and the problems of training courses. Due to such reasons, only some of the teachers are provided with the opportunity to develop their professional skills through organized training while others are left behind. As for the second problem, educational staff development is only provided by administrators through occasional on-the job sessions, consisting of a few days of training each year. These training programs are not effective as far as providing the knowledge the teachers need to cope with the job requirements and the classroom demands.

The new demands are urging professional education to shift from the training-alone focus to life-long professional development. Since the early eighties a number of approaches on teacher professional development have been proposed and tested in classrooms. Action research (AR), which focuses on the teacher as a researcher in classroom activities, becomes the most influential theory on motivating teachers for professional development. For it "involves teachers in generating their ideas about professional development. For it "involves teachers in generating their ideas about

classroom practice and being involved in the process (Burns, 1999)". Therefore, educators see AR as an effective alternative form of professional development for EFL teachers. Research on AR as professional development has mushroomed especially in the previous decades.

1.2 A Brief Review of AR as Teacher Professional Development

AR has been in practice for some quite time in the Western world. The idea of "AR" can be traced back to Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist and educator in the 1940s. Stephen Corey at Teachers College at Columbia University was among the first to use AR in the field of education. Since then, different key figures have taken the originator's ideas forward, notably Professor John Elliott at the University of Norwich in East Anglia, until recently Professor Pamela Lomax at Kingston University in London, and Dr. Jack Whitehead at the University of Bath. The values, philosophies and practices of AR are spreading to many other universities across the western world, for example, Victoria and Deakin Universities in Australia, Hamilton University in New Zealand, and the University of Salzburg in Austria to name but a few (Tian Fengjun & Moira Laidlaw, 2003).

According to the literature reviewed by this author, teachers who become involved with AR see themselves transformed in fundamental ways. They become more confident in their own opinions, more able to articulate their intentions, more reflective of their teaching, and more critical. In addition, teachers who have carried out AR report that they see themselves as experts in their field and as better problem solvers. Furthermore these professionals experienced increased self-awareness and a sense of personal and professional growth.

Nowadays, a number of AR networks with different focuses and objectives could be working effectively in spreading the new concept. The Collaborative AR Network (CARN), established by John Elliott, is one of them. This is a long-term AR project to develop knowledge, skills and resources for AR and related activities. Indeed there is a world congresses on AR. The third World Congress took place at Bath University under the

auspices of Professor Pam Lomax, and Dr. Jack Whitehead. There is a new forum at the American Educational Research Association annual conference on educational AR, one of the biggest forums in the whole conference (Tian Fengjun & Moira Laidlaw, 2003) .

AR not only enjoys popularity abroad but also is becoming known in China. Since the introduction of AR by Wang Qiang in 1990, more and more people become familiar with the notion of AR. The Sino-British MA-Certificate TEFL Programme at Beijing Normal University, sponsored by Wang Qiang in 1990, served as a pioneering project. In the following years, numerous studies on AR teacher training and teacher development have been reported. For example, AR has been introduced into the pre-service teacher development course at Zhejiang Normal University(Wu Zongjie, 1995), and an attempt has been made at Xinan Normal University to incorporate AR into in-service teacher's sustainable development(Wu Xin, 1996).

At present, the majority of studies are being carried out in developed regions where teacher development programs have been available. Therefore, to what extent AR can be the applied in western regions where teaching resources are limited is still an issue that needs to be addressed. Take Wang Qiang's AR project for instance, she included the project as a compulsory and complimentary part of the training program for teachers at Beijing Normal University. But for teachers in western, poverty-stricken regions, few of them have the opportunity to participate in a program aimed at improving their teaching skills. Can AR also be a potential means to enrich the teachers' professional development in those regions? With these questions in mind, I conducted a research at Guyuan Teachers College (GTC) for three months, during which time I attended the staff meetings and participated in discussions. I also personally engaged in the on going project on AR at GTC conducted by the British Volunteer Service Organization. As a result, I obtained first-hand data on what kind of roles the AR plays on teachers' professional development and what the challenges and opportunities are for the professionals.

1.3 Significance of This Study

My study was based on a research project on AR in GTC and my independent case study on this topic. The study was designed to first assess whether, according to the perception of the participants, AR was an effective alternative form of professional development for EFL teachers, and in what aspects AR influences teachers and to what extent such influences reach. An exploration on the correlation between teachers' experience and the results of such practice was also conducted in the hope that it would shed some light on improving the efficiency of doing AR. Further analysis of the efficacy-related factors brings a new focus on action research. Hopefully, other action researchers will be interested in the new focus and carry AR research forward.

Another critical viewpoint stems from my personal AR experience. The new AR model, the Living Theory, which values the participants' creation of their own theory in the classroom indeed does what it claims — an innovative way of achieving life-long professional development. It is also worth mentioning that my understanding of the relationship of interest and motivation is intimately linked to classroom practices, which may help teachers get some valuable ideas before engaging in similar educational settings.

In short, this study is significant in that it adds to the growing knowledge base on AR, serves as a potential means to meet New Curriculum. It is my hope that other educational administrators at different levels may be able to refer to this study when searching for alternative professional development programs.

1.4 Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of five chapters: Part one is the introduction. Part two is a review of the literature on the theory and practice of AR, educational staff development, and AR as staff development. Starting with a number of definitions of teacher development, Part two discusses disadvantages of current teacher development practices and presents the challenge of finding an alternative to meet the urgent need of teacher development. As a

result, AR is put forward as a response to the challenge. By summarizing the nature of AR, the point that AR might be a potential solution to the urgent need of teacher development is illustrated. Finally, the chapter gives a brief account of "AR as teacher development" at home and abroad.

Part three deals with AR as teacher development based on an investigation on the practice of AR in GTC. In this chapter, a detailed description of the whole process of the AR project being conducted in GTC is given. Then, a study which evaluated teachers' attitudes and views of the AR project is described. In order to minimize subjectivity, I chose to use both quantitative analysis as well as qualitative analysis in my thesis. Through qualitative analysis, seven categories of emerging themes are drawn from interviews with teachers taking part in the AR project. Quantitative analysis finally helps us to make sense of the relation between teachers' teaching experience and the effect of doing AR. The chapter ends with some implications of research findings for teacher education.

Part four is a description of a personal experience with AR. My AR process supports the idea that individuals have the potential of creating their own educational theory. I see my AR as a process of experiencing "living contradiction" and coming up with my living education theory: the relationship between interest and motivation. A chart is drawn to illustrate the complicated interactions, followed by my reflection on professional development tools and insights from personal practice.

Part five focuses on the relationship between AR and the new curriculum. China needs not only a New Curriculum, but also the innovative ideas and guidelines on how to implement the curriculum. AR can facilitate the implementation process. The model I developed and the research conducted in Guyuan may be one of the answers to the challenges of implementation.

Part six is a conclusion to the entire thesis. In this section, I discussed the contributions of the AR project to the field and presented my own suggestions on how to promote AR in China, such proposals may include establishing an AR network in China, integrating action research in training programs, etc. The whole dissertation ends with

some recommendations for further study and call for a new government sponsored requirement from China's educational authorities to include AR implementation as part of pre- and in-service teacher development.

Part Two Review of Literature

2.1 Overview of Professional Development

Teacher development is a hot debated issue in the western educational field. The core of teacher development, “reflection and development”, can be traced back to the twentieth century, when Duwei first presented his theory. The conception had exerted great influence on the whole development of education in the west.

In education, professional development refers to the ongoing and consistent procedures in language teachers' professional development in knowledge, thinking and teaching effectiveness (Monica, 2002). Professional development is perceived as a variety of activities in which teachers are involved to be able to improve their practice. Sparks defined professional development as “those processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills, or attitudes of school employees” (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990). In these definitions, special stress is laid on teaching experience and expertise.

The following definitions, however, lay much emphasis on the personal growth aspect. Gabriel defined professional development as “an ongoing learning process in which teachers engage voluntarily to learn how best to adjust their teaching to the learning needs of their students”(Gabriel, 2003). Dillon-Peterson (1981) states that staff development in education is “a process designed to foster personal and professional growth for individuals within a respectful, supportive, positive organizational climate having as its ultimate aim better learning for students and continuous, responsible self-renewal for educators and schools”. “Professional growth means enabling teachers to generate their own ideas about classroom practice” (Burns, 1999).

From a humanistic and psychological point of view, Underhill (1991) defines teacher development as “one version of personal development[...] personal development as a teacher”. He sees “the process of development as the process of increasing out conscious choice about the way we think, feel and behave as a teacher. It is about the inner world of

responses that we make to the outer world of the classroom..." (Underhill 1991).

2.1.1 New Trends and Beliefs of Teacher Development

From the above definitions, we can see that the concept of teacher preparation has undergone the following changes: from "teacher training" to "teacher education", then to "teacher development". "Teacher training" aims to provide direct solutions to some anticipated problems. It emphasizes practicing low-inference skills. By contrast, "teacher education" focuses on the exploration of teachers' thinking ability and the enhancement of theoretical knowledge so as to enable teachers to have a macro understanding of teaching and over-emphasizes the authority of theory. An inevitable outcome of theory-focused teacher education is the separation of theory and practice. Until recently, people realize that, in addition to the teaching skills and theories, teachers need to develop the ability of self-reflection and the competence of self-development. Thus, The term "teacher development" was coined as something separate and different from 'teacher training'. By development, it means learning carried out by practitioners already working in the classroom, and implies informal learning either individually or in collaboration with colleagues.

In 1990, Richard and Nunan summarized the trends of second language teacher education as the following:

—a movement away from a "training perspective" to an "education" perspective, and recognition that effective teaching involves higher-level cognitive processes, which cannot be taught directly.

—the need for teachers and student teachers to adopt a research orientation to their own classroom and their own teaching

—less emphasis on prescriptions and top-down directives and more emphasis on an inquiry-based and discovery-oriented approach to learning(bottom-up)

—less dependence on linguistics and language theory as a source discipline for second language teacher education and more of an attempt to integrate sound, educationally based approaches

—use of procedures that involve teachers in gathering and analysing data about teaching

(Richard & Nunan, 1990)

The new trend of teacher development sees “adopting a research orientation in classroom” as its basic idea, which departs from the traditional view of “teaching as knowledge imparting”. It combines three processes, the process of teaching, reflecting and researching, in language teaching into one thing. The new trend values reflective teaching, which is based on the assumption that teachers can improve their understanding of teaching and the quality of their teaching by reflecting critically on their teaching experience. The ability of reflecting can not be taught directly by “top-down” directives but be improved gradually through “bottom-up” practice. However, reflection is good for teacher development but not enough. Only structured or systematic reflection is effective. Therefore, reflective teaching should be conducted systematically, involving teacher in data-collection and data-analysis.

The new orientation aims to prevent the separation of practice from theory. Further, it encourages teachers to test, even reach a new understanding of the existing theory. In an ideal teaching environment, teachers are no longer told which theory and method to adopt, but are encouraged to find the solution to the problem through their own efforts. It is now widely accepted that professional development can not be only achieved through sporadic teacher training programs, but by developing an awareness of inquiry-identification and the ability of problem-solving. Only when teachers take initiative in teaching and turn the teaching practice into a research process can they achieve real life-long development. And this development will inevitably take place in classroom since it is the only place where practice meets with theory.

2.1.2 Limitation of the Traditional Professional Development

Though the beliefs about teacher professional growth have been updated, the practice of teacher development has long been falling behind the beliefs. During the past twenty years teacher development has changed the name: staff development, professional development, and resource development. But whatever it was called, it too often was essentially the same thing- educators... sitting relatively passively while an “expert” “exposed” them to new ideas or trained them in new practices (Sparks, 1994).

Staff development, by and large, was seen as workshops held a few times a year that teachers were required to attend and that, might not mean much to teachers since the new theory presented in the workshop and classroom reality may have very little in common. The knowledge that experts in their fields normally bring to these meetings "has been produced and accumulated in scientific research settings for use by others in practical settings"(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). This traditional concept of knowledge separates theory from practice and it views knowledge as what is created in controlled environments by experts.

The limitations of large-scale sporadic in-service events are evident both in terms of focus areas and the varying levels of teacher experience and needs. Studies generally support the idea that in-service programs are poorly planned, inadequately executed and lacking a proper evaluative process(Brim and Tollet,1974). Research further indicates that effective educational staff development should be based on the reality of teaching, and it should aim at teachers' concerns.

In summary, training sessions should not be seen only as a time-off for teachers to temporarily leave their classroom and receive 'knowledge' from 'experts'. In other word, any training course that departs from the reality of teaching might not mean much to teachers. What we need is training sessions that could provide with the solutions for the problems of teachers with different backgrounds, that could enable them interact themselves with theory and classroom practice. Teachers, who have accumulated valuable experience, should be provided a platform to share their ideas and suggestions. Furthermore, to ensure the long-term training effect, teachers should be encouraged to evaluate what happens in the classroom, and to have their own ideas on how the language teaching shall be done, to respond to demands of their own professional development.

2.1.3 Teacher Training and Professional Development in China

Aware of the importance of teacher training, many experts and professional training institutions in China have been committing themselves to teachers' professional development. However, teachers' professional development in China is still at the "teacher

training” and “teacher education” stage. Training merely deals with building specific teaching skills, for instance, directing a teacher to teach a dialogue, to teach vocabulary or to prepare a teaching plan. Though some training programs focus on the new educational theories, theories are always presented without referring to classroom practice. It is also found that teacher training is often a static process, and teachers are supposed to improve their professional skills by taking part in one or two training programs. To what extent these training programs are effective is still unknown. In order to improve the situation, a growing number of researchers are inquiring into the current situation of teacher training in China in attempt to explore new training patterns as well as offer constructive suggestions.

Some researchers suggested establishing a diversified training system rooted in the institute- and school-based training project (Cheng Hong, 2003). Others attempted to apply information technology to teacher training programs. These new models succeed in supporting teacher education by sharing information on the Internet. But the two new training models are not without their own limitations. The former is too theory-focused and the later fails to bridge the gap between theory and practice though solving the contradiction, to some degree, of the increasing demand for training and the shortage of training opportunities. As a matter of fact, no training pattern is perfect and can well serve the needs of trainees. In Wang Zhiru's words, this is because the present training models are “behavioristic.” Behaviorism focuses on a new behavioral pattern being repeated until it becomes automatic. As the terms implies, a behavioristic training model views learning as a stimulus-response process. This view maintains that favorable input will necessarily lead to good output provided that there is enough mechanical practice (Wang Zhiru, 2001). In response to such a belief, the aim of this approach to teacher training is to teach the four separate skills--listening, speaking, reading and writing by use of imitating and repetition.

To have an overall understanding of the present situation of teacher training in China, a small scale investigation was administrated to the English teachers in the English department of Ningxia University (See Appendix A). In this survey, 52 in-service English teachers were randomly chosen and each given a questionnaire. Of the fifty-two questionnaires that were distributed, 50 copies were returned as valid. The questionnaire

was adapted from the Questionnaire on the Training Situation on Secondary School Teacher. Thus, its validity and reliability was guaranteed. Consisting of two parts, training situation and the demand for further education, the questionnaire covers such aspects as training times, contents, methods and evaluations on the effects of training. All the items in the questionnaire take the form of multiple choices questions. The following table shows the teachers' responses to the items.

Table 1.1: Teachers Response to the Multiple Choice Items

Training situation	Average times/percentage	Average times/percentage	Average times/percentage	Average times/percentage	Average times/percentage
Average training times of different school age	1-10 year(s) (1.63times)	11-20 year(s) (1.63 times)	21-30 year(s) (1.70times)		
Difficulty in attending in teacher training programs	Lack of training opportunities (64.0%)	Heavy teaching loads(36.0%)	District constraint (10.0%)	High training fees (4.0%)	
Organization	Domestic training organizations (56.0%)	School-based training (48.0%)	Overseas training organizations (16.0%)		
Training program	Educational theories (40.0%)	Teaching material & teaching methods(16.0%)	Multi-media teaching (16.0%)	Specific teaching skills (14.0%)	Evaluation, assessment and testing (8%)
Patterns of training	Classes for advanced studies (30%)	Training in summer and winter vacations (22.0%)	Off-job training (16.0%)	In-job training (8.0%)	Short-term off-job training (less than three months)(4.0%)
Evaluations on training effects	Guiding teaching practice (32.0%)	Formalistic (14.0%)	Improving professional skills (14.0%)	Not achieving anticipated training goal(10.0%)	Means of getting promoted (6.0%)
Future training demands	Educational theories (52.0%)	Means of achieving self-professional development(50.0%)	Research methods (44%)	Teaching skills and methods (24%)	

The survey shows that the leading problem of training is that training is not available for most of the teachers, partly because scarce in-service training opportunities are provided and partly because teachers are working with heavy teaching loads. For analyzing purposes, training times of teachers are divided into three phases according to their school of age: 1-10 years; 11-20 years and 21-30 years. It is found that there is no striking difference among the teachers' training times that they participated in, with 1.63, 1.63, 1.70 times respectively. And those teachers who have never been trained account for 15.56 % of the total respondents.

Table 1.1 also indicates that a large percentage of training is organized by domestic training institutes or school-based training programs. Teachers also reported that advanced study for the purpose of getting certificates becomes the most popular training pattern. But it is a fact that this kind of training values learning teaching and learning theories rather than classroom-related issues. In addition, training programs that are held in summer and winter vacations become widely accepted forms because only then many teachers are able temporarily to escape heavy teaching loads to update their knowledge. On the evaluation of the training courses, most teachers confirmed that they had applied what they had learned into classroom practice and to some extent the methods work. However, 30% of teachers still hold that the current training projects have not attained the training goal due to the inherent weaknesses of the training system. When it comes to the issue of the demands of future training, teachers express their desire for learning the up-to-date theories concerning language teaching and learning. 50% of the teachers are concerned about being equipped with the means of self-development, not just satisfied with improving their teaching skills or approaches through these training courses. This feedback indicates that teachers are shifting to a life-long teacher development model, whereas the traditional form of a teacher training course cannot satisfy such a new demand.

In general, the result of the survey conducted in Ningxia University is in accordance with the report of researchers in this field. And the two leading issues which occurred in the present training programs are: 1) the training institutions are small in number, which

could hardly meet the teaching staffs' urgent need of improving their professional skills, and 2) the inherent limitations of the existing training systems. The following table ranks the problems of the current training system in the light of the statistics collected by the questionnaire:

Table 1.2: Problems in the Existing Training Projects and the Percentage

Problems in the existing training projects	Person-time Total respondents: 50	Percentage of total respondents
Without considering the needs of different teaching groups	19	38.0%
Lack of appropriate training tracking systems	15	30.0%
Lack of reasonable training evaluation systems	15	30.0%
Separating theory from the practice	14	46.7%
Without flexible and multi-training systems	13	26.0%
Not having concern about teachers' life-long development	12	24.0%
Not trainee-centered; lack trainees' active participation	10	20.0%
Too much emphasis on macro-aspects such as teaching skills and educational theories	4	8.0%
Focusing on performance instead of competence	4	8.0%
Too much emphasis on micro-aspects such as teaching skills	3	6.0%
Age constraint	1	2.0%
Unsystematic	1	2.0%

In summary, apart from common problems in the training system at home and abroad, China has its own problems, such as no sufficient training opportunities, lack of flexible training patterns to meet diversified needs, lack of systematic training, and many others. Nevertheless, the survey reveals that more and more teachers come to realize the significance of self-development. As sporadic training cannot be relied on to solve all the problems that take place in classroom practice, teachers must turn to more effective means to achieve life-long professional development. And training on its own may not be expected to provide the answer to the problem. In other words, training alone may not

solve the problem. One way to approach this is to readjust the training goal of the current training system, that is, all the training courses of various forms should serve teachers' needs of achieving self-professional development. In this way, training effectiveness may be maximized and the self-development-oriented training system will no longer be limited by time or space.

2.2 Action Research

The following section is a review of the current literature on the theory and practice of AR, educational staff development, and AR as staff development.

2.2.1 What is Action Research

AR has been defined in a number of ways:

AR is "the study of a social situation with a view to improve the quality of action within it".

(John Elliott, 1991)

(AR) is characterized by a continuing effort to closely interlink, relate and confront action and reflection, to reflect upon one's conscious and unconscious doings in order to develop one's actions and to act reflectively in order to develop one's knowledge.

(Altrichter, Posch and Somekh, 1993)

Action Research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research. It is based on the following assumptions that teachers and principals work best on problems they have identified for themselves.

(Watts, 1985)

But the most widely accepted one is put forward by Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis. In their book *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*. They write:

AR is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or education practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations (and institutions) in which these practices are carried out.

