LOOKING BACK INTO AN ACTION-RESEARCH PROJECT: TEACHING/LEARNING TO REFLECT ON THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This paper focusses on an action-research project in language classrooms in the official educational system of the city of Rio de Janeiro. It introduces the demand which motivated the project and the general theoretical framework which underlies action-research as reflection on a social practice conducted by its participants. Next, the paper reports on the general plan of the project, involving issues connected with the research context, length of time and the steps followed. By way of conclusion, positive and negative factors of the project are drawn on the basis of an analysis of data derived from audiotaped sessions with participants, open-ended questionnaires and the research papers produced.

Key-words: *action-research; project; evaluation; language teachers.*

Resumo

Este trabalho focaliza uma prática de pesquisa-ação nas salas de aula de línguas da rede municipal do Rio de Janeiro. Apresenta a demanda que a motivou e as linhas teóricas gerais que orientam a pesquisa-ação como reflexão empreendida pelos participantes de uma prática social sobre a mesma. A seguir, relata o plano geral do projeto, envolvendo o contexto da pesquisa, duração e os passos que o concretizaram. Ao concluir, são apontados os fatores positivos e os negativos do projeto, levantados com base em dados oriundos de gravação em áudio dos grupos de discussão dos participantes,

questionários abertos e da análise dos trabalhos de pesquisa desenvolvidos.

Palavras-chave: *pesquisa-ação; projeto; avaliação; professores de línguas.*

1.   Introduction

Although action-research as a practice for teacher education programmes, both in-service and pre-service, has long been argued for, few programmes in Brazil and, in fact, in most parts of the world, have taken up this alternative for teacher development. Certainly, in the area of language teacher education there have been few attempts. To the best of our knowledge, in Brazil, except for the odd MA dissertation in which one finds the author reporting on the findings of his/her investigation into his/her own work (Bandeira e Silva, 1995), no larger project involving a team of language teachers examining their own practice such as the one described here has been reported in the literature. Nevertheless, internationally the teacher as researcher movement has long been on the road. The early initiatives of this movement date back from the early seventies (Stenhouse's The Humanities Project, 1971 and Elliot & Adelman's The Ford Teaching Project, 1973). Also, a myriad of books and papers on classroom research conducted by teachers themselves have been published (Stenhouse, 1975; Nixon, 1981; Hopkins, 1985; McNiff, 1988; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989; Daiker & Moremberg, 1990; Kincheloe, 1991; etc).

It must be said, however, that a concern with action-research as a means for teacher development in Brazil has already been noted by Moita Lopes, 1986; Cavalcanti & Moita Lopes, 1991 and Moita Lopes, 1996a, for example. These texts, however, involve suggestions for action-research development rather than the report on actual

projects and their results. In Brazil, as, in fact, in most programmes for teacher education all over the world, the usual pattern of content courses is followed. As a matter of fact, the demand which motivated this project, as discussed below, was actually for a course in which teachers would cover the content of University courses to which they had not been exposed or would be presented to the recent theories in vogue at the University. This, we think, corresponds to what goes on in most programmes for in-service teacher education all over the world.

In these content courses teacher education basically involves a package of knowledge, so to speak, which the teacher educator possesses and which he is going to pass on to the student teacher or the teacher in the classroom (Moita Lopes, 1995a). The teacher educator, therefore, operates with a view of knowledge as product which the student teacher must assimilate so that he/she can deploy it in the classroom. What we present in this paper is an attempt to look back into an alternative for teacher education programmes which focusses on research practice as crucial for teacher development rather than on an approach which solely relies on content courses.

2.   The demand for the project

In the first semester of 1995, the Education Department of the city of Rio de Janeiro inquired whether the SALÍNGUAS Project[1] could offer some kind of in-service programme for their language teachers. They had in mind a course on reading comprehension. Although we are perfectly aware of the need for language teachers' familiarization with reading comprehension theories and teaching practices due to the relevance of reading comprehension in education (Moita Lopes, 1995b), we suggested that we would be interested in

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[1]The SALÍNGUAS Project started out by focussing on language classroom research although now other types of classrooms (history, mathematics etc.) are being investigated.

developing a teacher education programme which centered on action research.