(Carr and Kemmis, 1986)

Though these definitions explore AR from different perspectives, they share some common features: AR, as a systematic reflective activity, is carried out by people directly concerned with the social situation. It starts from practical questions arising from practitioners' concerns in their everyday work and follows a procedure that contains a series of steps. The findings of AR are fed back directly into practice with the aim of bringing about change, at the same time, developing an understanding of the research process.

To put it simply, AR is 'learning by doing'— a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts are, and, if not satisfied, try again. AR can be defined as a combination of the terms "action" and "research." The main aim of AR is to bring about change. It is situational or content-based, collaborative, participatory, and self-evaluative (Cohen and Manion 1980). It is "problem focused," mainly "concerned with a single case in a specific situation," and tries to find solutions to the problem in focus. It not only encourages teachers to compare methods and ideas with a critical eye, and to adopt these ideas into their teaching environment (Nunan 1988), but engages them in their teaching in a deeper way. In this way teacher's awareness of theory is also raised.

2.2.2 Issues Raised by AR

AR is a radical research methodology, which challenges the assumptions and status of traditional research. Not surprisingly it is subject to attacks by those who value the traditional research grounded in experimental design. The frequently asked questions on AR are:

1. Can we generalize from AR? If not, can we add the findings of AR to knowledge?

Often, we can't generalise from AR. In other words, we can often make claims only about the people or situations we studied. It may not safely come to the conclusion that other people or other systems are the same. For that matter, it may be hazardous to assume that what is true of one context will be true of another setting.

This is often viewed as one of the major disadvantages of AR. Experimental research, if done well, does allow generalisation. An experimental claim can often be taken to be applicable universally. The issue can also be looked at in a different way. Generalisability might be regarded as global relevance — the ability to apply a finding from one experimental setting into other settings. “AR then pursues local relevance, if necessary at the expense of global relevance. Experimentation often achieves global relevance, but at the cost of being difficult to apply practically to local situations” (Dick & Swepson, 1997).

In addition, there are ways in which some generalizability can be claimed for the findings of AR. For example, if several studies in diverse settings give similar findings, this allows greater generalisability than a single study typically does. Similar actions may produce similar outcomes in different situations; this implies generalisability. One can also use indirectly-relevant literatures to test the relevance of findings.

2. How can AR justify its conclusions?

Some opponents refer to causal explanation that is often offered by AR. They state that when almost everything has an effect on almost everything else, it can not safely come to the conclusion that “b” is the outcome of “a”. On occasions, the understanding developed by AR may be causal — a causal connection between certain actions and certain outcomes. Such a connection is then tested when the planned actions are carried out. AR can give causal explanations in this sense. But the supporters argue that it is true that “b” may not be the outcome of “a”, but action researcher can prove that “a” might influence “b”. The point is that AR is conducted to produce action, not to identify

relationship of variables as traditional researches do. As long as we can prove that "I can often achieve outcome Z by doing action "X", that is enough. In this sense, AR deserves to be pursued. Moreover, causal explanations are useful when there are too many variables, and they interact in complex ways. In this situation, even empirical research may fail to provide a satisfying explanation.

3. Can AR be regarded as science, and therefore substitute for experimental research?

By some definitions AR is science. By other definitions it complements science. Those who argue for it recognize that it shares with other approaches a pursuit of understanding. It values skepticism and empiricism. That is, in pursuing knowledge it strives vigorously to challenge present views, and it uses evidence to do that. Therefore, if science is systematic and skeptical empiricism, then AR is scientific.

Those who think it is not science point to a number of ways in which it differs from some other scientific paradigms. For example, AR:

- does not usually provide causal explanations of what is studied
- usually does not attempt to answer questions which are as precise as those addressed by e.g. experimental research
- mostly uses qualitative data
- is done by researchers who do not make the same effort to distance themselves from what they are researching; in fact, they often set out to build close relationships with the people within the system studied
- uses a research process which, rather than being standardised, is modified on the run in response to what happens
- does not necessarily seek explanations at a more specific level than the phenomena it is dealing with -- that is, it tends not to be "reductionist".

(Dick & Swepson, 1997)

Because of the differences between experimental science and AR, some would not regard AR as sufficiently rigorous to be regarded as science. In any event, AR can provide a useful contribution to knowledge, both in its own right and as a complement to more traditional approaches to research. It can provide more "realistic" explanations. If necessary, more traditional methods can then be used to develop causal explanations, and

to check how well the explanations can be generalised to other situations.

Furthermore, AR is not intended as a substitute for experimental research. Different research paradigms serve different purposes. There are situations where experimental researches are presently used. But there are other situations where AR may be far better suited. For instance, if researchers wish to find out about a few variables, and the causal relationships between them, experimental research is preferable. Alternatively, AR is more appropriate when the researcher do not know where to start, or when they wish to explore something in depth. In short, good research is research which uses a methodology that fits the situation. Sometimes, that is AR. Sometimes it is something else.

2.2.3 A Comparison Between Two AR Models and Traditional Research Paradigm

Among the various paradigms of AR, two models are quite influential: the traditional form of AR and the Living Theory Approach. Understanding these models and the underpinning basis will help us know their advantages and disadvantages.

The traditional AR model follows six steps as part of the AR process (a) identifying a focus issue, (b) gathering information about the issue, (c) using that information to design changes in classroom procedure, (d) gathering information about the issue, (e) observing changes this implementation brought about in the classroom, and (f) reflecting on the pedagogical implications of the information this observation yielded (Elliott, 1991).

The underpinning psychological basis of traditional AR is constructivism¹, which is the further development of cognitivism. It holds that the understanding and meaning making of the outside world is up to every individual. Contrast to behaviorism, constructivism emphasizes the inner side of learners, on "the sense that learners themselves seek to make of their worlds, and the cognitive or mental processes that they bring to the task of learning" (Williams & Burden, 1997).

¹ **Constructivism** – constructivism or constructivists advocate that knowledge and understanding of the complex world of living experience can only be valid through the point of view and interpretation of those who live it. Knowledge is built through individual reconstructions built around a consensus. Constructivists advocate that there are multiple realities, which are local and specific to certain context

In the constructivists' view, learning is not a simple reception or transmission of knowledge, but an active process of construction personal meaning upon existing experience schema and belief. It is an interaction between previous experience and new information. And because different learner has difference experience, they will have different understanding of the new information.

The following table is the comparison of three research approaches or paradigms: traditional research, traditional form of AR and the Living Theory Approach:

Table 2.1: A comparison of Two AR Model and Traditional Research

	Traditional Research	Traditional Form of EAR	Living Theory Approach
Theory underpinning		constructivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'I' incorporated into research enquiry; ● Living contradiction; ● Explanation for improvement ● living educational theory created by individuals
Representative figures		John Elliott Stephen Kemmis Richard Winter	Jack Whitehead Jean McNiff Moira Laidlaw
Research aims	make general theoretical statements: generalisability	Problem-focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Improving something ● Problem-focused ● Individually-oriented ● Creating theory
Creator of theory	Researchers	Teachers and theorists/academics	Teachers and other practitioners/ academics
Social value	of limited social value	of some social value	of great social value
Research subject	Students classrooms, large groups	Students, teachers	Educational theory or the teachers/researchers themselves
Relationship between Theory and practice	Theory→practice	AR theory→practice→ linguistic theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Practice precedes theory. ● Praxis sought.
Other features	Product-focused	Process & product-focused	Process & product-focused

- EAR = educational action research
- * praxis = the perfect melding of theory and practice.

2.2.4 Characteristics and Nature of AR

AR is different from conventional or traditional types of research because, rather than making general theoretical statements, it focuses on specific problems in professional practice. Kemmis and McTaggart(1988) summarize the characteristics of AR as: (1) it is carried out by practitioners rather than outside researchers; (2) it is collaborative; (3) it is aimed at implementing change.

Apart from the widely accepted features, I intend to add other four elements of this new notion: 1) marrying theory with practice, 2) having reflective teaching as its core, 3) adopting a qualitative research rationale, and 4) holding a humanistic perspective.

2.2.4.1 Bridging the gap between theory and practice

“Theory separated from practice slips into abstract speculation and the ramification of the jargon; practice separated from theory slips into self-justificatory reaction or self-perpetuating routine”(Winter, 1989). Carr and Kemmis also mentioned the need to marry practice with theory.

The relationship between theory and practice is a central problem teachers may encounter in their teaching activities. Traditional educational researches are always done by outside academics and do not take teachers' concerns into account. Therefore, instead of doing practical work in the classroom, they only think of an image about some assumptions which are waiting for being justified or tested out. This is the almost complete separation between research on the one hand and practice on the other hand.

AR starts from identifying a specific problem in a particular setting, then takes actions to change the situation in the hope of coming to an theory of language teaching. Thus, practice questions theory and theory questions practice in a spiral cycle of “practice—theory—practice.....”. It helps to keep theory and action as one body, not two distinct entities in the sense that the findings and the theories developed from this research are relevant to be applied into classroom by teachers. Another advantage is that many AR practitioners might then be able to understand the more technical research

articles. While traditional educational researchers understand the more technical research techniques in the classroom in an abstract way.

2.2.4.2 The core of AR: reflective teaching

AR is an extension of reflective teaching, a more formal and concrete version of reflective teaching. As reflective teachers, you assess your classroom practices many times every day and make decisions about maintaining them or changing them. In the course of AR, you identify classroom practices to assess, collect data about those practices over an extended period of time, analyze the data and then make decisions based on your analysis.

Loughran summarizes the concept of reflection in this way: "I consider reflection as the purposeful, deliberate act of inquiry into one's thoughts and actions through which a perceived problem is examined in order that a thoughtful, reasoned response might be tested out" (Loughran 1996).

Wallace(1991), in his excellent book on reflective teaching argues that reflective teaching provides a way of developing professional competence by integrating two source of knowledge: 'Received' knowledge and 'experiential' knowledge. They offer basis and condition for reflection. A reflective practice model of professional development can well illustrate the process of reflection:

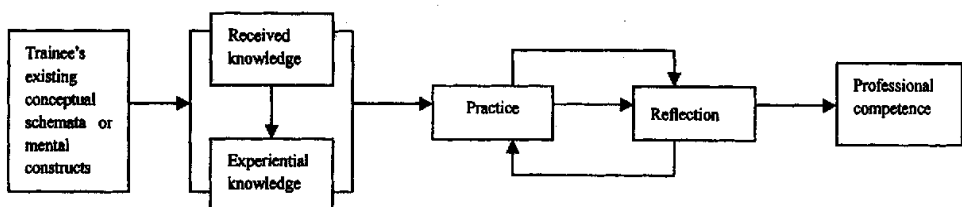


Figure 1.1: A reflective Practice Model of Professional Development (Wallace, 1991)

“Received” knowledge refers to facts, data, theories, etc. It is associated with the study of a particular profession. “Experiential” knowledge refers to professional action or one’s own practical experience. “Experiential” knowledge is usually related to one’s professional actions. The practicing teachers can reflect on the “received” knowledge in

the light of classroom experience, and on the other hand, classroom experience can feed back into the “received” knowledge. This model tells us the equal importance of theory and experience in teacher development. And the way to bridge them up is reflective teaching. In reflective teaching, teachers are not only a practitioner, but also a researcher. Language teaching and research has merged into one. It helps teachers to form a kind of thinking in action. It develops teachers into an active problem-solver and decision-maker.

It has to be recognized, however, that not all types of reflection are productive. Contemplating problems does not necessarily lead to solving them. Only structured reflection is effective. Reflecting in a systematic way, action research is to solve practical problems in specific situations. It involves the collection and analysis of data. This is done so that we can reflect on what we have discovered and apply it to our professional action. And reflective thinking is usually placed in a loop process, that means the process can be repeated (reframing the problem, collecting fresh data, rethinking our analysis, etc.) until we have found a solution that satisfies us (Wallace, 1991).

2.2.4.3 the Research Methods and the Rationales

AR is conducted in naturally occurring setting primarily using methods common to qualitative research² (Nunan, 1992). In qualitative research, researchers interact with those they study over a prolonged period of time. Similarly in AR, the research – practitioner interacts with her subjects throughout the entire research project for extended periods of time. Creswell (1994) states that “qualitative research methods suggest that the process is more important than the outcomes or products. AR is concerned more with questions and possibilities related to the study than with conclusions”. According to his statements, qualitative researchers are interested in meaning – how people understand their lives, experiences, and their world. The qualitative researcher is the main tool for collection and analysis of data. In qualitative studies, data are interpreted through the researcher instead of inventories, questionnaires, or machines (Creswell, 1994). In AR,

² **Qualitative research** – research method which accepts multiple realities, and which is more concerned with questions and possibilities than with conclusions. According to Dertzin and Guba, qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make use of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them.

the practitioner is in control of the entire process, collecting and analyzing data through a personal perspective.

Not surprisingly, in a typical AR report, action researchers prefer to use natural language rather than numbers when presenting data. But giving priority to qualitative approaches in AR does not necessarily mean restricting the use of quantitative approaches. As two approaches serve different purposes, qualitative research techniques can help researchers develop a good understanding of small, specific cases, quantitative research techniques, on the other hand, provide practitioners with the tool of examining a larger number of cases simultaneously, getting statistical data and analysis. Therefore, Qualitative and quantitative approaches³ can often complement each other well.

Qualitative modes of inquiry rely on personal, context-based accounts. For that matter, many traditional researchers question the validity of AR. To increase the reliability and credibility of the study, minimize the researchers' biases and inclinations, apart from quantitative approaches, AR uses triangulation in the research process as a powerful means. Triangulation is the process of using a variety of methods for data-collection, and various data sources, analysis to check the validity of the findings of a study. It is also referred to as a "multi-instrument" approach. In a strict sense, to triangulate means to utilize at least three different points of view to analyze a given event or situation. More generally, triangulation is based on the idea that using multiple sources and methods is the best assurance of the validity, reliability and completeness of the collected information.

2.2.4.4 Humanistic Aspect in Perspective

Historically a strong separation had been made between academic research and classroom practice, and consequently between theory and practice. Educational practitioners have been seen as the ones who perform daily classroom tasks unable to create knowledge or solve the problems that arise in their classrooms. Outside

³ Quantitative research – research method based on logical positivism which assumes that there exists one single objective reality separate from feelings and beliefs of individuals, which can be measured by an instrument. The purpose of the research is to establish a relationship between measured variables, and the procedures for quantitative research are established before the study begins. Quantitative research will make use of mostly inductive modes of inquiry. The goal of the study is to establish universal rules, which can be applied to any context.

researchers, who may know little about the reality that teachers face in their daily work, are the ones who often create the knowledge that teachers are to apply to their classrooms.

AR challenges the traditional way of research fundamentally in the sense that it places teachers in a situation of empowerment and enables teachers to control over their work. Such a notion reflects a theme of humanism, the theory presented by Abraham Maslow, who is recognized as the Father of Humanistic Psychology. Maslow's theory is based on the notion that experience is the primary phenomenon in the study of human learning and behavior. He placed emphasis on choice, creativity, values, self-realization, all distinctively human qualities, and believed that meaningfulness and subjectivity were more important than objectivity. AR echoes Maslow's humanistic theory by treating "teachers as researchers". As researchers, teachers are empowered to decide what to improve and how to improve the situation. They are recognized as creative, competent persons, who are capable of presenting valuable ideas. For AR, developing teachers' potential is one of the ultimate concern, which is called a process of achieving self-realization. Stenhouse, in his introduction to curriculum research and development, proposes that teachers should have a "capacity for autonomous professional self-development through systematic self-study, through the study of the work of other teachers and through the testing of ideas by classroom research procedures (Stenhouse, 1975).

Being recognized as researchers, teachers as unique classroom practitioner are given enough concern. As human beings, teachers' potentials are fully recognized and respected. Classroom provides them soil to plant the seed of "new ideas and inspirations" and testify their assumptions. No matter what conclusions may be drawn from the AR practice, one thing is certain: the influence of "humanism" will not be confined to find a solution to a specific problem in a particular context. Working with such a view, teachers, in the end, "will change the world of the school by understanding it"(Rudduck, 1988). Similarly, Carr and Demmis (1986) describe AR as "an embodiment of democratic principles in research, allowing participants to influence, if not determine, the conditions

of their own lives and work, and collaboratively to develop critiques of social conditions which sustain dependence, inequality or exploitation”.

AR empowers teachers to be researchers and therefore teachers are capable of presenting their own understanding of a given issue. This further pushes the idea of humanism forward in the sense that teacher-researchers' competence is fully recognized. Furthermore, teachers' creation of their own theory is an expected outcome of being treated as teachers. Just as McNiff said:

“What is necessary is that teachers should be encouraged to develop their own theories of education from, and through, their own practice: that is, they should be encouraged critically to examine aspects that they feel need improving, and to work systematically to think how to carry out the improvement. What is crucial is that teacher themselves form theories about their own practices. This process of theorizing – that is, forming and reforming theories – is an integral part of good practice.”

(McNiff 1993)

2.3 AR as Teacher Development

Just as Wallace points out, “as professional people, most teachers would accept that our expertise should progressively develop as we continue in our chosen occupation”(Wallace, 1998). Since AR is problem-focused, the teacher doing the research plays the dual roles of a teacher and a researcher. Through systematically collecting data and seeking solutions to specific problems, the teacher can make his or her research more relevant to the everyday practice. Reflection on what has happened can enable the teacher to make decisions on what to do in the future. In fact, the aim of AR is “not to turn the teacher into a researcher, but to help him or her to continue to develop as a teacher”(Wallace, 1998).

Henson (1996) states that:

“AR suggests rigorous examination of one's own practices as a basis for

professional development. The idea of AR is that each school, indeed each classroom, is a laboratory in which the curriculum and problems experienced as problems by teachers, not outside researchers, are subjected to empirical examination by practitioners."

Carr and Kemmis (1986) related the very character of AR to professional development by saying that:

There are two essential aims of AR: to improve and to involve. AR aims at improvement in three areas: firstly the improvement of practice; secondly, the improvement of the understanding of the practice by its practitioners; and thirdly, the involvement of the situation in which the practice takes place. The aim of involvement stands shoulder to shoulder with the aim of improvement.

Kember and Gow (1992) pointed to a further reason why AR would be an effective tool for higher education professional development. They refer to the fact that AR suggests widening of the involved group; therefore, projects may lead towards publications and presentations. That could induce other professionals to test or adopt the innovation of the AR projects. Involving teachers in AR will promote the creation of a learning community. In a learning community, a group which works together to learn or understand, every member is allowed to communicate openly and freely, which is beneficial to higher education professional development.

According to Nunan(1992), for professional development, there are two approaches: 'inside out' approach and 'outside in' approach. The 'inside out' approach, represented by AR, begins with the concerns and interests of practitioners, placing them at the centre of the inquiry process. In contrast, the 'outside in' approach departs from the 'inside out' approach in the sense that an outside 'expert' brings the 'good news' to the practitioner in the form of a one-off workshop or seminar.

In my own view, it is the "inside out" research nature that leads to both individual and group professional development. For teachers, they begin their research by looking into "inside" and find a research focus. To seek solution to the problem, they must reflective on what has happened in the classroom, examine their own practices closely,

and then try out ways to improve the situation. This process is beneficial to teachers' individual development. When something encouraging does happen, they invite their colleague to validate the work they have done, either by observing their class or by making their report public. In this way, more "outside" teachers get involved in professional development process. By working collaboratively, a learning community was developed, which in turn encourage teachers to engage in a further development cycle.

Part Three A Study on an AR Project at Guyuan Teachers College

Though the 21th century sees the great achievements in action research in China, it is too early to claim the current achievements are perfect. It is for the reason that great regional diversities in China call for different specific AR activities to fit in individually by geographic locations. Therefore, more and more efforts should be devoted to the study of AR suitable for China's different educational situation. A literature review revealed that the present situation of the action research development in China is unbalanced: most action research projects are carried out in developed regions and less attention was given to the remote and poverty-stricken areas, where teacher development is more pressing. For teachers in poverty-stricken regions western China, few of them have the chance to participate in such programs to improve their teaching skills. Set in this background, teachers in Guyuan Teachers College, devoted themselves in this new field three years ago and great achievements have been made in theory and practice ever since. This pioneering project in the west appealed to me and offered me the opportunity to complete a study on AR over a period of three-month. During the period, I attended the staff meetings, observed teachers' classes, participated in discussions and even personally engaged in AR process. As a result, I got the first-hand data for interpreting the impact of AR on the professional development of EFL teachers.

3.1 Background Information about This Project

Guyuan Teachers' College, China's Experimental Centre for Educational AR in Foreign Languages Teaching, is the first centre of its kind in the world. In this centre, a new model along with some innovative methodologies of educational research has been developed by the active practice through close communications among the teachers and students alike within the institution. Such experiments have been continuing for the past three years under the leadership of Mr. Tian Fengjun, the dean of GTC, with academic

advice from Dr. Moira Laidlaw, an English AR expert from Bath University.

The model adopted in the Experimental Centre is specifically called the 'Living Theory Approach' to AR. The approach has "Living Theory" as its center piece, with "human" characteristics, which is believed that each individual has something to contribute and the objective of AR is to bring individual potential to the fullest. It follows the six-step procedures, but is more individually-oriented with such inquires as starting with "How can I...". Living Theory Approach is based on three theoretical assumptions as follow.

"1) The first is that "I" is a living I, not a theoretical one, that each "I" is unique in the world. It is based upon an Russian Philosopher, Mikle Flanni, who wrote a book entitled Personal Knowledge in 1958 in Russia, in which he said: "to understand the world from our own point of view". In other words, it gives validity to the idea that an individual can act responsibly with the intention to communicate on a wide scale and create something of value.

2) AR is built on the belief that each one of us is a 'living contradiction'. To put it simply, sometimes we say we believe something, but are unable to live according to what we believe, for a variety of reasons. Here we would experience ourselves, in Jack Whitehead's words, as 'living contradiction'. A point of entry for AR would be to find ways of overcoming the contradiction so that we might live more fully in the direction of our values.

3) The third distinction is the individual "I". When engaging in this cycle of action and reflection, "I" can create something of value. In other words, an engagement between this real 'I' and the people and context around this real 'I' in a systematic enquiry."

(Laidlaw, 2004)

Integrating the above three aspects into one self-study explanation of individual learning constitutes a living educational theory. Compared to the traditional form of AR, it differs in the following two aspects:

Problem-focused VS. professional-growth focused Treating teachers as researchers, the doers, the traditional AR allows teachers to speak for themselves. The Living Theory Approach, however, further empowers action researchers by emphasising more on each individual's potential. Therefore each individual initiates actively to bring the AR into practice and thus contributes to the AR theory. It is well accepted that traditional AR is problem-focused. In the course of seeking solution for the problems, teachers involved in critical thinking may become better professional language practitioners. The development of teaching skills and self reflective ability, however, are often seen as by-products of AR experiment, not the ultimate objective as regarded by some other researchers. The living approach, on the other hand, focuses on helping teachers achieve professional growth while providing an opportunity to find the solution. By emphasising on teachers in the experiment, AR is both growth-focused as well as problem-focused. Now there have emerged two different AR models which in theory hold different views on what constitute research "subject" and "object".

Distinction of subject and object Traditional AR views teachers as subject, who merely initiate a study on the objects of students. While "Living Theory" advocates "always research 'with', never research 'on'". What such approach is concerned about is educational theory not the people: one is not entitled to research on individuals apart from oneself. The underline reason is that each person as a unique individual has a right to speak for oneself, and should not be regarded as objects. The distinction between the two is not obviously differentiated in formality but rather by a perspective of epistemology.

"In traditional forms of research- empirical research-researchers do research on other people. In action research, researchers do research on themselves. Empirical researchers enquire into other people's lives. Action researchers enquire into their own. Action research is a enquiry conducted by the self into the self."

(McNiff 1993)

3.2 The AR Project

Twenty-eight teachers working for the department at that time volunteered to conduct AR in their EFL classes. They were divided into two groups — beginners' group and advanced group. This was how the project was conducted:

In order to help teachers formalize their ideas for their AR projects, AR beginners are required to submit an *Action Plan for Improving Practice*. This plan was to contain the following questions:

- What would I like to improve?
- Why am I concerned about it?
- How can I improve it?
- Who can help me and how?
- When will I know that it has improved?

Once that step was completed, the teachers were asked to begin putting their ideas into practice in their classrooms. At the initial stage, though most faculty members became interested in the concept of developing research in their classrooms, a few of them demonstrated a great deal of skepticism toward the idea. Starting from the five basic questions, most of them were very confused about what they were supposed to do and what their research project entailed. The difficult situation lasted for six months. Then, the situation was improved little by little as the researchers met regularly with others and exchanged ideas in the weekly-held meetings in order to check progress. At these meetings, they were taught how to choose a concern, the means to collect data, ways to keep a reflective journal and write field notes as well as how to use triangulation to avoid biases and subjectivity. Take monitoring the outcomes of learning from the students for instance. The evidence of improvement include such areas as students' better homework, more active participation in class, clear signs of improved understanding in whatever the teacher is focusing on in the research, and even increased confidence in students about what they are learning.

AR researchers worked in collaboration with their colleagues, especially in the form of getting help from learning partners(critical friends), who were willing to discuss AR

sympathetically and offer constructive suggestions. At the same time, teachers were encouraged to visit each other's workplace and observe closely what was happening in their classroom. Observers made notes about their insights and ideas, which became their partners' evidence of improvement. These practices constituted a change from precedents in GTC and helped accomplish a learning environment.

After a research cycle, the researchers were required to present a report on her/his findings. Different in the form of presenting data, all the reports must be submitted to the Validation Group to testify the validity before being made public. Validation Meeting was therefore called for such a purpose. At such a meeting, the validation group, normally consisting of less than ten people, judged the quality of an action researcher's case-study or report. It is a necessary process in the validity of the AR process. "Validity refers to the degree of truth in an account of educational development. Is your research believable and does the research matter? Has it helped to improve something?"(Laidlaw, 2004).

At present, most of them have completed the first cycle of their enquiry and their own findings as living educational theory can be found at an international website: <http://www.actionresearch.net>. At this address you will find case studies of teachers who have used AR to improve their practice. Their enquires cover a variety of aspects, including language teaching, including interest, motivation, self-confidence, pronunciation and listening, reading.

With the accumulated experience from the first cycle, the researchers began the research again. This time, in the advanced group, they were expected to use more efficient methods and strategies in the research. Thus, they were in a better position to generate their own educational theories. The point is that Living Educational Theory is a combination of new ideas and some ideas from others.

Therefore, literary review plays an important role in teachers' new theory creation; otherwise their insights will lack rigor and be less instructive. It was proved that, without exception, only teachers who kept abreast of the latest development in theories were

capable of presenting valuable educational theories of their own.

In April, 2003, I was accepted as a member of the AR group. Because of my dual identity—a participant as well as a researcher—I was then in a better position to get the most from the study. The researcher's role made me sensible to the academic atmosphere in the English Department. The first thing impressed me was that though teachers were free to arrange their after class time, they were often seen stay in the simple teacher's office, exchanging ideas with peers. Compared to the teachers in other universities, they seemed to be freer to communicate, more open to criticism, and more reflective in their daily practice. In order to demonstrate what had happened to them during the past three years, I began my study on the influence of AR upon teachers in the hope that I could collect some valuable data on the topic in focus.

3.3 Methods of Data Collection

Over a period of three months, I collected data on AR as a tool of professional development mainly through distributing questionnaires and having interviews with teachers. I believed qualitative methods could serve the intended purpose well when it was combined with quantitative methods. Apart from these two tools, I kept writing journals and field notes as an auxiliary means of data collection. By collecting information in many ways rather than relying solely on one source, the validity of the findings can be ensured.

3.3.1 Interview

“The researcher wants to find out what is on someone else's mind. Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings. Or how people interpret the world around them” (Merriam 1988).

Before the interviews, I designed a series of questions that were related to the topic of research, that is, AR as staff development. To get participants' personal accounts of their experiences in relation to AR, I suppose, open-ended questions were preferable.

Therefore, these interview questions were semi-structured, involving asking a series of structured questions and then probing more deeply using open-form questions to obtain additional information. The questions used in the interviews are listed in Appendix B.

At that time I began this study, a total of 28 faculty members volunteered to participate in the project to conduct AR. I interviewed 10 teachers, 5 from the beginners' group and 5 from the advanced group, who had been conducting AR in their classroom to understand how teachers perceived AR as a staff development tool. In the interview, the same questions were asked of all respondents, though they were free to diverge or expand as they wished. Each interview lasted 30-40 minutes and took place in teachers' office. The intention of the interviews was to probe in greater depth the questionnaire responses. After the interviews were transcribed, the author shared the draft of the transcripts with teachers to ensure that no misrepresentation was present and to ask the teachers if there were anything they wanted to withdraw. Seven of the teachers reported that they identified no inaccuracies or mistranslations in her transcripts. None of them withdrew any of their account. The interviews were analyzed with a view to extracting recurring themes, comments and impressions, allowing categories to emerge from the data.

Details of the participants are listed in following table:

Table 3.1: Information on Participating Teachers

Participant	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience	Research Interest
Tom	M	4	Improving my "paraphrase" ability to help students' learning
George	M	7	Improving the pronunciation and intonation of the first-year English Majors
Robert	M	15	Improving students' self-confidence in their class work
Lily	F	2	Improving English Majors' confidence
Tina	F	2	Improving students' learning by increasing their interest and confidence
Mary	F	3	Improving students' motivation
Susan	F	13	Improving students' speaking ability

Participant	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience	Research Interest
Jennifer	F	10	Improving students' self-confidence
Lisa	F	12	Improving students' motivation so that they can be responsible for their own learning
Angel	F	5	Developing students' self-confidence through respect and encouragement
Monica	F	1	Improving students motivation

3.3.2 Questionnaire

As an assessment tool, questionnaires would allow for a certain degree of anonymity for the respondents. In addition, respondents would have more time to think about their answers and they might choose not to answer some of the questions. My intention was to minimize subjectivity and biases through the use of questionnaires since the respondents might be more comfortable expressing their true feelings about the study. Because of this, I administered questionnaires as an additional form of data collection for the study. Teachers' questionnaire and students' questionnaire were designed for collecting data from two different perspectives. And I made sure that questionnaires were revised a number of times and being sampled before distributing.

Teachers' Questionnaire The teachers' questionnaire was made up of five parts. Part I was concerned with personal data, including participants' level of education, sex, experience of conducting AR, experience of teaching EFL, and time on the job with the college. Part II was to collect data on teachers' behavior change in and outside classroom.

Part III aimed at inquiring subjects' beliefs toward AR, including statements representing 3 dimensions of beliefs: 1) beliefs on language teaching(6 items); 2) beliefs on professional development(6 items); 3)AR as a tool of personal development(3 items).Participants were asked to rate each statement on a five-point scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree"(1) to "Strongly Agree"(5). Statistic analysis shows that internal consistency of the questionnaire is reliable(over 0.60).

Table 3.2: Distribution of the Three Dimensions in Teachers' Questionnaire

Type of Items	Number of Items
beliefs on language teaching	1 2 3 6 7 10
beliefs on professional development	4 5 8 9 11 15
AR as a tool of personal development	12 13 14

Part IV was designed to rank the order according to degree of importance that contributes to professional development. The last part (Part V) was two open-ended questions concerning AR and development(see appendix C). The questionnaires were distributed to 19 teachers working in this department and all the questionnaires were returned and can be treated as valid questionnaires.

Students' Questionnaire Students' questionnaire consisted of 20 items and an open-ended question(see appendix D). To ensure good validity and reliability, the questionnaire was written in Chinese to guard against misunderstanding. The aim was to elicit students' evaluation on the effectiveness of AR. Students were requested to demonstrate the extent to which they agreed with a statement (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree), which was based on a five-point Likert-type scales.

Table 3.3: Students' Questionnaire: Dimensions and Categories

	Dimensions and Categories	Items	Alpha
1	newly-appeared teaching activities	6 items	0.632
2	students' new views on language learning	3 items	0.675
3	students' academic performance	4 items	0.601
4	changes of teachers' teaching behaviour	4 items	0.603
5	improved relationship between teacher and students	1 item	0.554
6	confidence in English learning	2 items	0.682

Table 3.3 outlines the major dimensions in the questionnaire: the categories under each dimension, the number of items under each category, the internal consistency reliability of each category. Statistic analysis shows that internal consistency of the questionnaire is reliable. The alpha of most sets of items for reliability is over 0.60. Anyway, the reliability in one category is low(category 5). The reason for this may be

that the items under this category were too few to draw out stable answer.

Both classes for English majors and non-English majors were investigated in the study. By the time of conducting the questionnaire, teachers of these classes were still in the process of doing AR or had just completed an AR cycle. All together 12 classes were chosen to distribute the questionnaire, with each class having 12 respondents. To obtain a sample of students to represent different levels of English proficiency, I sampled each class with the method of stratified sampling, namely, the whole class was first categorized into 3 groups according to their level of English proficiency. Then 4 students from each group were selected to be respondents. 114 of the 130 questionnaires were handed in, with a return rate of 88%.

3.3.3 Teacher's Journal and My Field Notes

To add to the information collected through interviews and questionnaires, the third method I used to collect data was field notes and anecdotal records. Since teachers were required to write journals during the whole research process, I went through and copied some of their thoughts in journals as evidence with their permission. Teachers wrote their feelings, reflections, and thoughts in their journals, and they shared these journals with me. In this way there was a dialogue between us through which I could learn about their teachers' professional development experiences. "A dialog between the research and the subject of the research can create new possibilities for the learning, growth, and transformation of everything in the class" (Onel, Zeynep. 1997).

I always kept a small notebook with me, and jotted down quick notes on what I perceived relevant to the study. Later, I would transcribe these notes and add my own reflections on the situations I had observed.

3.4 Process of Data Analysis

My data analysis was conducted as I collected my data, and as I realized emergent issues in my observation. My research questions led me to the observation of certain

phenomena, which in turn may have led me to the realization of other emerging themes not predicted in the research question. The following is a section of data analysis on the basis of the interviews and questionnaires. The qualitative analysis in the form of natural descriptions offers us respondents' original ideas of AR as teacher development tool, whereas the quantitative analysis presents us an overall picture of the effectiveness of AR. Before I began my study, I made the hypothesis that teachers would change their teaching beliefs as the AR project went on. This was testified when the feedbacks from the teachers' questionnaire were collected and analysed. In addition to the above two data-collection methods, I collected data about students' evaluation on the influence of AR as another resource of data. To explore the relation between teaching experience and the effectiveness of AR, students' questionnaire was also designed and distributed.

3.4.1 Qualitative Analysis of the Data and Emerging Themes

I interpreted the data basically in terms of the 11 questions in the interviews and accordingly grouping them into 7 categories.

Table 3.4: Categories of Emerging Themes

Category 1: Participants' Rationale to Carry out AR.
Category 2: AR Impact on Participants' teaching.
Category 3: The Problems they Experienced in Doing AR.
Category 4: Would Participants be Likely to Conduct AR in the Future?
Category 5: Did Teachers Create their Own Theory When Conducting Their AR?
Category 6: AR as a Teacher Professional Development Tool.
Category 7: Debates on the Applicability of AR.

Category 1: Participants' Rationale to Carry Out AR

Three themes emerged in this category, they are:

(a) Requests from the department

Four teachers mentioned in interviews that they had begun conducting AR because "it was suggested by the department". One teacher stated that "we were all involved into

it. It was encouraged by the department. It seemed a department wide activity, and everyone was doing it, so I agreed to do it too". Another mentioned that they "were asked to do research".

(b) Participants' desire for professional growth

Teachers expressed the desire for a chance for professional growth through the means of conducting research. They were looking for a chance to learn and for a chance to have their work acknowledged through making their findings public.

For example, Tina told me "I wanted to be a better teacher". Lily said that "As a novice teacher who has not much experience in classroom, I am in urgent need of improving my teacher skills and adapting to the teaching setting. AR can help me to achieve that." George said that "Sometimes I get the idea of research from actual teaching. I get interested in certain teaching methods and wonder which method would be most effective. I think it would be a good chance to implement a classroom study to see how it work." Tom said that he had done more "classical research before, AR was attractive to me as it has different rationales."

Category 2: AR Impact On Participants' Teaching

Another aspect of AR that I wanted to investigate was whether teachers felt that AR had contributed to their teaching of professional development and how. All participants responded that AR had had a positive impact on their teaching. When analyzing the questionnaires, interviews and field notes on the issue, the following themes surfaced.

(a) Change in Attitudes and Teaching Practice

Teachers reported that doing research had brought about a change both in their attitudes towards learning and their teaching practice: Lily explained: The result of research can be applied to teaching of the future. Mary said: "Doing research is absolutely necessary and helpful to my teaching classical mythology. By doing so, my students will learn something worthwhile." This was echoed by Angel and Lisa as below: The research results may show implications to myself and other interested colleagues willing to improve our teaching (Angel). Now I am aware of what affects students'

evaluation of teachers' teaching and know it's not just they dislike you personally. The result of evaluation became more constructive to my teaching (Lisa). Monica provided a more thorough explanation: "My research has changed the situation and students react to my teaching in a different way. They become far more interested in their work. By doing the research, I not only improved my classroom management, but also built up close contact with my students, which made it much easier to communicate with them." Responses from the participants show that there is some belief that research does improve teaching, and the above indicates how this might occur. Furthermore, doing research opens up a channel of communication, and moves the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship to new dimensions (Thorne and Qiang, 1996). Vulliamy and Webb (1991) indicate that those teachers who carried out research that involved collecting the views and experiences of pupils claimed that this aspect of the research process had had the greatest impact on their teaching. Doing research had transformed the teacher as s/he knows and understands better her/his classroom and teaching by inquiring into them.

(b) Increased reflexivity: Eight of the ten teachers surveyed referred to increased reflexivity as a result of having conducted AR. Lily stated, "it made me more aware of the impact or influence of how and what I teach has on my students". George said that AR has helped him because "I am now a little more reflective about the things I do". Tom said that the "note-taking of my work left me with a clear reference of those aspects which proved effective and those which could be improved".

In my field notes I also addressed the increased reflexivity among the teachers involved with AR. "Tina approached me today to tell me how she had been reflecting about and journaling her classroom activities for her AR. She mentioned that she found herself going through the same process in every class she was teaching [reflecting more] even though she was not doing AR for those other classes".

(c) Increased confidence as teachers and researchers: In addition to reflexivity, other themes that surfaced on the topic of the impact of AR on their teaching and

professional development referred to increased confidence in their work. Angel mentioned that, "AR has made me more confident about my teaching and about trying new things, and trying to invent some different techniques and things". In my field notes, I wrote that the same instructor "appeared to be more confident and seemed to speak up more about his teaching during faculty meetings. Mary also claimed: "The main benefit of doing research, so far as I'm concerned, is that I will become much more confident of myself and have a sense of achievement in personal identity — a little bit advance toward my life's goal."

And AR proved to be helpful to increase teachers' confidence as researchers. Robert mentioned in his interview that "this project has increased my confidence as a researcher. Two teachers reported that doing the research project and familiarizing themselves in-depth with the literature in a particular area had given them confidence. For example, Jennifer reported: "Conducting research increases my understanding of my practice and makes me have more confidence in myself." In addition, Lisa indicated that doing research also gave her a sense of achievement in her ability both to undertake further research and to better express and justify her view of teaching and learning achievement.

(d) The change of teaching beliefs (also see 3.4.2 quantitative analysis of a questionnaire on teaching beliefs)

Another leading influence of AR on teachers is the change of their teaching beliefs. Teachers now see "adopting a research orientation in classroom" as its basic idea, which departs from the traditional view of "teaching as knowledge imparting". And they believe the research orientation can lead to life-long professional development. The following analysis is based on a questionnaire. We could see changes in the following aspects:

● **New beliefs about language teaching and learning**

- 1) No anybody who learns English can teach the language.
- 2) Teaching of the separate skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing does not necessarily lead to good teaching.
- 3) The teacher is not a resource person who provides language input for the learners to work on.

4) Teachers' teaching and the use of textbooks should be based on students' needs.

● **Adopting an research orientation**

1) Teachers cannot improve their English enough simply by studying methodology.

2) Practice can be seen as the source of theory instead of vice versa.

3) It is important to adopt a research orientation to teaching and classroom.

4) The key concepts of teacher development are teacher reflection and teacher as researcher.

● **Views of professional development**

1) Experience is insufficient as a basis for development.

2) Professional development is a life-long process.

3) Reflections on teaching practice will have a very beneficial effect on my professional development

4) AR is a potential means of achieving professional development.

5) AR research can enhance awareness and sensitivity about the classroom situation.

Category 3: The Problems They Experienced in Doing AR

The problems the teachers reported they had experienced in doing research can be grouped into 3 categories as follows.