We had already been involved with quite a few content course programmes to understand that their role in making teachers think about their practice is very limited since teachers often perceive possible innovations as exactly what they are doing in classrooms or as having no relevance to their practice. Although both perceptions on teachers' part maybe equally true, we are frequently faced with the fact that content courses offer teachers no chance for them to reflect on their work so that they can alter it. Teachers go away from their content courses and revert to their old practices or, alternatively, begin to follow new dogmas, which likewise is harmful since this practice leaves teachers in the position of research consumers and, therefore, in an eternal situation of dependence on the University or textbook. If teachers are not ready to evaluate the adequacy of whatever is said to have relevance to their practice they are not really educated. They are trained to follow particular dogmas as how to procede in the classroom. Education involves the ability to make critical choice, which will lead into emancipation, i.e., the ability to stand on one's own shoes. This view inspired our concern with an approach to in-service teacher education guided by action research principles.

3.   General theoretical principles

The basic principle underlying action-research is that, in order to change a social practice, participants have to start by reflecting on it. The underlying notion is therefore the need for participants to get cognitively involved with their action in a particular context where they act (i.e., to understand it) if they want to improve it. This can be better done if participants can do it systematically and continually through research. Therefore, it is essential that teacher education programmes be framed as an investigation practice, which involves the need for teachers to understand how knowledge is produced, disseminated and criticized,

i.e., the research cycle or the knowledge production process. Language teacher education programmes, then, should consider not only the new paradigms in the field of language teaching/learning but also how they are produced and how they can be criticized (Moita Lopes, 1995a and 1996b).

That is to say that it is paramount that both teacher educators and the classroom teacher see their work as sources of investigation: they need to take a research stance toward their work (Stenhouse, 1975). The classroom, therefore, becomes a site of constant investigation instead of the place of certainties or dogmas. In this view, the teacher educator also takes a research stance toward his/her own work as we did in the practice which is reported on here. In other words, by teaching teachers to act as researchers in their own classrooms, we were also trying to understand what we were doing as teacher educators by reflecting on the very practice we were involved with. The results of this reflection is what this paper reports on.

Two factors are essential in order to familiarize teachers with research. First, teachers need to understand what is involved in knowledge production: an epistemological issue. Basically, just like any other person who is getting involved with research, they need to become aware of the fact that knowledge production is a process. The theories which explained our field in the past (how languages are better taught, how the nature of language is conceived of, etc.) are no longer followed. Getting involved with knowledge production is equal to becoming familiar with this process of theory construction. This requires that teachers understand what the scientific enterprise is all about, which includes the processes which legitimate and validate certain types of knowledge, how some theories are substituted for others, what is involved in educational and social knowledge production, the diversity of forms of research types in the post-positivist days in which we live, and issues related to the myth of objective knowledge production (Moita Lopes, 1994).

One of the most relevant issues raised by recent concerns with epistemology has drawn attention to the need for research in the social world to consider the views and perspectives of those acting in it (Gibbons et al., 1995). That is to say that research conducted by teachers about their practice has a twofold objective. Besides fostering educational development by making teachers reflect on their work, it may also help university researchers to illuminate their findings by making use of teacher-constructed theories. In this sense, it is not only the school teacher who learns from the university (as traditionally conceived of), but also the university researcher who learns from school-produced knowledge.

The other factor is methodological: how people who produce theories in our field operate. It is crucial, in this connection, that teachers become familiar with research methodology, which has traditionally considered both the positivist and the intrepretativist modes (Moita Lopes, 1994). In particular, language teachers need to learn about language classroom research methodology (Moita Lopes, 1996a), i.e., how data are collected and interpreted. This makes it possible for teachers, on the one hand, to criticize knowledge produced in their field by other people, and, on the other, to produce knowledge about their own practice. It should be noted that, in classroom action research, the interpretativist research methodology seems to be more adequate in view of the fact that this tradition accounts for the social practice as a process as well as for how participants construct it (Moita Lopes, 1994).

Another important point in learning to reflect about classrooms through action-research is knowledge dissemination, which involves learning to prepare oral presentations and to write papers for publication. Teachers need to get used to disseminating the knowledge they produce so that other people (colleagues, university researchers, etc.) can learn from them and, at the same time, they can receive criticism about their work. One of the important steps of knowledge production is offering the research results to the

community so that criticism may improve them. Involving teachers in the research cycle (doing research, finding results, offering them to criticism) is a crucial part of initiating teachers in action-research. The action-research project we are centering on in this paper tried to do that as the project design discussed below indicates.