(a) Workloads and lack of time for research:

Three out of 7 respondents mentioned the difficulties that they had in juggling research and teaching commitments, which made them unable to concentrate their mind on research. One teacher stated that "Teaching load occupied most of my time, it affected my ability to carry out my research plans." Another said that "A lot of teaching and housework often interrupt my plan. I have written a paper for three years. Every time, I had to stop doing after writing some paragraphs and started from the beginning again in the next time. Finally, I gave up. Only three or four pages were completed until now. I really don't know when I can finish it." Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) wrote: Time is one of the most critical factors in the formation and maintenance of learning communities for teacher research. Unlike other professions, which are organized to support research activities, teaching is a profession in which it is extraordinarily difficult

to find enough time to reflect, reread, or share with colleagues.

(b) Focusing on the question

One respondent described the difficulties experienced in getting to a research question that was narrowly focused enough to be manageable. In fact he identified the need to define one's focus very precisely as one of the main lessons he had learned from undertaking his research. "At the beginning, I had difficulty in define a problem-focused inquiry that is solvable. The broad and unpractical inquiry I had ever work on proved to be a failure. Therefore, I narrowed down the focus. The main lesson (in doing the research) was just how precisely you have to think about defining the questions before you start."(Angel).

(c) Data collection and interpretation

Seven out of ten participants mentioned the difficulties they had experienced in interpreting their data, in finding or adapting appropriate analytical methods. For example, one teacher pointed out that "My problems were about designing and analyzing questionnaires. I'm not sure what methodology and statistics to use. I lack the skill of dealing with statistics."

(d) Availability of material resources

A number of respondents also mentioned that the teachers' access to journals and research database was frequently restricted, as one teacher explained:

"It took me a lot of time to search the related literature, the restricted accessibility made the situation worse. You know, it is quite discouraging when you really want to do something, but..."

Category 4: Would Participants be Likely to Conduct AR in the Future?

When asked if they would conduct other AR in the future, nine of the ten teachers said they would. The teachers seemed to agree that their studies had led them to think more, investigate more, and reflect more. An illustration of this is "I intend to use AR in the approach to all my concerns for teaching from now on". Another example was, "I feel this AR project was a great experience for me. It opened up several questions to be

explored. Perhaps a future AR project would address those questions". The one who chose not to continue her AR expressed the desire to conduct some research in her classroom at a later date (she was busy with preparing for a examination at the moment).

Lily, when testifying the hypothesis of an AR enquiry, "How can I improve my students motivation so that they can improve their learning?", she felt the need to further her AR research with a new enquiry: "How can I understand students learning needs so as to increase their motivation in the learning of English?"

Susan stated in the report: My new research enquiry is "How can I encourage the students' creativity in my teaching?"

After being justified in claiming that students' self-confidence in their class work had been improved, George raised one question at the end of his AR cycle:

"How could I improve students' self-confidence in asking questions?"

We can see that their new concerns are based on their first enquiries, which echoed the nature of Living Theory, "Living Theory must always be about improvement about practical solution. We are not satisfied with a single answer to a single problem. A theory will never come to an end in the sense that it is continuously growing. Therefore, our understanding of a certain problems is ever expanding and never ends" (Laidlaw, 2004).

Category 5: Did Teachers Create Their Own Theory When Conducting Their AR?

Jean McNiff stated: "if you can provide a validated account of how you have improved education through you AR, you have contributed to the creation of 'Living Theory'. And he further stated that, "if you are theorizing the grounds of your own knowledge, you are developing you epistemology of your personal practice". From his accounts, we know that there are two levels that contribute to theory: primary level and advanced level. For the majority of researchers, especially the beginners, they are making achievements if only they can provide convincing arguments for the importance and adequacy for their description. If they can survive the stage and successfully turn descriptions of their educational practice into theories, they are shifting from primary practitioners to advanced action researchers. But theorizing the grounds of practitioners'

own knowledge depends on many factors, among which the ability of reflection is most important.

A number of teachers in GTC have developed their own theories in their practice. On the issue of the classification of motivation, a teacher challenged the widely-accepted traditional view of motivation, "During the process I am working on AR, I develop my own living education theory which, mainly results from my own practice.....I assume that, apart from the two types of motivation, namely, integrative and instrumental. There is another type of emotional motivation. By it, I mean teachers' encouragement and conscious attention to some students, particularly the poor, may motivate them to learn. Put in a plain way, emotional motivation encourages a building up of a friendly relationship between teachers and students through such ways as chat, communication, personal talk or even conscious attention, encouragement etc." Her assumption can be seen as a complementary of the existing theory on motivation. Many of us may have the experience that the two traditional types of motivation sometimes are inadequate to give a rational explanation to certain classroom phenomena, especially in the non-English majors' class. Lacking integrative and instrumental motivation, these students are not in the least initiative in their English learning. Nevertheless, an attempt could be made on captivating their emotional motivation. Once being motivated emotionally, the enthusiasm they show on the subjects is enormous.

The case suggested that teachers were capable of putting their own educational theory when they are empowered to carry out classroom research. Generally, the theory created by teachers means much to other teachers who have the same concern because the theory is presented in the classroom reality. Besides, the teacher herself/himself could also benefit from the process. Compared to short-term training courses, generating one's ideas about classroom process may have long-term effects on professional development.

Category 6: AR as a Teacher Professional Development Tool

The data collected from the previous questions in the interviews and questionnaires support and provide evidence to the claim that AR is a valid alternative form of

professional development.

Most respondents reported that doing research had broadened their content knowledge and kept their professional knowledge updated. John explained "During the process of research, I have to read a lot of papers, get a thorough understanding, integrate all of the main points, and come up with my own ideas. In the process of reading, thinking, absorbing and reflecting, my content knowledge broadens and deepens" At a more general level, one teacher reported that carrying out his project had made him more organized and systematic in his approaches. Another indicated: "Indeed. As a teacher, I need to make myself familiar with the field I feel fascinated. Doing research is one way to make a man erudite gradually and systematically. As an indispensable dynamic, it will push me forward whether I enjoy it or not."

Their rationale for their answers can be summarized as follows:

(a) Conducting AR makes professionals more accountable

The issue of accountability was brought up in this question. "AR is a good form of professional development because it allows the teacher to conduct research in his/her classroom and reflect more concretely on his/her teaching practices. I think it increases accountability" (LiLy).

(b) AR is relevant to teachers' and classroom needs: Teachers also referred to the issue of how relevant AR is to their needs when compared to other forms of professional development. "Most staff development is something of a waste of time. AR is definitely more relevant to what my needs in the classroom are". Tom said, "What I liked about AR is that it allows you to work on your specific need and to intently focus on it".

(c) AR increases practitioners' reflexivity (see category 2 (b))

Category 7: Debates on the Applicability of AR

Briefly, Living Educational Theory starts from a view of knowledge that is developmental, personal, negotiable and open-ended. In working in this way, we are assuming that practice precedes theory, that individuals can develop knowledge and

theory through the exercise of their own creativity and critical judgements and that truth is highly problematic (Kincheloe, 1991).

Unlike many others, Robert, a teacher of fifteen years of teaching experience, questioned the underpinning of AR and its applicability in China. Based on his firm belief that the knowledge in theories abstracted from practice is of much higher value than the knowledge from practice, he held that "theory precedes practice", which challenged the base of AR. Because of his opposing opinion, a "battle" between theory and practice was then started in the early days of introducing the new notion to GTC. The following is a dialogue between he and the Moira Laidlaw, who works as a counselor of the project.

Robert: You weren't allowing people to feel safe in theory first.

Moira Laidlaw: I thought I was right, because we were doing AR. I thought that we needed to move from practice to theory, so if people could get into their classrooms and start their enquiries, their ideas and theorising would naturally follow.

Robert: Yes, but that wasn't how to work with Chinese colleagues, was it? We need theory. We like to see what others have achieved first and then develop something. We go from the general to the particular, not the other way round like you.

Moira Laidlaw: I was rather slow in picking that one up, wasn't I?

Robert: We are comfortable with theory. It is what we know. Don't you say we should start from what the learner already knows?

Moira Laidlaw: Good point. I do say that, yes!

Robert: In China, you are working with five thousand years of history. You can't change that in two years!

Obviously, Robert's belief in the values of theory stemmed from Confucian, who stressed the importance of learning from theory. And he thought this belief had been deeply rooted in every teachers' mind. For that reason, AR, which put much emphasis on individuals and the potential of individuals could hardly find its place in China. However,

his view on AR changed as he started an AR inquiry into improving students' self-confidence in his class. In his report, he mentioned the insights gained from his experience as follows:

"I now firmly believe that I learn a lot from case studies for I experience them more closely and immediately than general theories of knowledge emanating from research done by outsiders."

"In my case I have learnt to an extent to value the premise of practice preceding theory in order to be able to change my teaching and learning processes. I maintain that AR is only one way to enable change and improvement, but realize that it has been most beneficial in my own professional development and seemingly in the professional development of colleagues, as well as improving the quality of learning with the students."

It is worth mentioning that Robert didn't follow the ideas because they were from the authorities. Instead, he negotiated with the experts to strike a balance between theory and practice. As an action researcher, he was on the right way of doing AR from the start, that is, practitioners ought to have the courage to question the theory (including AR itself) instead of accepting the authorities' opinions blindly. In this sense, Robert is a real action researcher.

3.4.2 Quantitative Analysis of Teachers' Questionnaire on Teaching Beliefs

The concept of professional development has a multifaceted nature in that professional development refers not only to knowledge expansion, thinking ability development and teaching effectiveness but also to a change in teaching beliefs. To put it in another way, change of teaching beliefs can be viewed as an indicator of teachers' professional development. These beliefs are important to language teaching for teachers are greatly influenced by their beliefs. They can affect the way teachers plan their lessons, make decisions and their general classroom practice. For this reason, a questionnaire on teaching beliefs was designed with the aim to locate teachers' new orientation on teachers' role, "teaching as learning", "teacher as researcher", together with "activity

preference for professional development”.

The participants were 19 teachers who had completed at least an AR cycle. Teachers' age ranged from 22 to 40 and the average year of teaching experience was 6.3 years. The instructor with the least experience in the field had taught EFL for 2 semesters, and the one with the most experience had been involved with EFL for 15 years.

Survey results

Part II. Results(percentage of teachers that selected each activity)

1.How often do you use group discussion and other classroom activities in your class?

Never 0%;occasionally 5.6%; often50%; almost in every class 44.4%.

2. What percentage of your teaching time do you usually spend in delivering your lesson?

Results(number of students selecting each option)

20-30% 1; 30-40% 4; 40-50% 11; more than 50% 3.

3. How many hours a week do you spend in reflecting on you teaching or journal writing?

0-1 11.1%; 2-3 66.7%; 4-5 22.2%; more than 5 0%.

4. What is the frequency of another teacher's observation to my class and feedback each term?

Never 5.6%; 1-3times 50%; 3-5times 33.3%; more than 5 times 11.1%.

5. What's your attitude towards peer observation?

Fear 0%; uncomfortable 11.1%; comfortable 16.7%; welcome 72.2%.

6. How often do you discuss the problems that occur in teaching with your colleagues?

Never 0%; occasionally 16.7%; often 72.2%; quite often 11.1%

By virtue of the fact that teachers' beliefs are difficult to measure, it is advisable to infer people's beliefs from the ways in which they act rather than merely from what they

say they believe. The statements in Part II examine teachers' beliefs from this perspective.

The result of the survey(Part II) did show evidence of behavior change. 94.4% of the teachers reported that they often use group discussion and other student-centered activities (pair work, role play, oral presentation) in the class. AR, to some extent, reduced their time spent on delivering lesson as most of them ticked the option of 40-50%. Besides, AR made reflective teaching a habitual practice because every week the majority of them spent 2-5 hours reflecting on their teaching and write journals. The feedback also reveals that in spite of the heavy workloads, they still observed their colleagues class 1-5 times each term. And they felt comfortable, when peers visit their class. Some of them even voluntarily invited their colleagues to their class because observation provided them with the chance to exchange ideas and "colleagues comments can be used as evidence of improvement of situation I concern"(Tina).

Part III (Results are given in percentiles)

Table 3.5: Teachers' Responses to the Items of Teaching Beliefs Scale (%)

Items	Strongly agree5	4	3	2	Strongly disagree1
1.Anybody who learns English can teach the language, regardless of whether or not they know anything about teaching and learning	0	0	5.3	47.4	47.4
2.The teacher is a resource person who provides language input for the learners to work on	10.5	42.1	5.3	42.1	0
3.Teacher's teaching and the use of textbooks should based on students' needs	42.1	57.9	0	0	0
4.Teachers cannot improve their English enough simply by studying methodology	26.3	52.6	21.1	0	0
5.Teachers' beliefs do influence their approach to teaching	57.9	31.6	5.3	5.3	0
6.Practice can be seen as the source of theory instead of vice versa.	36.8	47.4	15.8	0	0
7.The combination of formative assessment and summative assessment is better for the	63.2	31.6	5.3	0	0

Items	Strongly agree5	4	3	2	Strongly disagree1
evaluation of students.					
8.Experience is insufficient as a basis for development	15.8	78.9	0	5.3	0
9.Professional development is a life-long process.	57.9	42.1	0	0	0
10.It is important to adopt a research orientation to teaching and classroom	47.4	42.1	10.5	0	0
11.Reflection on teaching practice will have a very beneficial effect on my professional development	89.5	10.5	0	0	0
12.AR is a potential means of achieving professional development	47.4	52.6	0	0	0
13. My classroom research skills have been improved since my doing AR	36.8	52.6	5.3		5.3
14 After doing AR, I find my awareness and sensitivity about the classroom situation increased.	57.9	42.1	0	0	0
15.The key concepts of teacher development are teacher reflection and teacher as researcher.	52.6	47.4	0	0	0

Table 3.5 shows teachers' responses to the items of teaching beliefs scale. Their new beliefs about language teaching, one of the positive outcome of conducting AR, were relatively positive with an average rating of 3.91 on the five-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).

For the statement: *the teacher is a resource person who provides language input for the learners to work on*, 52.6%(10.5%+42.1%) teachers still hold that teacher is the person who has the responsibility to provide their students language input, either in oral form or in written form. Such a response can be given a reasonable explanation when referring to the practical teaching situation in GTC. Considering the fact that the majority of the students were enrolled in the college with lower scores, students might feel "unsafe" if they were put in a complete student-centred learning environment. Because of this, most teachers believed that the traditional role of "teacher as resource person" should be changed gradually rather than jumping to the role of facilitators. The English level of students, not other factors, determined the part of teachers in the classroom.

Just as our teaching beliefs influence the way we plan and teach our lessons, it will also in turn affect the way teachers perceive self-development. For this reason, an order-rankings activity was included in the questionnaire to elicit teachers' views on professional development.

Part VI Rank the activities for professional development according to their value

Results (in rank order: 1= valuable)

1. Individual or group reflection
2. Interaction with colleagues
3. Reading professional journals and publications
4. Attending seminars and conferences
5. Training teaching skill(programs)

The result is encouraging. Owing to the AR project, teachers developed their understanding of professional development and update their views on teaching and learning. They no longer viewed improving teaching skills as the ultimate aim of professional development. Instead, they believed that reflective thinking and interaction with peers are crucial to self-development. This was followed by reading professional journals and publications and attending seminars and conferences. The result shows that teachers in GTC, large due to their updated teaching beliefs, had undergone a shift from a product-oriented professional development view to a process-oriented one. In contrast, teachers in Ningxia University, where no AR project was carried out, seemed not sure about what kind of activities are more helpful to their professional development. The following are the results, ranked from most valuable to least valuable, according to their responses on the "Questionnaire on the Training Situation."

Results of the survey conducted in Ningxia University(in rank order: 1= valuable)

1. Attending seminars and conferences(50%)
2. Experimental research(48%)
3. Teaching practice, experience accumulation(46%)
4. Reading professional journals and publications(42%)
5. Training teaching skill(programs)(26%)
6. Individual or group reflection(16%)

English teachers in Ningxia University believed that to achieve life-long development they could benefit most through conducting experimental research. Clearly,

they were not sure whether individual reflection could play a significant part in self-development. The different in beliefs of the two teaching groups suggests that the change of teaching beliefs can not take place naturally. This is because teaching beliefs are culturally bound and, since they are formed early in life, they tend to be resistant to change. Therefore, one potential means of pursuing up-to-date teaching beliefs is to experience belief change by practicing AR in their classroom.

3.4.3 Quantitative Analysis of Students' Questionnaire on the Effectiveness of AR

Research indicates that student learning should be the ultimate goal of educational professional development. To avoid biases and subjectivity, I focused not only on teachers' perceptions of AR as a professional development tool but also on students' view on the impact of AR on their classroom behaviour and beliefs in language learning. The following table and figure offer an overall picture of the students' response to the questionnaire:

Table 3.6: Descriptive Statistics of students' questionnaire

N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
114	2.45	2.50	4.95	3.9145	.5583	-.222

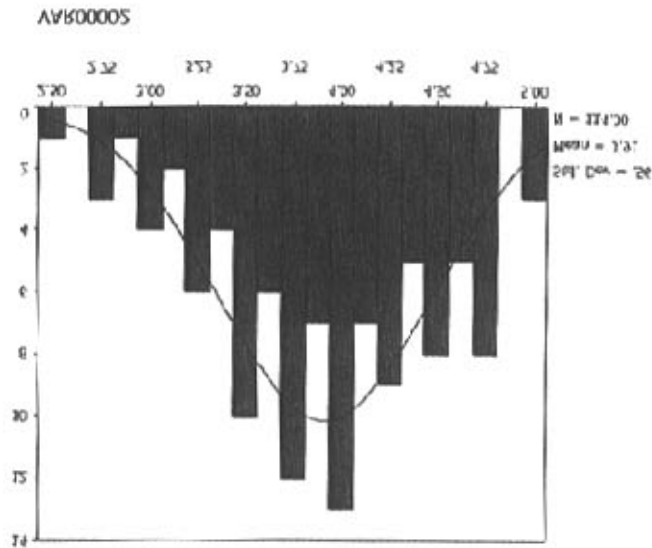


Figure 2.1: A Normal Distribution of the Overall Evaluation on AR

From Table 3.6, we are able to tell the central tendency as well as dispersion of the investigation. A mean of 3.91 indicates that students' response to the effectiveness is basically positive. A SD of 0.56 with a range of 2.45 suggests that students' reaction to the AR is different. To put it in another way, though the majority of the student accept AR as a efficient means to improve their language learning, a few of them were still sceptical about the attainment of this new approach. A possible explanation could be that teachers were novice action researchers, they were at their initial stage to carry out the demanding research work. They needed more time and guidance to better their AR skills. Another reason was that the number of subjects being involved in their research was usually small and teachers' efforts aiming to motivate certain groups of students might not necessarily cater for other students' learning preferences.

An overall analysis of the data can merely provide us a general picture of the effectiveness of AR. To get the detailed information of which sphere benefited most from doing AR and what were the spheres that still needs to be improved, I further analyzed the effects from six perspectives. Figure 2.2 shows respondents' reported changes or attainments in six spheres on five-point scale. The six spheres are: (1) newly-appeared

teaching activities(6 items);(2)students' new views on language learning(3 items);(3)students' academic performance(4 items); (4)changes of teachers' teaching behavior(4 items);(5) improved relationship between teacher and students(2 items) (6) confidence in English learning(1 item). The students perceived to have benefited much in all of the spheres, with a mean of 3.91. According to the respondents' response to the questionnaire, more evidences can be seen in teachers' improved teaching behavior and students' new views on language, but less in students' academic performance and confidence in English learning.

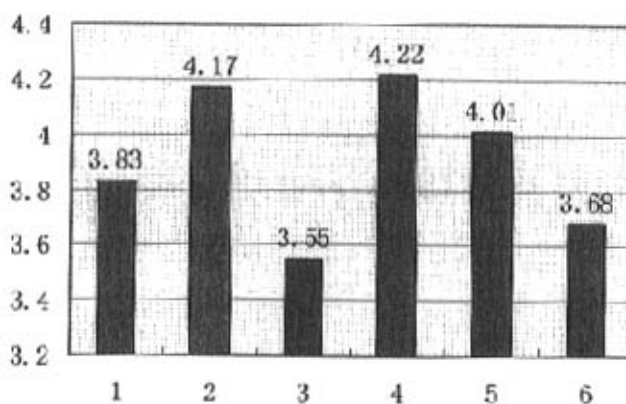


Figure 2.2: Students' Attainments in AR in Different Spheres

Table 3.7: The AR Attainments on Five-point Scale

	Six Spheres	Attainments in AR
1	Newly-appeared teaching activities	3.83
2	Students' new views on language learning	4.17
3	Students' improvement in academic performance	3.55
4	Changes of teachers' teaching behavior	4.22
5	Improved relationship between teacher and students	4.01
6	Confidence in English learning	3.68

The survey shows that AR had led to general improvement in teachers' teaching and students' learning. Students reported teachers called on a variety of instructional skills and multiple classroom activities to meet their goals, which, to a great extent, motivated

students' learning interest. As a result, students played an active part in their learning and construct their own knowledge or meaning of what they learned. The teacher was no longer perceived as the sole authority of learning, but, rather, as the person to facilitate learning, guiding and supporting learners' own construction of knowledge. Many students described the student-centered learning setting and mentioned that their teachers become more flexible in the questionnaire. Individual difference and other factors such as students' interest, age, learning style were taken into account before their teacher engaged in the teaching task. This was the evidence of teachers' involvement in reflective activities as they became more sensitive to problems occurred in their practice. Another result was that average students received much concern from their students. This was because action researchers held the belief that all students can learn and teacher-researchers can see more improvement in poor learners as long as they were given enough concern. It had been proved, once again in GTC, that sustainable improvement of students' learning could be achieved when teachers shift their attention to the average students. At the same time, students saw changes in their own learning beliefs or views. They became more responsible for their own learning and awareness of being autonomous learners was also raised. The survey also indicates most of the students accepted "errors" as an indicator of their progress in language learning, not the evidence of failure.

Another issue to be addressed to was that most students reported developed views on language learning and teachers' changes of their teaching behavior but some of them were not sure that they had made progress in language learning or becoming more confident in future leaning. The nature of AR may account for this. To solve the practical problem that occurred in the classroom, teachers first needed to experiment on different means of solution. It is for this reason that the traditional teacher-centered classroom was turned into student-centered classroom and more communicative channels between the two parts were opened. That's why students were more likely to see changes of teachers' teaching behavior and improved relationship between teacher and students. As the project went on, students were more comfortable with their new roles in classroom, which helped them develop new views and beliefs on language learning. Making progress in English learning,

though was one of the ultimate aim of doing AR, cannot take place overnight. That means one term may not be long enough to see apparent achievements. Another reason was that, the statement on students' self-evaluation of their progress was presented in a more general than it should be. "I see progress in English learning Language" could be interpreted in many ways. The progress could specifically refer to the ability of the four basic skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, or just referred to scores of the final exams or CET exams. Therefore, students' might not positively confirm the effectiveness of AR if they perceived passing the CET exam as one of the major evidence of their progress. As summative assessment didn't match the process-oriented nature of AR, scores of exams could not serve as appropriate evaluation standard for AR project. The third reason was that many practitioners, especially beginners, were encouraged to conduct their research by starting with a small problem and a small group of students because a large research scope meant deeper involvement and harder work. As a result of the above-mentioned factors, the majority of the students reported little evidence of improvement.

3.4.4 Correlation Analysis Between Teacher's Teaching Experience and the Students' Evaluation on the Effectiveness of AR

Before starting my study on the issue of what contributes to the efficacy of AR, I made the hypothesis that the teacher who has rich teaching experience must feel more comfortable with their research work and consequently have a better AR efficacy. Because they are good manipulator of teaching skills and are able to deal with unexpected event in a flexible way. Therefore, I took it for granted that experienced teachers would inevitably get a higher rating in comparison to the novice teachers. But the situation is more complicated than I supposed. The following is a set of data I sorted out from the students' questionnaire (years of teaching experience ten teachers and the average rating given by their students):

Table 3.8: Teachers' Average Rating and Their In-service Time

	In-service time (years)	Average Rating of Ten Teachers
1	2	3.75
2	1	3.82
3	2	3.43
4	3	3.90
5	7	3.55
6	13	3.89
7	10	3.80
8	12	4.16
9	4	3.84
10	5	4.00

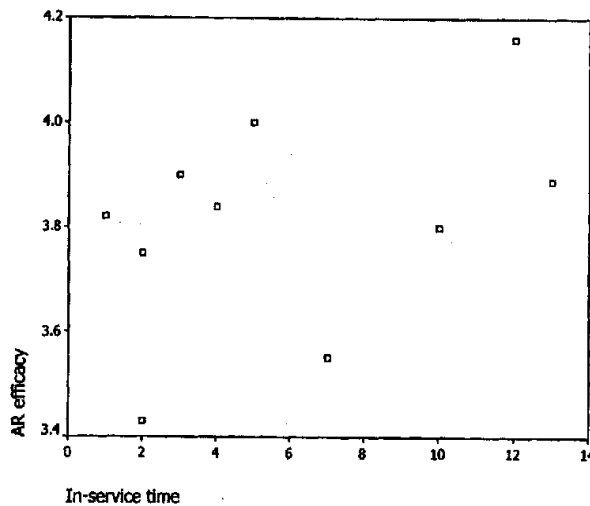


Figure 2.3: Scatters of Teachers' In-service Time and the Efficacy of AR

The above figure roughly indicates that these two elements, teachers' teaching experience and AR efficacy, are not positively correlated with each other. To further examine the validity of the result, correlation analysis was made to examine the relationships between the teachers' in-service time and the effects of classroom AR. The Person correlation coefficient ($r=0.433$) of the two variables was calculated with an educational statistical package (SPSS 10.0). By referring to the *Person Correlation Coefficient Table*, I got the $r_{0.05}=0.549$ under the degree of freedom of 8 ($10-2=8$). The value of $r(=0.433)$ is smaller than $r_{0.05}(=0.549)$, which indicates that there is no positive

correlation between the two variables.

According to the above analysis, we may come to the conclusion that the efficacy of AR is not significantly correlated to the teachers' in-service time. That means apart from the factor of teaching experience, there must be other elements that affect the efficacy of classroom AR. Time constraint, teachers motivation of doing AR, experience of conducting the traditional research, the degree of involvement in AR are all potential factors that may influence effectiveness of conducting AR.

Degree of involvement Though the majority of the teachers volunteered to participate in the project, they differed in the degree of involvement. A teacher, who had taught English for more than ten years failed to complete her AR cycle. In an informal interview, she stated the reason, "I began my AR with great enthusiasm, but I found it was too demanding. Lack of time and other difficulties I encountered distracted me from getting fully involved in the research process. So I chose to give up and turned to the traditional teaching method." Her words highlights common worries and difficulties encountered by practitioners, namely, lack of time, lack of expertise, lack of ongoing support, fear of being revealed as an incompetent teacher, fear of producing a public account of their research for a wider unknown audience. All these factors might influence the degree of involvement. Conversely, the case of a novice teacher further supports this argument—highly motivated teachers are more likely to achieve higher level of efficacy AR. With only a year of teaching experience, she did well in her AR and got a relatively higher rating of 3.81, because of her high motivation of developing her teaching skills through doing AR.

Task difficulty Another factor that influences the effectiveness of AR might be task difficulty. Different research inquires vary in the degree of difficulty. Some are easy to be conducted while others are difficult. For example, if a teacher's aim is to improve students' pronunciation, one may see encouraging improvement in several weeks. But if the inquire is "how to improve students' learning strategy to facilitate their learning", one term may not be long enough to get a satisfying result. The point is to alleviate burdens

on teacher-researchers, which can be achieved by providing them with support in framing research questions, by introducing research tools and methods to them, by establishing research partnerships and/or networks as appropriate.

Research experience The third reason is that teachers with traditional research experience have advantage over those without when doing action research. It was proved that teachers who had classical research experience were more skillful in making sense of data. Tom provided an explanation: "Though different in rationales, these two research paradigms have something in common. Very often, when it comes to data analysis, I find it is helpful when referring to the past experience in data and analysis of traditional forms of research." They know how to design questionnaires as a complementary means and transcribing data is comparatively easy for them. Teachers without experience in research work, on the other hand, are not sure what methodology and statistics to use or how to deal with the bulk of statistics. If the research has to apply complicated statistics, the teachers will get more confused.

Time constraint As I have mentioned before, time constraint can be a retarding factor of complementing a full cycle of an AR. AR needs many things, but firstly it needs time. What school authorities can do is to provide additional time away from teaching and other duties to enable teachers to engage in research. This could be achieved by increasing the total number of academic staff, so that individual teachers' teaching loads may be reduced. However, financial constraints are not likely to permit this. Perhaps there could be a partial reduction in teaching duties of some senior lecturers to enable them to plan and coordinate college-based research programs for the school and in consultation with all staff.

The efficacy of AR is the result of interaction of many factors. Apart from the above-mentioned reasons, intelligence-related factors may also affect the result. Therefore, it is unreasonable to give priority to the teaching experience when working on the issue. Instead, it is preferable to take all the elements into account. Here poses another question: "Are some of these factors interrelated? And what are the most

important factors to an AR process?" I intend to leave it as the next enquiry of my research. Hopefully, those factors could be identified and the interaction among the factors be clarified in the next cycle of my research.

Part Four An Independent Case Study on AR

The following chapter is a record of my personal action research process, my reflection on the research tools and action research as my professional development. My action research experience shared the characteristics of a typical cycle of Living Theory: The research started from five basic context-based inquiries. And what I was concerned about during the process was presenting my understanding of certain educational theories and tracing my professional improvement. I researched “with”, not researched “on” my students. As a unique individual, I inquired into my own life, aiming to improve my work for my own benefit and the benefit of others. I firmly hold the belief believe that “If we live in the hope, at least we have some idea of what we can achieve, the world would instantly be a happier and more productive place for all” (Jean McNiff, 1995).

4.1 Background of This Project

When I started my teaching career, the New Curriculum was already at its pilot implementation stage and Chinese teachers had long been exposed to ideas of “learning by doing, experience the language, learn the language by self-discovery, positive affective, task-based approach was the Chinese teachers”(NC, 2002). These fascinating ideas appealed to me, a novice teacher, but sometimes it put me in an awkward situation. Very often, I felt frustrated and depressed when I tried to put these ideas into practice. For instance, many times, I tried to develop students' communicative ability but gave up disappointedly(Laidlaw et al, 2004). I assumed, this was partly because the traditional Grammar-Translation teaching method was deeply rooted in my mind after many years of exposure to it, and partly because these new teaching approaches were hard to master. I was quite well aware of what a novice teacher with only one term of teaching experience was facing. In most cases, I could not get valuable advices from other colleagues for these radical approaches were even new to them. At that time, I sensed that I was experiencing a “living contradiction” (Whitehead, 1989):

Fortunately, I was offered the opportunity to experience action research in the experimental centre. Following the five basic context-based inquiries, I personally experienced a process of professional improvement. As a unique individual, I inquired into my own educational life, aiming to improve my work for my own benefit and the benefit of others.

4.2. Process of This Project

4.2.1 What did I Like to Improve and Why was I Concerned about It?

After May Day, I began teaching a small class of non-English majors in GTC. Of the 13 students, eight were girls, seven were boys. The textbook was *New Horizon English Book 4*, a course book that is widely accepted by colleges. After two weeks of careful observation, I noticed a problem: the students tended to be unresponsive and avoided interactions with the teacher. Before I had had any close contact with the class, I had heard it described as “a hard-nut to crack”. The quick surfacing of the problem helped me narrow down my focus in a short period of time. I further explored the issue by first making an objective evaluation of the textbook, which consists of adapted articles selected mostly from influential journals. I asked myself the question: Is the textbook appropriate for my students' English level? I concluded that although the course book has “fresh” materials and a well-organized structure, the vocabulary and the complex sentence structures in the textbook overwhelmed the students. This was later confirmed by the persistently basic grammatical errors in the students' writing. I was later told that when the students enrolled in this college, their English level was lower than the requirements of the curriculum. In such a remote, poverty-stricken region, it is not uncommon that the majority of students enter college with lower marks than students in more developed regions. Therefore, I assumed that the large amount of vocabulary was an insurmountable task, in addition to confronting them with the long, complex structure, which makes a high demand on reasoning. However, I was well aware of my obligation to complete the teaching assignment, that meant flexible use of the textbook.

Another reason for students' passivity was that though the college is already in the process of shifting from the traditional method to a student-centered one -- the Communicative Method -- the traditional method still has its own place. A long exposure to a teacher-centered environment meant that the students' active style and initiative was inevitably impeded. Therefore, they preferred that their teacher to give them a lecture rather than presenting questions.

With these hypotheses in mind, I made some further investigation through the means of a questionnaire. It consisted of four open-ended questions addressing learners' interests, motivation and confidence.

- Are you interested in English learning?
- Do you think English learning is important?
- What do you think of the textbook we are using?
- What do you intend to learn in the English class?

I classified the feedback from my students into 4 categories:

Table 4.1: Four Categories of my Students and the Percentage

	Categories	The Number of Students	%
1	Seeing English learning as a burden and having no intention of studying the subject further	6	46.2
2	Having some interest but lacking of motivation of any kind	3	23.1
3	Having no interest but knowing its significance (instrumental motivation)	1	7.6
4	Having both interest and motivation	3	23.1

My original intention for the AR inquiry was to foster students' interests in English and further foster their motivation. However, among the large amount of information I gathered, two students' feedback attracted my attention, largely because their views were apparently representative.

Su Zhiwei wrote, *"Nearly all specialities have included English as its compulsory subject. But few of them find it useful in their later professional development. For this reason, as far as I am concerned, I don't see any necessity to learn English and have lost*

interests in it."

Another female student mentioned,

"English doesn't appeal to me but I have realized that it is of importance to my future career."

At first, I thought what I need to do was to develop students' motivation by first fostering their interest in English. However, the feedback suggests that there exists a between-state, that is, the possibility of having motivation but having no interest in English learning. A review of literature and teachers' reports also suggested that interest, motivation and other non-intellectual elements interacted in a complicated way. All these factors led me to change my inquiry into a more general one: "How can I improve students' English learning interests and motivation?" However, the degree to which the issue could be solved was hard to anticipate because I only had 7 weeks to conduct my research.

4.2.2 How Could I Improve It?

With the final aim of changing the passive classroom learning context into an active one, I proposed the following ways to tackle the issue: captivating interests in learning by ensuring students' dominant role, designing varying classroom activities to build an active learning atmosphere, alleviating anxiety by tolerating mistakes learners made in their performance; motivating students' learning through emotional education. All these imagined solutions pointed to the New Curriculum, which is scheduled for national implementation by 2005. The New Curriculum emphasizes the students' affective domain by stating that students' leaning interacts with their interest, motivation, confidence and other affective factors. Language learning will be greatly facilitated when these affective factors are developed and strengthened (NC, 2002).

- **Changing the traditional roles of teachers and learners**

I gained inspiration after observing another action researcher's class. The class Mrs. Ling was teaching was the poorest class in grade one. By poorest, I mean they were enrolled in the English department with the lowest scores in the College Entrance

Examination. Since being streamed into this class, most of the students had developed a sense of self-contempt. They lacked initiative in their study and always put their teacher in an awkward situation by giving no response to questions. But an amazing change took place after she adopted the student-centered teaching approach. In many classes I observed, four or five students worked as assistant teachers and seemed quite comfortable with their new role. The average time teachers spent on instruction accounted for less than 20%. In this sense, it was the students themselves who dominated the class. As an observer, I sensed the relaxing and active atmosphere that pervaded the classroom. Another thing that impressed me was that many of them were capable of presenting their own understanding of the text and questioning their classmates with relatively fluent oral English. They used expressions like "Today, I will introduce some sentences which can be used to ask permission." "I think that's everything I want to say" "What is the implied meaning of the word '...' in the context?" and other classroom-management English to make their delivery smooth. This is amazing considering the fact that they were merely grade one students. Could this approach find its way into a class of non-English majors?

With this in mind, I chose one text that was comparatively easy to understand and encouraged my students to explain collaboratively with each group being responsible for one part. To my delight, the students were really motivated to be active and initiate. One female student even used group work to elicit students' deep thinking about a social problem. The topic for discussion was "*Supposing you were the author, how would you like to end the story?*" When circulating in the classroom, I frequently heard expressions such as "I think..." and "I cannot agree with you because...."

I reflected on the changes that were taking place in my class as follows:

Now I reach a full understanding of the statement in the New Curriculum that 'Language learning is most effective when students' interest, motivation and attitudes are taken into consideration. (NC, 2002)'

As a result of their increasing interest in language learning, they become confident enough to make everything clear by asking questions. They are responsible for their own

learning. This is a starting point for their life-long learning process.

Also, I am experimenting on the task-based approach which is 'learning by doing and by using the language'. I set them a task of making meaning out of a text, and then they work cooperatively to "experience the language, learn the language by self-discovery, participate in discussion and negotiation activities..." (NC, 2002).

After adopting activities of this kind, I found that more students were gradually feeling free to ask me questions, which suggested that they were encouraged to have a deep understanding of the text. In addition, they seemed more willing to respond to my questions. Now I found myself preferring to ask for "Any volunteers?" rather than calling their names.

On May 25, a student named Yang Xiaopinn answered a question on her own initiative. Though the answer wasn't perfect, I saw this as a good starting point for her long journey of development. At the same time I noticed that another student, Su Zhiwei, was not in the least motivated by a heated atmosphere of discussion, just sitting there in a state of absent-mindedness. The boy's behaviour aroused my curiosity and urged me to have an interview with him after class. Far from being an introverted student, he was friendly and talkative, except for his reluctance to give any reasonable explanation of his uncooperative behaviour in the class. I inferred that his absent-mindedness might have something to do with his attitude towards the practicality of English.

- Build relaxing learning atmosphere via various interesting classroom activities.

In a discussion with Dr. Moira Laidlaw, she suggested that:

"Many students don't have interest in English at all. They come to English class, hoping it will be over soon. If they come to your class, knowing that something different is going to happen, they'll get better and better".

I was greatly inspired by these words and determined to adopt in each lesson at least one activity that would maintain their interest. What I had done in the class proved to be effective. Take my new way of dealing with the vocabulary for instance.

The students' attention was focused on memorizing the new words. I reflected in my journal:

"The study of English will come to an end in a month, what can I do with their English in such a short period of time? To foster their interests in English learning may be the best choice. Suppose I teach vocabulary in a way of group competition, helping them to overcome the pressure that large vocabulary has imposed on them, the effect will be far-reaching, not just the few words that kept in their memory. "

My new method of teaching vocabulary went like this: After making sure that all the words had been pronounced correctly, I required the students to demonstrate in groups the words listed in vocabulary as many as possible. Meanwhile, the students in other groups had to do their utmost to guess what the word was. Acting as a scorekeeper, I recorded the points each groups gained. My colleague and critical friend also tried this method in her class and stated:

"A good method indeed and easy to motivate the student interest in learning."

What impressed me most was that the male student took an active role in this activity. He helped his group win the competition, which greatly encouraged me. However, what happened afterwards proved that the situation was even more complex than I had anticipated.

I designed similar activities to create a relaxing learning atmosphere. And most students showed signs of increased interest and enthusiasm: they smiled, discussed, participated actively, and happily rearranged their seats. Such a learning environment was helpful because "people learn best when they are relaxed, comfortable, unstressed, interested and involved in what is going on and motivated to continue"(Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975).

- **Taking the right attitude toward oral mistakes to lower learning anxiety**

At first, the students' performance in communicative activities was far from satisfying. They stood in an extremely restrained and unnatural manner and murmured to their partners in their role-plays. I thought that by pointing out that they were performing like a "reciter" rather than performer, I might see some improvement, but I didn't. What's more, the sentences they produced were full of errors. I touched upon the issue with great

caution for I was fully aware of the fact that accuracy might be achieved at the expense of fluency and the students' confidence! Consequently, I introduced them to some linguistic theorists' attitudes towards oral mistakes: "No mistakes, no progress." In the meantime, I showed a tolerance towards mistakes to minimize their anxiety, telling them that I would not over-correct the mistakes in their oral work. I noticed that Liu Xiang and some other students nodded, suggesting that to some extent their uncertainty of the issue had been eliminated. Later on, in most of the classroom activities he became a particularly active participant. With his permission, I copied out one paragraph from his journal as evidence of his improvement:

"At the beginning, I was reluctant to participate in oral activities, fearing being mocked at by the classmates. Even if I had to say something in some cases, I rehearsed the sentence in my mind several time before I uttered it. How was I envious of those people who can speak with fluent English..... Now I know 'no mistakes, no progress' and to my surprise, I am making progress in spoken English these days. As a result, my interest in English is growing."

Another student spoke of his true feelings about the English class during a break:

"I feel at ease when making mistakes. Now I see myself as a capable person with the potential to learn English well."