4.   Project design

The project was coordinated by two lecturers from the SALÍNGUAS Project[2] of UFRJ - Alice Maria da Fonseca Freire and Luiz Paulo da Moita Lopes - and by two others from different institutions - Inês Miller (PUC-Rio) and Maria Izabel Azevedo Cunha (CAp-UFRJ). The other participants included 30 English, French and Portuguese high school teachers from different schools in the public sector of the city of Rio de Janeiro who had read about the project in a newsletter published by the Educational Department. From the onset of the project they were considered teacher researchers.

The whole group met at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro for two hours and a half, each two weeks, in the second semester of 1995 (a total of 9 meetings) in order to cover the steps of an action research project as presented by Moita Lopes (1986: 302): (1) familiarization with action-research principles and instruments; (2) monitoring teaching/ learning process through field notes and audio recording; (3) negotiation of research question[3]; (4) negotiation of research instruments; (5) actual research: data collection; (6) analysis and interpretation of data: accumulation of evidence for theorising; (7) production of reports to be presented in seminars/ congresses; (8) negotiation of new research questions (the process will start again on

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[2]The Educational Department allowed teachers to include the time dedicated to the project in their work load.

[3] Negotiating/defining the research question is a crucial point. It starts by focussing on a general theme participants consider problematic in their practice (eg.: why pupils do not like reading comprehension classes) until they can more specifically indicate the question they want to investigate (e.g.: how pupils relate to the content of the texts used in their reading classes).

stage 8 above). Due to schedule constraints, size of the group, and lack of experience as regards research practice on the part of the teachers, and other pragmatic issues, the project did not move into the negotiation of new research questions.

More specifically, having this framework as a basis, the project was organized in nine meetings which covered the following activities:

Meeting 1:   Workshop: *Teachers' expectations about the project.*
              Lecture: *Project description.*
              Fieldwork: *First observation of teaching/learning practice.*

Meeting 2:   Workshop: *Analysis of the first observation.*
              Lecture: *Action research principles and practice. Research question.*
              Workshop: *Discussion of the project principles and practice. The research question. Analysis of the first observation from the perspective presented in the lecture.*
              Fieldwork: *Self-monitoring experience. The research question.*

Meeting 3:   Workshop: *Discussion about the self-monitoring experience and the definition of a research question.*
              Lecture: *Data collection # 1: research instruments. Presentation of data collected by means of different instruments.*
              Workshop: *What would be the best data collection procedure for your research question? The research instruments.*

	Fieldwork:	*First data collection experience using one type of instrument (after the definition of a research question).*
Meeting 4:	Workshop:	*Discussion about the first data collection experience. Difficulties.*
	Lecture:	*Data analysis # 1. The role of a critical friend in the process of data collection/analysis.*
	Workshop:	*Analysis of data collected in their first data collection experience. Changes to be made in the practice due to conclusions drawn from the analysis. Refocussing on the problem.*
	Fieldwork:	*Second data collection experience.*
Meeting 5:	Workshop:	*Discussion about second data collection experience. Difficulties.*
	Lecture:	*Data collection: triangulation. Improvement on the use of fieldnote techniques, audio/video recording and interviews.*
	Workshop:	*Discussion about the use of these research instruments. Comparison of data collected by means of different instruments.*
	Fieldwork:	*Third data collection experience.*
Meeting 6:	Workshop # 1:	*Analysis of data collected in their third data collection experience.*
	Workshop # 2:	*Comparison of data analysis # 2 and # 3.*
	Fieldwork:	*Written reports on the comparison of data analysis # 2 and # 3. Reading of action research reports already published.*

Meeting 7:	Workshop:	*Sharing the difficulties on the production of written reports. Discussion about the reading assignment.*
	Lecture:	*Changing the practice / acting in the practice.*
	Workshop:	*What to do to change the practice? to act in the practice?*
	Fieldwork:	*Changing the practice with the help of a critical friend in the classroom.*
Meeting 8:	Lecture:	*The production of the final written report.*
	Workshop:	*Discussion of final written reports.*
	Fieldwork:	*The writing out of the final report.*
Meeting 9:		*Final seminar. Presentation of individual papers. Project evaluation.*