I appreciate the changes that my class is undergoing especially when seeing them act out confidently before class with louder voice and more natural facial expression. It seemed that many signs pointed to success in restoring the students' confidence and interest in English by means of lowering their learning anxiety.

● **Building students' achievement motivation along with emotional motivation**

I am fully aware of the influence a teacher may have on his/her students. Therefore, far from taking a negative attitude towards my students and hurting their sense of self-esteem, I prefer encouraging them. My practice is what my colleague Tao Rui termed "emotional motivation".

"By emotional motivation, I mean teachers' encouragement and conscious attention to some students, particular the poor, may motivate them to learn" (Tao Rui, 2004).

"The New Curriculum lays much emphasis on the students emotion, aiming at captivating their interest in English learning, helping them acquire a sense of achievement and confidence" (NC, 2002).

When appropriate, I motivated them with the successful experiences of English learners such as the founder of "Crazy English", Li Yang. I perceived this as a supplementary way to educate emotionally.

Sometimes, I was inclined to develop students' achievement-motivation by stressing the progress they were making. I once provided Yang Xiaoping (the student who showed some instrumental motivation but no interests in English) with the opportunity to give a three-minutes duty report. In her report, she taught us some expressions about making and answering a 'phone call'. What impressed me most is that she performed confidently without referring to her notebook. I praised her by saying:

"I'll keep these useful expressions in memory because I learned them from my student."

Actually, I was conveying the message that everyone in this class had something to offer and that no one was superior.

At other times, I attempted to give them a sense of achievement. For instance, I asked the winner to stand up as a kind of praise and encouragement after the completion of a group competition. The classroom atmosphere would, I figured, reach a climax at that moment with sweet smiles and warm applause in every corner. Maybe it meant nothing for a good student, but for the average students, it might contribute to the building of their confidence. During my practice, I realized that various teaching methods and techniques should be adopted to foster students' motivation. Learners, as individuals with different demands and learning preferences, can never be motivated by a certain method. For instance, a average student may be motivated by a few encouraging words, whereas a good student may have a sense of achievement only by more challenging questions.

4.2.3 When Would I Know That It had Improved?

During the process, I collected some data as evidence of improvement. The

data-collecting methods included observation, colleague's comments and students' journals. Since some of the evidence has already been presented, I will focus on two pieces of evidence that I haven't yet touched upon. One consists of comments made by an English expert—Dr. Moira Laidlaw—and the other, the outcome of a questionnaire conducted at the end of the term.

During the course of doing AR, I invited Dr. Laidlaw to observe my class. The following are extracts from her comments:

"They are all waiting for you and keen to learn. I can see this because of their open books, their shining eyes and their friendliness to you."

"I think this class is much more successful than you led me to expect. I think you have done wonders with them, because they really are keen and want to learn. You are using new methods with some success. The students are happy to have you as a teacher."

Before the term came to a close, the students were required to complete a questionnaire, which consisted of 20 five-scale statements (See Appendix D). These statements were designed to get a general idea of students' opinions of the new English class and their attitudes towards English learning. To present the results in a systematic and academic way, I used a Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Questionnaire

N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
13	46.00	48.00	94.00	72.7692	10.8178

Although the mean is relatively high at 72.7, the SD (standard deviation) is comparatively large, indicating that although the majority of the students in my class were in favour of the new teaching methods, a few had a negative attitude towards them. For the purpose of getting more valuable information from the investigation and have a comprehensive analysis of the whole AR process, I eventually identified the student with the lowest score as Su Zhijie, the boy who showed no interest in English. His reactions to the new approach in different stages of the research and on the questionnaire show that interest and motivation were not fostered. In his response to one of the open-ended

questions— “Do you see any changes in your interest or motivation to English learning before and after the May Day?” — he wrote:

“I make no progress this term because my English is too poor. I give it up for many reasons. And what I want to say is that the teacher should not see a poor student as odd and treat him in a special way.”

Did I ‘treat him in a special way’? Yes, to some degree. I called on him to answer questions, and I checked his homework frequently. When he failed to complete an assignment, I said: “You are a brilliant student. Please work harder and you can do well!” I don’t think these are harsh words for a student. Good intentions now met with frustration, which urged me to draw the following conclusion:

Being involved in AR, I could not avoid treating some students slightly differently from others. The point is that some of them may have felt uncomfortable about it. During the process, I chose not to tell them about my AR for I thought Chinese students are more sensitive about being subjects. But I neglected another important thing—their feelings about being given too much concern. Two points can be drawn out of the case: First, everyone is unique, and students’ individual differences should be respected. Second, teacher-researchers need to get permission from their subjects before conducting research. Consequently, I partly attribute my frustrating experience to the violation of one of the moral rules of AR:

“Get permission from the people you hope to work with to involve them in your research. Keep them involved and informed. Invite them to do their own action research. (McNiff, J. , etc., 2002) “

4.3 Conclusion

By and large, weeks of action research practice proved to be successful, especially in captivating students’ interest in English learning. Students who had long been passive listeners benefited most from action research for they began to dominate the classroom. Most activities designed to foster their interest contained elements of the communicative

method. It is worth mentioning that all these changes took place in seven weeks, indicating that action research did serve as a potential means of enhancing learning. Being an action researcher, I have much to say in tackling problems of various kinds, including failures. And I see failures as valuable in that subsequent action researchers can learn from the ones I have related. In a relatively short period of time, I saw my professional improvement, and action research practice helped me to have a deep understanding of the issues and form a habit of reflection. When confronting a problem in class, instead of leaving it untouched, I would rather face it directly and seek for ways of improvement. Most importantly, I furthered my reflection on the relationship between interest and motivation. Ideally, my findings will find practical application and complement the existing theory.

4.3.1 Significance to Language Teaching in Practice

From the very beginning of this research, I found that two groups of students made up 69 percent of the class: those “having both motivation and interests,” and those “without motivation and interest.” My original intention was that by focusing on the “without” group, I might be able to foster students’ motivation through captivating their interest in English learning. I hoped this would also help learners who already had some interest but no motivation. However, with the progress of the AR, I identified a third group—those who had the instrumental motivation to learn but failed to see anything of interest in the subject.

It seems to me now that instructors are more likely to meet resistance when attempting to motivate the “lacking interest and motivation” group. Therefore, an alternative way would be to show more concern over the other two groups. The case study of the male student Su Zhiwei illustrates this point. His change of attitude—moving from no interest to some precious interest and finally returning to the starting point—manifested the difficulty of fostering his interest and motivation. In contrast, the growing interest of the female student, Yang Xiao Ping, could be clearly observed.

The following is the final feedback from this student:

"My interests in English is growing. In addition, the realization of taking responsibility of my learning or becoming a autonomous learner help me to build confidence in making further progress in this subject."

The case study of Yang Xiaoping has some implications for the teaching of non-English majors. For one thing, those students with some motivation are more easily motivated. For another, it may be beneficial to start with a problem that can be resolved, at least to some extent. Taking these two factors into account, I suggest that language teachers identify students of this category (students with motivation) and try to improve their learning. McNiff shares my idea:

"There can be a big difference between the scope of your work and the scope of your action research project. Even though the area may not be small, the study itself should focus on one aspect of the overall picture so that it is always clear that you are researching."

(McNiff, J.& Whitehead, J., 2002)"

On the basis of the results of my research, I drew a difficulty scale of fostering students' interest and motivation as follows:

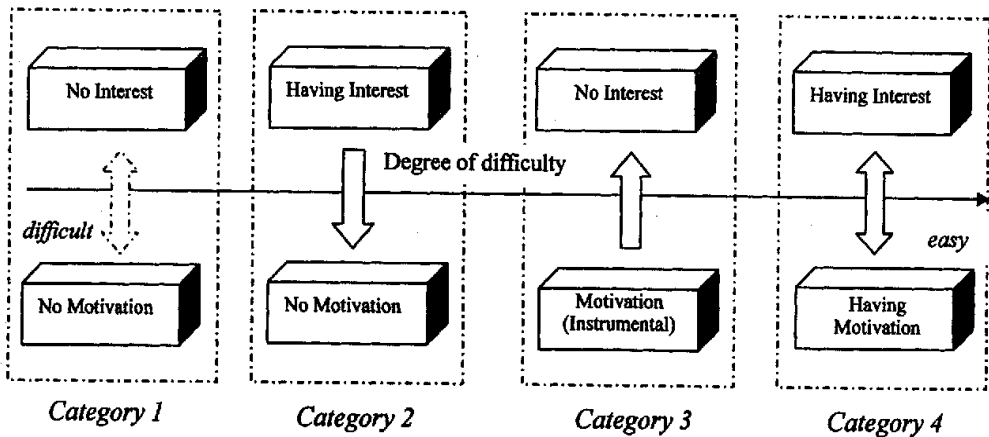


Figure 3.1: A Difficulty Scale of Fostering Students' Interest and Motivation

From the above figure, we may come to the conclusion that it is pretty difficult for language teachers to improve the learning of students, who fall into category 1. The doubled-headed arrow in the figure indicates that lack of interest in learning may inhibit

building of motivation and, likewise, a student who has no motivation in learning may partly due to lack of interest in the subject.

Next comes category 2 and category 3. Students belong to these two categories are easier to be motivated comparing to the category 1 for the two factors, motivation and interest, are closely interact with each other. That is to say, as the two single-headed arrows shows, interest can intrigue students' motivation, or vice versa. Therefore, as a language teacher, it is preferable to identify students in category 2 and category 3, which will make the research work easier and more efficient. Only after that research cycle should the teacher enquire into the following question: "How to improve the learning of students without either interest or motivation?". Of course, one can start with the most demanding task by researching into students in category 1. But action researchers are expected to facilitate most learners' learning, not just one or two students. In this sense, this figure is useful for it gives teachers a long-term plan for captivating students' interest and motivation.

Category 4 is the most desirable model and the one teachers are pursuing. Once being built, the two elements, interest and motivation, will facilitate each other. The close connection is marked with a double-headed arrow in category 4. Generally speaking, students need less attention from teachers if they have both interest and motivation.

4.3.2 Contribution to Theory Building

What is necessary is that teachers should be encouraged to develop their own theories of education from, and through, their own practice, that is, they should be encouraged to examine aspects that they feel need improving, and to work systematically to carry out the improvement. What is crucial is that teachers form theories about their own practices. This process of theorizing — that is, forming and reforming theories — is an integral part of good practice (McNiff, 1988).

It might be widely accepted that integrative motivation or intrinsic motivation are hard to achieve, and that next comes the instrumental motivation. My own experience also proved the point — that after seven weeks' effort, there was little evidence that the

students had acquired any intrinsic motivation. There exist two other types of motivation: emotional and achievement. By “achievement motivation,” I mean giving students a sense of achievement by confronting them with questions of differing degrees of difficulty. Actually, achievement motivation together with emotional motivation work well in facilitating students' learning and fostering language learners' interest. With the increasing of motivational types, the relationship between interests and motivation becomes more complicated. The following figure roughly illustrates my understanding of the interactions among these elements:

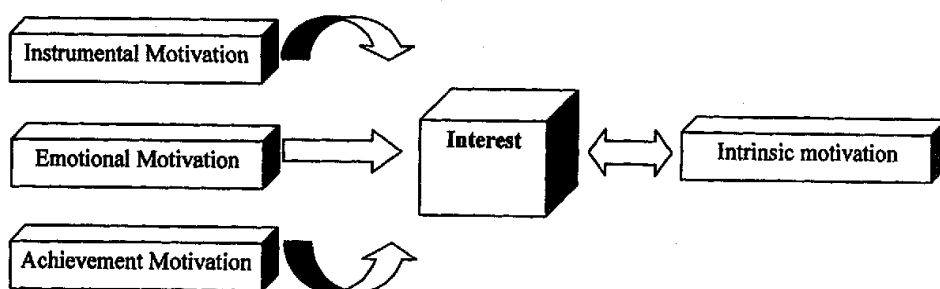


Figure 3.2: My Understanding of the Interactions Between Interest and Motivation

I believe that other three types of motivation — instrumental motivation, emotional motivation and achievement motivation — also work when it is to foster language learners' interest. What's more, interest in language learning may lead to intrinsic motivation, which is the source of steady interest in English learning. Therefore, it is appropriate to view fostering intrinsic motivation as the final goal of a language instructor, without which the new trend of cultivating autonomous learners will be reduced to an empty slogan. At this point, my understanding proves to be consistent with a requirement from the New Curriculum: “Teachers are supposed to foster and strengthen learning interest of students, and then shepherd them to a more steady form of motivation” (NC, 2002).

The four types of motivation and interest interaction are complicated connected. Any attempt of exploring them in isolation will disclose merely part of the truth and not the whole picture. Though most scholars point out that interest is part of intrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation might have something to do with extrinsic

motivation, they are not sure what bridges these two elements. The following figure is an illustration of this:

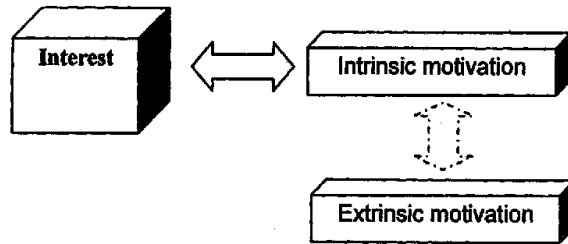


Figure 3.3: Traditional Model of the Relationship Between Interest and Motivation

The theory, as an outcome of the traditional research, is created by outside researchers who are not aware of the teachers' concern. Therefore it is inadequate in practicability. When testing these assumptions, teachers may encounter many unexpected practical problems. In my case, I learned from the motivation theory that fostering students' interest and motivation will help them to learn. But will students be motivated merely by participating in some interesting activities? And what kind of students should be given priority? I got the answer by doing practical work in the classroom, not from the experts. Furthermore, theorists cannot be expected to provide all the solution to problems that occur in different contexts. What I have done is the further development of the existing theory, which may be replicated in similar situations. Though a language learner might not strictly follow the sequence, to some degree, figure 3.2 provides an alternative of fostering students' interest as well as motivation, which is especially meaningful for non-English majors.

4.4 Reflections on the Tools for My Professional Development

The conduction of action research is a process of breaking the routine, during which

I experienced the following means for my professional development.

Keeping journals Action Research encouraged me to reflect on the practices in my classroom as well as equipping me with the methods to challenge deep-rooted opinions. Through reflection, the insufficiencies in my teaching surfaced and, unconsciously, I formed the habit of questioning the routines and searching for alternatives. Some teachers might argue over the way reflection should be presented: journals or diaries. My view is that keeping a journal is a productive way to achieve a systematic analysis of the work you have done. We all have the experience that some sparkling of ideas comes to our mind, and they will soon disappear unless we jot them down in notebook. Furthermore, after conducting action research over a period of time, one needs to give a comprehensive overview of the whole research process. This could not be completed without referring to those notes.

Enlightenment through discussion Though action research can be done individually, a platform on which teachers can exchange ideas and solve problems is needed. Otherwise, their research will be reduced to "research in isolation" and this is not good for a teacher's sustainable professional growth. The following constitute some insights I gained from the action research meetings that were held twice a week at GTC.

On June 8, 2004, in an action research meeting, my attention was attracted by a teacher's new way of data-collection — the use of photographs. This visual form of evidence can well illustrate the point because pictures are more realistic and convincing than descriptions. Because of this, during the second stage of my research, I photographed in real time the performance of my students as evidence for their increasing interest in English. (Notes: To protect the students' identities, I choose not to use these photos in this AR report.)

In another action research meeting, the issue of identifying the scope of subjects for research was presented. Despite there only being 13 students in my class, observation of all these students' classroom behaviour was a heavy burden. Furthermore, action research has a qualitative nature, so objective descriptions of facts and phenomena are preferable. To make sure that the description is specific and problem-oriented, in most cases we are

advised to narrow the subjects of the research-focus down to a couple of students. In addition, the subjects chosen for research ought to be representative of the group. Taking advantage of the results of this discussion, I determined to trace the behaviour of two problematic students in my class and develop my own living theory on interest and motivation.

Insight from teaching theories and teacher's report Teaching theory is accumulated by several generations of effort and is still a source of my inspiration. In a sense, my research is the validation and development of these theories. Working in a teaching environment within a similar background, I found that these action research reports are informative and their findings replicable. Reading through teachers' reports have broadened my vision and encouraged me to approach the problem from various perspectives. With different starting points, confidence or motivation, each perspective aims at the students' involvement in classroom activities, and, hopefully, moves the students away from receiving knowledge passively. The application of some of these methods, such as emotional education and formative evaluation, indicated that they are effective measures. In addition, the replication of these methods in a different situation supplements and develops existing teaching theories.

4.5 Reflections on AR Based on My Practice

Action research increases reflexivity and adds to my confidence as a researcher, and it increases student-involvement in the teaching/learning process. Therefore, based on my own experiences with action research, I have concluded that action research is a meaningful option for professional teacher- development. To be more specific, action research helped me improve my teaching skill and equipped me to be a qualified language teacher over a relatively short period of time. In practice, I formed the habit of observing and taking notes while something important occurred in my classroom, trying to identify those problems common to the students. Action research could cover such a wide range of issues that I assume nearly every problem in the classroom could be

investigated and solved to some degree. Novice teachers could inquire into a common problem such as "How to improve paraphrasing skills?" I didn't choose this for various reasons, but I see such an inquiry as a good start for beginners. Second, the systematic reflective practice helped me adopt appropriate teaching methods according to students' needs and different situations. Reflection offered me a sense of achievement after each class, and I felt excited when I was inspired by those sparkles of thought. For me, teaching is no longer a dull, mechanical process of departing knowledge but an activity full of challenge and interest and interactions between teacher and students. Apart from this, with improved communication with my students, I sensed that a friendly relationship was building between us, which changed my role of an instructor and classroom dominator into the role of advisor and facilitator. More importantly, I saw improvement in reflection ability. Before doing the action research, I seldom sought for ways to change the unfavorable situation but passively accepted things as they were. For example, at first, I attributed students' passivity to an introverted nature and didn't think I could do something about it. Through my reflective practice, I developed the ability of looking for explanations to a certain phenomenon from different angles in an attempt to solve it. I often turned to other teachers in the department for advice and help and I felt comfortable with that because each member of the learning community was willing to offer help, especially to beginners. The following are some more insights I gained from this experience:

Problems confronted by novice teachers Teachers in their first years have special needs and interests that are different from their more experienced colleagues (Calderhead, 1992). Beginning teachers need assistance in their form of support during their first year of teaching as they pass through different phases of development. As a novice teacher, I experienced the two general stages of development described by Fuller and Bown(1975). In the early stage, I experienced concern about survival, that is, I was concerned about control of the class and the content of my instruction. In the later stage, I became concerned about my teaching performance. Thanks to the action research practice, the survival time of the first stage was reduced and I felt more comfortable with staying open

to adaptation and change of my practice instead of settling into a state of resistance to change. Therefore, the first year of teaching had a very important impact on my future career as a language teacher. Another insight I gained from my personal action research experience is that administrators should not expect too much from novice teachers. Novice teachers without research experience have to first struggle to survive the first stage, that is, mastering the basic teaching skills. Therefore, it may demand too much from beginning teachers to create their education theory. I was fortunate to be able to present my own understanding of the motivation theory. This was based on my three years of study as a graduate student. Besides, teachers differ in their capacity for doing research, and most of them can do better only after years of exploration and practice with guidance from their experienced colleagues. In short, being able to present new theories is fine, but I think the nature of action research doesn't necessarily focus on perfection. Instead it focuses on a willingness to try new things, be flexible and grow through complications.

Learning from mistakes Very often the research doesn't proceed smoothly. Each teacher-researcher may list a number of frustrating experiences they have had, but few of them share these experiences with their colleagues. In most cases, they intentionally avoid mentioning the mistakes they made in their action reports. I think these practices are against the spirit of "Living Theory", which values "sharing" with others so that they can learn something from your example. Therefore, for a learning community, setbacks are equally as important as theoretical findings. In addition, including frustrating experiences in a report will add authenticity to the research process. During my practice, I found that one of my subjects was offended because I didn't keep him informed of what I was doing from the start and deprived him of the right of withdrawing from the research. I described this awkward situation in my report, followed by a section of reflection, because I believe "Mistakes in research, in your teaching and learning are not really mistakes, actually. They are opportunities for learning" (Laidlaw, 2004).

Qualitative analysis plus quantitative analysis As I have mentioned before, action research relies mainly on qualitative analysis. A typical action research report may be a

report of descriptions and qualitative analysis. But I think to know the things better, sometimes, one needs to look at the matter from outside. As for action research, I suggest collecting data from different perspectives instead of just looking at the details, because "When you use qualitative search techniques you will be looking at a small number of cases in as much detail as possible. When you use quantitative research techniques you will be looking at a larger number of cases in less detail and will probably find statistics useful aids" (McNiff, 2002). Thus, I combined qualitative analysis with quantitative, trying to present a whole picture of the problem I attended to. For example, on my survey on students' effectiveness evaluation of the action research project, though most students reported that action research boosted academic achievement, a relatively low rating of 3.55 revealed that there was still a small group of students who didn't benefit much from the project. The results from quantitative analysis may help us know the limitations of the action research project, which is not likely to be identified merely by qualitative research.

I believe the negative influence of action research on practitioners is small, if any. Some teachers claims that they sometimes feel exhausted because action research demands too much time, energy and involvement. Except for this, I don't see any negative effects. Some people argue that too much emphasis on the importance of the self in action research can give rise to problems. There is a tendency for some research to become 'pointless', so that self-exploration and personal growth seem to become the whole focus and purpose of the research. Such a statement cannot hold water for I think personal growth and research validity can be achieved simultaneously. Action research reports need to document some aspects, at least, of the researcher's personal reflection in order to establish the validity of the research. For that matter, action research reports are nearly always written in the first person and interpretation, judgment and decision-making can only be made by the researcher. In this sense, the self is a research instrument and the reports demonstrate that action researchers' personal understanding may have influenced interpretations, judgments and decisions. But the validity of a report should not be questioned for similar actions may produce similar outcomes. Besides, the

findings of empirical research, which are produced in a strictly controlled environment, may not be applicable when put in a more specific context.

Part Five New Curriculum and AR

A new curriculum being piloted in some provinces is scheduled for nationwide implementation by 2005. This curriculum has outlined the new learning and teaching approaches as follow:

"...process-oriented language learning and teaching approaches, such as experiential learning and co-operative learning: students are encouraged to experience the language, learn the language by self-discovery, participate in discussion and negotiation-activities. It emphasizes the role of positive affective states on the part of the students. It advocates the task-based approach to language learning and teaching; learning by doing and by using the language. It incorporates learning strategy development into the classroom instruction."

(VSO, 2004b: 1)

It should be pointed out that though the New Curriculum aims at improving English teaching in secondary school, it is applicable to all phases of education. English teachers, no matter whatever kind of schools they are serving, should work under the NC for the demands of their work. A senior official reported to VSO conference, "All over China, schools, colleges and universities are obligated to manage the New Curriculum for the Teaching of English (Chen, 2002)."

But the obvious challenge is that how the teachers remain innovative in trying new methodologies in teaching while cope with the hard tasks required by the curriculum in their classroom. "This means less didactic control by teachers, more unpredictability in behavior and outcome by the students, and a necessity for flexibility in educational processes in the classroom"(Laidlaw, 2004). The massive challenge arouses a sense of anxiety among the teachers of English across China.

When language teachers in other regions were still fumbling their way to meet the requirements of the New Curriculum, teachers in GTC had already walked out of the stage of confusion. Even in the making of NC, teachers there were exposed to new ideas,

such as learning by doing, experience the language, learn the language by self-discovery, positive affective, task-based approach. This was because AR encouraged teachers to “move from competence to performance”. By doing so, teachers turned their attention to record every tiny improvement that students made. Thus, learning process was valued instead of learning result, which embodies the philosophy of the NC.

An overview of what happened in GTC may provide us with some more insights. Many teachers stated that they could now understand the reasons and needs of institutional curriculum change better. The major reason for sure is the introduction of AR to this college. The following comments on AR and NC are taken from teachers' AR reports:

“AR has prepared our minds and trained our actions to get on the boat of the New Curriculum ahead of time.”

“Also I was delighted that my plans were entirely in line with my nation's recommendations about the New Curriculum, which stresses, cognitive, critical and creative thinking, and takes into consideration about students individual differences and affective factors, e.g. motivation and confidence and so on.”

“Actually, my AR practice and my understanding of AR made it easier to understand the New Curriculum. I learnt from both that I should treat students as ‘whole’ person not just as a language learner “

“The New Curriculum says that language leaning is most effective when students' interest, motivation and attitudes are taken into consideration. This is what I have found too. Anyhow, I now believe that AR can help everyone reflect on their actions critically and enhance their professional development.”

Despite that each teacher had their own experience and understanding when reflecting on the relationship between AR and NC, their comments are almost same. Nearly every teacher who had completed an AR cycle mentioned that they were approaching the New Curriculum in one way or another. In addition, the GTC also saw great achievements if examined from the 5 perspectives:

- *Language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing (critical thinking skills and interpersonal skills emphasised for senior Middle School);*
- *Language knowledge: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, function and topics;*
- *Motivation, interest, confidence, co-operation, patriotism and world vision;*
- *Learning strategies: cognitive, planning, communicative and resourcing strategies;*
- *Cultural awareness: cultural knowledge, cross-cultural competence.*

(NC, 2004)

At present, three integrated skills mentioned in the New Curriculum, Language Skills, Language Knowledge and Affective Factors, are well focused on and improved in GTC. For example, enquiries like “How can I help the students improve their speaking ability?” “How can I improve the pronunciation and intonation of first-year English majors?” are addressed to improve students’ language skill and language knowledge.

In GTC, many colleagues are researching into the affective domain. “How can I improve students’ self-confidence in their class work?” “How can I improve my students’ motivation so that they can improve their learning” “How can I cultivate non-English majors’ interest in English?” are the research focuses commonly chosen by teachers in GTC. For they realized that “Language learning is most effective when students’ interest, motivation and attitudes are taken into consideration (NC, 2004).” After years of practice, teachers’ findings in this domain are shared by teachers in other area and they succeed in changing the learners’ passivity, which was once a big headache for them. In short, teachers in GTC are already under way of meeting the requirements of NC.

To find out what leads to the changes in GTC, some of the relevant features of AR, particularly how they relate to Net Curriculum are outlined and examined. It is found that NC and AR well complement to each other in terms of values of humanism, developmental qualities and the means of assessment and evaluation.

5.1 The Parallel Natures of AR and the New Curriculum

5.1.1 A Theme of Humanism

“The NEC emphasises the values of humanism with respect to the combination of knowledge, skills and development of the whole person, a holistic learning-approach in other words. Students are expected to actively construct new things connected and originating with their previous life experiences, so as to promote their interests. Treating students as human beings can ensure the equal participation among teacher and students that man encourage multi-interactions and ensure the possibility of cooperative learning..”

(Zhong Qiquan, 2003)

AR, especially the Living Theory Approach, also values “humanism”. By humanism, it means teachers as unique classroom practitioners should be given enough concern and, in the field of language teaching, humanism elements in AR even goes so far as viewing teachers as competent individuals who are capable of creating their own theory by researching with the participants. “What is crucial is that teachers themselves form theories about their own practices. This process of theorizing — that is, forming and reforming theories — is an integral part of good practice” (McNiff, 1988). The creation of theory starts from problem identification, followed by hypothesis testing, and reflection, which will unavoidably lead to students’ initiative and student-centered activities. Whatever the subjects of “humanism” are, teachers or students, individual difference should be valued and respected, not inhibited in the process of exhibiting their specialties and a springboard for individual potential. In this sense, AR is in line with the New Curriculum.

5.1.2 The Dynamic and Developmental Qualities

The New Curriculum sees language teaching and learning as interactions between teachers and learners, as a on going process in which learners are encouraged to sense the text, and thus led to progress. In Moira’s words, “Language is now being viewed as dynamic and living, as changeable and difficult to control. It is seen as contextual, as living, as creative interactions between real people, rather than as merely functional, de-contextualised and un-dynamic”(Laidlaw, 2004). In this curriculum, learning

strategies are advocated as apposed to set skills, which facilitates the developmental process of learning. That means learners are encouraged to use whatever strategies that is suitable to them to develop their language skills. Most importantly, the strategies themselves are developmental. The developmental qualities also reflect in the adoption of teaching methodologies. It has now been widely accepted that no method can claim to be suitable for all learners and settings. Thus, the teaching methods need to be developed with the changing of the subjects and the teaching settings.

The quality of progress is centered in the AR theory. Firstly, the process of AR is a gradual progress in making. AR process goes on as new research enquiries stem from the old research focuses. Ascending like a spiral, the subsequent AR cycle steps forward on the basis of previous one. Secondly, AR advocates interactions between teachers and learners as apposed to the conventional practice of teachers' domination of the class. It is the interactions that finally lead to development in both groups. Reports of many AR researchers record improvement in learners' language competence, as a result of exposure to authentic learning environment and involvement in active communication activities. Teachers, also, achieve professional development during the life-long process. The third, action researchers perceive educational theory as something living and need to be further developed. They argue that no theory is perfect. When theories are to be applied in specific learning or teaching context, some changes need to be made. Viewed from the above three dimensions, AR is dynamic and developmental. Moira Laidlaw, the leading figure of the Living Educational Theory approach, went even further to refer to teachers' ever-changing education value as evidence of AR's developmental quality. She said, " 'Living Theory' is living in the sense that it is dynamic. At the center of AR is individual's education value, which is ever changing. And teachers' education value grows and changes and develops, which changes teachers' education beliefs from the inside"(Laidlaw, 2004)

5.1.3 Assessment and Evaluation

In the areas of assessment and evaluation, the New Curriculum is complementary to

Living Educational Theory AR and combines summative assessment with formative assessment. Summative assessment is mainly to summarize student learning usually within a defined time period such as by the end of a certain course. By contrast, formative assessment occurs when immediate actions are needed by utilizing a variety of teaching methods as well as administrative measures in order to reach a comprehensive evaluation on a student's progress. If the primary purpose of assessment is to support high-quality learning, then formative assessment ought to be understood as the most important assessment practice. In addition, students are expected to keep track of their own progress and evaluate their own performance. AR has recognized the individual role of the students play in the process of evaluation, e.g., self-assessment.

While, action researchers believe that, "Evaluation should be a developmental process and administered to encourage the learners rather to frustrate them. It should be carried out in terms of what students can do rather than what they cannot do" (Laidlaw, 2004). To gather data and evidence, action researchers often adopt diverse and flexible methods of assessment to record students' progress. Students' smile and their shining eyes are all evidences of their eagerness to learn. Therefore, to keep the students advance further, action researchers would likely record what students are able to do in the classroom and track his/her progress in the teachers' journals. The test results of students' final exams only accounts for a small part of their overall performance for evaluation, but largely on their overall initiatives to learn, how much progress they have made in that certain subject cause, class participation, self-evaluation process, their ability to independent study and their language skills as whole. Students are also encouraged to keep journals themselves to reflect their progress and thus to enable themselves to develop a sense of achievement. The journal is similar to portfolios recommended by formative assessment in NC. Thus, AR corresponds with NC in terms of the techniques of assessment and evaluation.

5.2 AR and the New Curriculum — a Means to an End

5.2.1 Updating Teachers Views on Language and Language Teaching

Some modern educational theories hold the view that “The devastation in education is lack of teaching beliefs”. The implementation of New Curriculum demands teachers to use the NC as guidelines to shift the teaching perceptions in their teaching practice, which may not take place overnight. The fact is that many school teachers are daunted by this enormous task, because they recognize the challenges of treating knowledge in a more dynamic way. AR, with “reflection” as its core, is a potential means to bridge the gap between the New Curriculum and the classroom practices, to avoid complementing the NC in a state of vacuum. For it begins with a practical problem, reflecting in practice, practicing in reflection to arrive at a new understanding the problem. This seems to be the most effective way for teachers to develop a complete new view on language teaching.

In an investigation on teachers' belief change, a group of 19 English teachers who had done AR reach an average score of 76.5, indicating that AR did work in updating their views on language education. As a result of three years of efforts in searching for a new way to meet the new trend of language teaching, AR now has been growing in GTC as a potential way to meet the new challenges. Teachers' reflection on their experience confirms that belief change cannot take place of its own accord, but results from a strong desire for professional development, classroom practices and, most importantly, an effective approach to experiment on new ideas. This suggests only when a sense of achievement through their own experiment, can teachers naturally accept such new concepts.

5.2.2 Avoiding a Departure from the Original Intention of NC

With great enthusiasm a number of teachers are now busy experimenting different methodologies in their classroom in order to comply with the New Curriculum. But some of them mistakenly assume that application of the different methods in teaching is what a

student-centered class requires. Take a class I once observed for instance, the adoption of a variety of teaching methods well involved students in the different activities during the forty-five minutes, however, the result was not satisfactory because the students were given little chance to practice. This can be seen as a departure from the original intention of the New Curriculum, because a steady interest in language learning relies on the sense of achievement and growing competence of the learners. The point is how to deal with the relationship between material and the teaching forms.

AR, by large, can avoid these pitfalls from the very beginning thanks to its natures focusing on the problem and the context. Different hypotheses and plans for improvement could be utilized as ways of finding the solution. Some are valid and practical. To prove that a certain problem has been solved to some degree, data from different sources (colleagues, students' journals, students' testing score, etc.) need to be collected and validated during the process, without which the AR implementation cycle may be regarded as a failure. Therefore the implementation of AR can guarantee that the classroom practice is in line with the teaching content and the demands of NC.

5.2.3 A Distinctive Role of AR

In fact, AR goes beyond the above-mentioned functions since it can also facilitate teachers' self-development. AR makes "teachers as researchers", which greatly expands the traditional role of language teachers. By such practice, the teachers are no longer the passive learners of teaching theories. Instead, they may assume the responsibility of researching in their own classrooms, either individually or collaboratively. As a result, they solve the practical problems they encounter daily, improve professional skill and even create their own theories. These theories are of significance to the EFL education and language teachers as well. These theories either testify or question the old theories as a complement to the existent theories. Furthermore, it inspires teachers to build confidence as language teachers and take initiative in their future work.

Further, the self-development process will not cease when an AR cycle comes to an end. Because once teachers engage themselves in an AR cycle, they embark on a

life-long journey of professional development. Study carried out in GTC proved this. Nearly all the teachers who had completed the first AR cycle raised further enquiries. And the new enquires were relevant to their previous studies. "Seeking solutions and identifying new problems" is the driving force of achieving higher professional competence. Except for AR, no other form of PD can improve students' learning and, at the same time, meet teachers' self-development demands. In addition, as opposed to conventional ways of development, PD through conducting AR is not restricted to scheduled events, but is an integral part of practitioners' everyday live.

5.3 New Curriculum Serving as Guidelines for AR

To make sense of the New Curriculum and AR, I'd like to borrow two terms, "top-down" and "bottom up", to illustrate the point. AR starts from the bottom of language teaching, a practical problem in classroom, to bring changes into a larger context. Therefore, it follows a bottom-up model. The New Curriculum, however, first provides us with a holistic matrix of language teaching, and down to different aspects of the process, is actually by structure of a top-down model.

The "bottom-up" nature of AR determines that teachers' concerns should confine to a certain problem at a time or one aspect of teaching over a long period. There lies potential danger that teachers cares more about a certain aspect and ignore crucial factors within the chain of teaching and learning. Far more than a linear form, different factors of language teaching and learning could interact in a rather complicated way. This point can be illustrated by looking at the practice of GTC. Apart from language skills and language knowledge, a number of teachers in this college are now engaging in developing students' interest, motivation and confidence in language education. Obviously these three are the most urgent factors which need to be addressed. But the focus may go beyond the affective domain. It is observed that teachers in GTC had focused mainly on classroom observations and teachers interaction with the students in their research, only a few of teachers ever made any attempts to explore the topics on the

learning strategies and culture awareness. With the introduction of NC, the “top-down” guidelines, the limited research scope as discussed here on GTC experiment on AR shall be expanded. In this regard, the New Curriculum adds into its guidelines and requires students to develop proactive learning strategies so that students' learning can be facilitated and quality of learning improved.

The New Curriculum may be serving as effective guidelines to enable teachers with different backgrounds to implement AR, and to expand their AR practice to its intended depths.

5.4 External Climate for Promoting AR in China

At a crossroads in its EFL education, China needs not only a New Curriculum, but also innovative methodologies of implementation. AR can facilitate such implementation. The research work developed in Guyuan is one answer to the challenges of implementation. “We recognise there may be many more, but for the moment, we offer this in the hope that it will be useful and inspiring. We also hope that it will show what can be done in a relatively remote part of China, through the hard work and dedication of groups of educators with a vision about the kind of future they want” (Laidlaw, 2004).

However, the question is what kind of support is required in order to promote AR on a national level and what are the challenges and opportunities in such cause? The education system is unique and totally different from its western counterparts. The concept of “theory precedes practice” has long been rooted in teachers' minds. AR, as the practice-focused theory, provided great challenges to the national's traditional teaching theories and the educators by large. Since the New Curriculum was initiated, teachers care more on how students' is doing in classroom rather than what the test scores are, which provides teachers with the “soil” for developing AR. But the plant of AR is not likely to grow up without other necessary conditions. First, AR needs teachers' strong commitment to their research work while Chinese teachers are overburdened by the classroom sizes and the number of students in class. Inevitably, many teachers, though

eager to achieve something, have to give up their research because of limitation of time and energy. Therefore, in order to carry out the NC and enable teachers to search for their own solutions for class, there have to be a commitment by the institution and research work shall be valued as equally important as classes. That means the institution should provide with adequate relief time for teachers to work on research in addition to their normal duties. Second, expand and add AR with Chinese characteristics to fit in local contexts. Chinese value collectivism while western theories may focus on individualism. In the case of AR, collectivism is well manifested in teachers' preference to cooperating with others. That is to say, for Chinese teachers, it is advisable to reflect cooperatively rather than alone, which may make them feel more comfortable and trusted. Furthermore, AR may show other unique Chinese characteristics. The right attitude toward such uniqueness is to take a positive attitude toward the outcomes as AR is transferred to Chinese educational context. Finally, it requires establishing support system of various forms for the undertaking. Since AR is still in developing stage for the nation's education in general, it will become more effective with outside support. Such support should combine financial incentives to those teachers engaged in AR research and this will ensure they have the security to carry out the work.

Part Six Conclusion

In the following section, I set out to discuss the contributions of the GTC's AR project to the field. AR project conducted in Guyuan is a pioneer project in the western region. The process-oriented professional development form brings groups of teachers together regularly to reflect on who they are, what they value, who they teach, what they teach, how they teach and why they teach the way they do. It provides us an alternative form of professional development that engages teachers as active developer of knowledge. Facing the urgent demand of qualified teachers and the need to meet the requirements of NC, it is advisable for educators in China to develop AR with our own national characteristic. Set in this background, the first thing we need to do is to get educators and teachers familiar with the new notion and then put forward some suggestion for expanding it.

6.1 Contributions of Research Projects to the Field

What are the implications of these research findings for teacher education? What kind of impact AR has on the participants' teaching and research processes, and most importantly, what is the significance of GTC' AR project for China's teachers' professional development? Answers to these questions will help us reach a full understanding of the AR project.

6.1.1 Concerning Implications of Their Findings to the Field

A further issue to be addressed in this area of the study is the teachers' contribution to the knowledge base of the field. Have the AR projects developed by the participants contributed to present knowledge base in the field of English-as-a-Foreign-Language teaching?

It can be said that the projects developed by the teachers have added a great deal to the knowledge base of the field of EFL. What needs to be considered though, is that the knowledge acquired through these projects may relate solely to the localized and

contextual problems. In this case, what needs to be further investigated is to which degree each project can be generalized, not whether or not it has contributed to the knowledge base of the field.

English-as-a-Foreign-Language(EFL)teachers working in similar settings and with similar student populations and similar challenges may greatly benefit from the knowledge created through the participants' AR projects. With that in mind, the teachers in GTC are working together to compile a book of EFL activities based on the projects they have developed. In this way, other practitioners in the field will have access to the research findings, activities and suggestions that these practitioners have to offer to their colleagues.

As questioned in the literature, "What are the implications when practitioners begin to create an alternative knowledge base found on a combinations of their rich store of tacit knowledge and their inside understanding of the contexts of teaching and learning" (Anderson, 1994). Research suggests that one way for the inquirer to minimize this is to use sound methods of research as well as work collaboratively with other professionals. If a variety of methods of data collection are employed and if different researchers observe the same phenomena, then findings could be compared, and the reliability of the study might be increased.

6.1.2 Concerning Teachers' Professional Development

The positive impact of AR on the participant's teaching is consistent with prior research in many aspects. Firstly, the participants of the study clearly demonstrated an understanding of their present professional status, and they pointed out a desire to construct ways to change it – through AR.

Secondly, the issue of increased reflectivity is both as a characteristic of conducting AR as well as a consequence of having conducted AR. Teachers reported that they found themselves almost instinctively more reflective about their teaching even when they were not conducting research in their classrooms. The participants reported that as a result of this exercise, they found themselves more inquisitive about the teaching/learning process

and less reluctant to try out new approaches and techniques in their classrooms. In other words, this research project has demonstrated that AR can incorporate elements of research into teachers' daily lives. At the same time, the exercise of AR can improve teachers' research skills as a natural consequence of their classroom practices. In this way theory and practice are intimately connected.

Additionally, the participants reported increased confidence in their work and increased confidence as researchers as consequences of having carried out AR. It also increases students involvement in the teaching/learning process. In this study, teachers who conducted AR reported a feeling of accomplishment and a feeling of recognition of their work by other professionals. These teachers further stated that AR increased the accountability for their work and that they plan to continue to use AR. According to my study, other common characteristics shared by the teachers are:

- They were no longer awed and intimidated by research. They became intimately involved with AR.
- They were cooperative rather than competitive.
- They became more tolerant of creative chaos in their thinking (not in classroom behavior) and therefore more understanding of its appearance in their students' thinking and writing.
- The teachers were able to try new ways of teaching because they were sensitive to classroom variables.
- Their research studies were fully context dependent.
- Teachers reported having gained more self-assurance and encouragement to change.

The teachers who participated in this study wanted a chance to publish their work, to share their ideas with other professionals, and to go beyond the confines of their daily work. Their desire for professional recognition, once again, pointed to the fact that teachers perceived themselves as important workers who were avid for a chance for personal and professional growth. This AR exercise may have planted a seed that will give participants the means with which to further their quest for professional recognition and self-respect.

6.1.3 A Pioneer AR Project in the Western Region

It is a fact that the situation of language teaching in western regions is more pressing.

For one thing, these regions are short of resources for teacher development. Teachers there are largely dependent on support from a few domestic universities or institutes. For another, the positive impact of the training programs on these teachers is still unknown. Serving as a pioneering project in these remote regions, the AR project conducted in GTC, sheds some lights on teachers' development in China. It was proved, through three years of practice, that AR practice could help teachers acquire a stronger sense of professionalism and control over their work, especially when their AR reports were made public to obtain more recognition for the work they had done. As a result, professional development, an outside demand from the school authorities, was turned to teachers' inner desire for self-development. In a long run, involving teachers in AR promoted the creation of a learning community. In a learning community, teachers worked together to learn or understand, every member is allowed to communicate openly and freely, which is beneficial to group professional development. Guyuan teachers' college is only one of the hundreds of teaching institutes. It is my hope that other educational administrators at different levels may be able to refer to the GTC's successful experience when searching for alternative staff development programs.

6.2 Suggestions for Expansion of AR in China

As a response to new requirements and challenges in English teaching, AR is still a new thing to us Chinese language teachers for it has only undergone 15 years of development since it was introduced in the 1990s. Therefore, while interest in AR is growing, there is a long way to go before AR is fully accepted there as a legitimate discipline. It is true that we still know very little about what kinds of support structures or information are needed as they conduct research as well as carry out regular classroom activities, and what conditions promote or hinder the doing of research (Burns, 1999). Thus, here raises the question of "How can AR be made more accessible?"

6.2.1 "Push from Above"

While it becomes evident that the participants are searching for professional

development opportunities, this study demonstrates that what they need is not only guidance, but also a “push from above” to actually embark on a project that would give them some of the growth they were looking for. One half of the participants stated that they were conducting AR because it had been suggested to them.

The evidence collected for this study has demonstrated that without guidance and leadership professional development is not impossible, but it is more difficult. Even though the teachers were very interested in improving themselves, as they stated, they might not have embarked on classroom research if they “had not been asked to” or if “AR had not been suggested to them by the department”. In addition, without the education necessary to carry out research, they might not have the means to improve themselves.

Therefore, it should be the responsibility of the management authorities to provide professional under her/his supervision with the tools for their personal and professional growth. According to this study, teachers need and want to improve themselves professionally, and in this way, improve the teaching/learning process. Education administrators must provide teachers with the means to achieve that end. This research project has shown that AR can be an effective instrument to achieve that goal.

6.2.2 Including AR in Teachers' Development Program

The introduction of AR can take many forms. For example, the Living Theory prefers engaging teachers in the five basic questions to illustrate the idea of AR. However, in China, it is a demanding job to promote the AR, I assume, largely due to China's deep-rooted faith in Confucian, which perceives teachers as practitioners and experts as theory creators. The practice in GTC, which started from the practice of AR, caused a great deal of skepticism toward the idea at the beginning. It takes time for teachers to go through the stage of confusion and feel comfortable with carrying out AR in their classroom. Therefore, I suggest following a structured training program. A training program may begin with “familiarizing the participants both theoretically and practically with the AR approach” and then “undertake their own cycle of research with their

teaching practice class. "By doing so, teachers may show some interest in this new approach, then "trainees feel the need, and have the motivation to carry out such research for themselves in the relatively secure environment of the training course"(Thorne and Qiang, 1996).

6.2.3 Establishing an AR Network in China

We are now in a unique position in taking advantage of the international web-based AR resources. With these valuable resources, we are capable of overcoming the constraints of geographic distances, lack of time, budget implication(Mottart, 2004). In this sense, I see Internet as the potential means of spreading the notion of AR in three aspects: familiarizing AR beginners with the basic information(definition, features, steps, common problems, etc.) about AR; making the teachers' reports public to share their valuable experience in doing AR; establishing a platform for AR practitioners to exchange ideas. Nevertheless, doing AR is not without its problem. The biggest problem is that all the currently AR models are developed in the West are not entirely appropriate for China. To solve the problem, China is in urgent need to build up an AR network with Chinese characteristics.

With the development of computer science and network and the multimedia technology, people are capable of being educated in real time. Even some remote cities in western region have access to Internet resources. These favourable factors and the need for teachers' professional development are urging us to establish an AR network in China. Though two domestic AR research centres have been established in China, no attempt has been made to build such a Network. I even suggest that, in the near future, long-distance program on AR based on the learners' need is available. By then, the problem of lack of human and financial resources in providing AR courses will be minimized to a large extent.

6.2.4 Equipping Teachers With the Skills of Data-collection and Data-analysis

Unlike traditional research, AR does not strictly follow a procedure of data

collection and analysis. But that does not mean action researchers don't need to improve their skills of data interpretation because "the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of data collected is crucial to the validity of a research of any type"(Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Personally, I believe the ability of reflection can be developed during an AR process, together with teacher's awareness of identifying problems in classroom. Teachers' ability of collecting and interpreting data, however, is not easy to be developed naturally in their practice. It needs careful guidance and should be conducted in a systematic way. I came to this conclusion after the three months study on the AR project in GTC.

In the teachers' reports, teachers mentioned that collection and interpretation remain two major problems for them. In a response to the questionnaire statement: "My classroom research skills(identifying problems, collecting data, analyzing data) have been improved since my doing AR", more than 50% teacher reported they didn't see much improvement in the last two skills. Therefore, the importance of training teachers' data-interpretation ability in AR research can not afford to be neglected. Otherwise, action researchers may be discouraged to further carry out their classroom AR. Integrating data analysis courses in training sessions may be a good choice as Wang Qiang did in the Sino-British MA program. The project was divided into two stages. "During the next stage we move into an examination of various data collection techniques, including case studies, audio and video techniques, teacher and learner diaries, questionnaires, interviewing, and classroom observation sheets. We study authentic example of each type of data, with two aims: firstly, to show trainees what sort of material it is possible to collect from their own classroom, and what that material can reveal about the teaching and learning processes; secondly, to equip them with the skills necessary to construct their own data-collection instruments"(Thorne and Qiang, 1996).

Wang Qiang's practice of training teachers' data-collection and analysis ability serves as a model. It is apparent that this training course was qualitative-oriented. Suppose we add some quantitative analysis techniques to this model, will teachers be more flexible when interpreting data, thus making classroom AR more productive? I suppose, the

answer is positive.

6.3 Conclusion

AR involves defining a problem, making a plan of action, implementing that plan of action, reflecting on the results, and revising as a basis for further planning. AR or teacher classroom research aims to provide teachers with the means to unite theory and practice. AR is relevant to each teacher and classroom reality. It is a democratic, ongoing and ever changing process through which teachers and students can experience growth and empowerment.

At a time of enormous pressure in China to reform schooling, AR has been particularly useful to teacher educators, in providing a set of procedures for working with teachers and supporting education change. AR has, in this way, filled an institutional need of Higher Education for a form of research while still answering the practical needs of teachers and their schools.

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Appendix A

大学英语教师培训现状调查问卷

尊敬的老师:

您好!

为了了解新一轮课程改革中英语教师培训现状,探索教师的可持续发展的有效途径,特设计本调查问卷,以便了解各位老师对目前国内英语教师培训现状的建议。以下各题,您可以在认为合适的选项前的方框中打“√”,可以单选,也可以多选,请您依据自身实际情况认真填写。

非常感谢您填写本调查表!

教 龄		学 历		职 称		职 务	
-----	--	-----	--	-----	--	-----	--

一、教师培训现状

1. 您参加过的培训次数:

从未参加过 1次 2次 3次 4次 4次以上(不包括4次)

2. 您个人参加教师培训的困难是:

培训机会少 教学任务重,无法离岗 地域限制 费用过高
其它原因_____

3. 您曾经参加过的培训级别有:

国外教育机构培训()次 国内教育机构培训()次 学校内部(校本培训)()次
其它_____

4. 下列培训方式中,您曾经参加的有:

学历进修 研究生进修班 远程教学 脱产培训(半年以上) 短期离岗培训(半年以下) 在职培训 寒暑期培训
其它_____

5. 在您参加过的在职培训中,涉及的培训内容有:

英语专项技能培训 教材教法培训 外语教学理论 英语测试和评价培训 英语教育技术(如多媒体教学)
其它_____

6. 您对所参加过的培训的评价是:

流于形式,起不到多大作用 是一种职称晋升的手段
 由于培训体制本身存在许多问题,培训不能达到预期的效果
 对我的教学实践有很强的指导意义 对我的教学实践有一定的指导意义
 培训很大程度上提高了我的专业技能
其它评价_____

7. 您认为,目前的培训内容和方式上存在下列哪些问题:
- 过于强调知识的专业化和理论性 过于侧重实践教学等微观问题
- 对实际一线教学的指导意义不大 没有考虑不同层次教师的需求
- 传授语言知识、技能而不注重知识的运用和能力的培养
- 主要是“填鸭式”培训,缺乏学员的能动参与 不注重教师职业技能的终生发展
- 其它_____

8. 您认为,目前的培训模式上存在下列哪些问题:
- 培训模式单一 以培训教师为中心的培训而不是以学员为中心的培训
- 没有合理的培训跟踪体系 没有合理的培训评价体系
- 其它_____

9. 您认为培训中所传授的新教学方法和教学理论:
- 不适用于自己的课堂 在一定程度上适用 很适用于自己的课堂

10. 在经过培训,回到教学岗位之后,您:
- 仍然沿用以前的教学方法 在一定程度上应用了新教学法 很好地应用新教学法
- 不能运用所学新教法的原因是_____

二、教师培训需求

11. 作为一名大学英语教师,您目前急需解决的问题是:
- 丰富语言知识 提高教学技能 了解英语教改的有关内容 寻求适当的方法,响应教改的要求
- 掌握开展教学研究的方法 了解最新国际教学动态和理念
- 其它_____

12. 您认为,教师专业技术发展可以通过以下哪些方式实现:
- 学术交流 岗位培训 课题研究 阅读专业著作 课堂实践,经验积累
- 教学反思和以课堂实践为基础的研究活动

13. 教师在职发展是教师成长的关键,您认为在以下专业能力中,哪些是可以自我发展的:
- 语言运用能力 教学技能 教学反思能力 教学科研能力 教学理念的更新
- 其它_____

14. 您认为,教师自我发展可以通过以下哪些方式实现:
- 学术交流 岗位培训 课题研究 阅读专业著作 教学实践,经验积累
- 教学反思和以课堂实践为基础的研究活动
- 其它_____

15. 为了进一步丰富自身的外语教育专业知识,您希望得的培训内容有:
- 最新教学理念 课堂教学技能 教学方法 教学研究的方法 自我专业发展的途径和手段
- 其它_____

16. 请用一句话说明您对教师专业发展和自我发展两者关系的理解。

Appendix B

AR Interview Questions

Teachers Who Conducted AR

Name _____

Experience teaching EFL _____

Experience conducting AR _____

AR Interview Questions:

1. In your opinion, what is AR?
2. Why did you become involved with your AR project?
3. Has AR contributed to your teaching? Why/why not? In which ways. Please be as specific as possible.
4. Have the AR group meetings and discussions contributed to your teaching/professional development?
5. Do you plan to share your AR findings with other professionals? Why/why not? How?
6. According to your experience, is AR a good teacher development alternative? Why/Why not?
7. Do you plan to continue with this or other AR projects?
8. What was the greatest difficulty you encountered during your AR?
9. You have "finished" your AR (at least the 2 "rounds" we agreed upon). Where do you go from here? Do you think you are "done" with this project?
10. What did you enjoy about conducting research in the classroom?
11. Was the compensation you received for conducting AR fair for the time and energy you put into the project?



Appendix C

Questionnaire on Teacher Development Beliefs

Directions: Three years have passed since the first introduction to AR in our English Department. Through years of hard efforts on AR, we are wondering what has happened to the language teachers' teaching beliefs. In order to get first-hand information, a survey is going to be conducted among teachers in the department. The following is a questionnaire, asking information about your general education beliefs and preference. This project is so important to our profession that we will be very grateful if you could take some time to take the time to complete it and give it back to us. The validity of this project corresponds directly to the number of responses we receive. Your input is crucial. In addition, the questionnaire might be conducted without your names on to protect identity.

Hopefully, this analysis will show common trends and important directions for our future. We will be sharing the result with you.

Thanking you in advance for your participation.

Part I. Your background Mark(✓) in box

1. Are you:

Male Female

2. Your level of present certification:

Bachelors Masters Others

3. How many years have you been teaching English?

0-3 4-6 7-10 more than 10

4. How long have you been conducting AR in your class?

less than one year 1-2 years 3 years

Part II. Please read all the following questions or statements. For each question, choose one answer that is in line with your beliefs.

1. How often do you use group discussion and other classroom activities (pair work, role play, oral presentation, etc.) in your class?

A. never B. occasionally C. often D. almost in every class

2. What percentage of your teaching time do you usually spend in delivering your lesson?

- A.20-30% B.30-40% C.40-50% D. more than 50%

3.How many hours a week do you spend in reflecting on your teaching or journal writing?

- A.0-1 B.2-3 C. 4-5 D. more than 5

4. What is the frequency of another teacher's observation to my class and feedback each term?

- A. never B. 1-3 times C.3-5times D. more than 5 times

5.What's your attitude towards peer observation?

- A. fear B. uncomfortable C. comfortable D. welcome

6.How often do you discuss the problems that occur in teaching with your colleagues?

- A. never B. occasionally C. often D. quite often

Part III. Read the following statements about language teaching. For each statement indicate if you agree or disagree with the statement (5=Strongly agree, 4=Agree, 3=Not sure, 2=Disagree, 1=strongly disagree)

	Strongly agree	Agree	No sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.Anybody who learns English can teach the language, regardless of whether or not they know anything about teaching and learning.	5	4	3	2	1
2.Teachers are resource persons who provide language input for the learners to work on.	5	4	3	2	1
3. Teachers' teaching and the use of textbooks should base on students' needs.	5	4	3	2	1
4. Teachers cannot improve their English enough simply by studying methodology.	5	4	3	2	1
5. Teachers' beliefs do influence their approach to teaching.	5	4	3	2	1
6.Practice can be seen as the source of theory instead of vice versa.	5	4	3	2	1
7.The combination of formative assessment (形成性评价)	5	4	3	2	1

	Strongly agree	Agree	No sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
and summative assessment (终结性评价) is better for the evaluation of students					
8.Experience is insufficient as a basis for development.	5	4	3	2	1
9.Professional development is a life-long process.	5	4	3	2	1
10. It is important to adopt a research orientation to teaching and classroom.	5	4	3	2	1
11.Reflections on teaching practice will have a very beneficial effect on my professional development	5	4	3	2	1
12.AR is a potential means of achieving professional development.	5	4	3	2	1
13. My classroom research skills(identify problems, collect data, analyze data) have been improved since my doing AR.	5	4	3	2	1
14.After doing AR, I find my awareness and sensitivity about the classroom situation increased.	5	4	3	2	1
15.The key concepts of teacher development are teacher reflection and teacher as researcher.	5	4	3	2	1

Part VI 1. Consider the following activities for your professional development. Rank them in order of importance from 1 to 5.

- Reading professional journals and publications
- Individual or group reflection
- Interaction with colleagues
- Attending seminars and conferences
- Training teaching skills (programs)

Are there any other activities you feel valuable but not mentioned?

2.Consider the value of qualities of a good language teacher. Rank them in order of importance from 1 to 5.

- a flexible user of different teaching methodologies
- sound foundation of theories on TEFL
- abilities of self-reflection and self-development
- a good mastery of the foreign language
- a good command of teaching skills

Part V. 1. What's your beliefs about the teaching and learning process before doing AR?

(including your attitudes towards change, your role in classroom as a language teacher, your teaching methods, etc)

2. Does AR contribute to your professional development?

If your answer to (2) was YES, in what way does it improve your English teaching? If your answer to (2) is NO, please give the reason.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire, we greatly appreciate your cooperation to this study!

Appendix D

英语课堂教学学生调查问卷

同学们:

外语教学行动研究从引入我系到现在已经有三年时间了,相信有的同学对这个术语应该并不陌生。为了解这一项目取得的阶段性成效,我们准备在一些班级开展一次关于目前课堂教学情况的调查。同学们在填写时请对将目前与一年前的课堂教学实际情况进行对比,并作出相应选择。

本次调查以无记名的方式进行,各位同学只要将班级、年级等信息填入即可。调查结果将对今后我系英语教学工作的改进产生指导性作用,希望每一位同学都能认真对待!

年级: []

班级: []

序号	内容	同意程度				
		完全同意	比较同意	不确定	不同意	完全不同意
1	我喜欢老师现在的授课方式	5	4	3	2	1
2	老师的授课方式能激发我学习的兴趣	5	4	3	2	1
3	我们的英语课堂上出现了多种形式的课堂活动	5	4	3	2	1
4	我喜欢现在英语课堂上的这种气氛并认为它有助于我们的学习	5	4	3	2	1
5	我认为现在的英语课堂上我们成了主角,不再是老师“一言堂”	5	4	3	2	1
6	我不会因出现错误而不敢于表达,因为在语言学习中出现错误属于正常现象	5	4	3	2	1
7	我敢于在课堂上表达自己的观点,并与同学们进行讨论	5	4	3	2	1
8	我的老师同样关注成绩不理想的同学的学习情况	5	4	3	2	1
9	我的老师经常用灵活的方式处理不同的教学任务	5	4	3	2	1

序号	内容	同意程度				
		完全同意	比较同意	不确定	不同意	完全不同意
10	我的老师经常了解我们的学习需求并根据实际情况开展教学活动	5	4	3	2	1
11	我的老师留心课堂上出现的一些问题并努力找到解决办法	5	4	3	2	1
12	我愿意把我自己的想法和要求告诉我的老师	5	4	3	2	1
13	我不仅从老师那里而且从与同学的讨论中学到了很多东西	5	4	3	2	1
14	我在现在的课堂里得到更多的机会锻炼我的听说和语言表达能力	5	4	3	2	1
15	我发现自己的学习自主性有所增强, 成绩有所提高	5	4	3	2	1
16	我感到现在的教学活动促进了我思维能力的发展(如对课文更深层的理解)	5	4	3	2	1
17	我认为学习英语不应该是为了仅仅掌握一些语言知识而应当达到能够交流的目的	5	4	3	2	1
18	我会把老师采用的这种灵活的教学方法运用到我未来的课堂教学中	5	4	3	2	1
19	我自己而不是老师应当对我的学习负责	5	4	3	2	1
20	我有能力学好英语, 对今后的学习我更加自信	5	4	3	2	1

与一年前的英语课堂教学相比, 我觉得在以下几个方面发生了变化(请从课堂, 教师, 自身变化三方面来回答):

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