As can be seen above, in the first meeting the teachers had a chance to express their own expectations before being presented to the actual project by the coordinators. At that point it became very clear that the teachers had very little or almost no experience in carrying out any type of classroom research. Therefore, they had to be introduced into interpretativist research procedures in a very detailed way. This meant that at the end of each meeting they were asked to do an assignment which always involved observation and data collection since we wanted to make sure that they would have the necessary tools to produce some kind of research to be offered to criticism through the presentation of a paper at the final seminar. In every meeting, they got together in workshops, led by one of the coordinators, in order to discuss/ analyse, in small groups, the data they had collected. Then they listened to a lecture given by one of the coordinators who would introduce them to theoretical and practical

principles in order to allow them to reevaluate their data analysis, once again in small groups. At the end of each session, they were given one more assignment. This same procedure was systematically repeated, giving the teachers a chance to refocus their research question and refine their analysis. In the last meeting they should be ready to produce a final written report and to present it to the whole group in a poster session.

5. Project evaluation

The design of the evaluation centered on both the coordinators' and teacher researchers' views of the process they were involved with. To be consistent with the research methodology we were teaching the teachers to use (to reflect on their practice), we also used interpretativist research procedures which allowed us to reflect upon our own practice as teacher educators. The data collection procedures involved audio-recorded group discussions as well as open-ended questionnaires and the actual research reports written by the teachers.

5.1. Data derived from audio-recorded group discussions and open-ended questionnaires

As already mentioned, on the very first session the teachers were asked to discuss in small groups about what they expected from the project. Their words, audio-recorded and later transcribed, show a complex array of emotions - frustration, low self-esteem, lack of confidence and hope, desperate need to be respected, as can be seen in the following extracts.

(teachers were asked to discuss in small groups the reasons why they had decided to take part in this project and then to write their conclusions on a piece of paper)

Excerpt 1[4]

Teacher 4:	I think that it is too utopic to talk about improvement in the teaching system... (laughter) it is too utopic \. We won't do it for sure. We are watching the opposite: the failure of education. Isn't it?
Teacher 1:	We watch it every day.
Teacher 4:	We watch it. Then, what's the reason for research?
Teacher 8:	Is it going to save education from chaos? Is it? to save education from chaos?
Teacher 4:	To save education from chaos... I also think it is too utopic, right? (laughter)
Teacher 8:	To avoid failure?
Teacher 4:	Then let's write an attempt ... to survive.

Excerpt 1 shows that teachers were skeptical about the possibility of this type of project to bring about any change in education.

Excerpt 2

Teacher 4:	Are we going to be guinea pigs?
Teacher 3:	I think that research is going to ... through action ...
Teacher 4:	But are we going to be guinea pigs or research ... what are we going to be? guinea pigs?
Teacher 3:	For whom? For them?
Teacher 4:	I don't know! For them.
Teacher 3:	I think they see us
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Teacher 4:	guinea pigs.
Teacher 3:	Source of investigation. And as ...

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[4]The data used here were translated from Portuguese into English for the purpose of this paper.

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Teacher 4:	I'm already feeling like I was an ornithorhynchus.
Teacher 3:	... we become a source of investigation for them, we learn about what we do to our students, the other guinea pigs ((UNINT))
Teacher 8:	We also transform our students into our guinea pigs.
Teacher 4:	Yes. Then why research? We got back to the initial question: what came first, the egg or the hen? (laughter) ((UNINT))
Teacher 8:	Is action research a chance for improvement? Is it a chance for professional improvement? To carry out research... for us to feel safer or for us to feel more... appreciated, that your work is appreciated, I don't know.

Excerpt 2 indicates that at that point the researchers did not trust the coordinators and were skeptical about the objectives of the project. They believed they were being used for someone else's research benefits. In fact, they seem to be echoing the way University researchers use their classrooms for research without giving back to them the results of their investigation. In teacher 8's last turn, we seem to detect a concern with what leads one into research.

Excerpt 3

Teacher 3:	The most interesting thing is, the most ((UNINT)) is the fact that we have ... even the Department of Education carries out so many interesting projects, then we receive them, it's...it's...it's suggestions, those books of suggestions

Teacher 8:	look, they are not made...
	[
Teacher 3:	I think that... I think it is
	interesting that we arrive
	at school... and it is completely
	impossible...

Again, teachers are reacting to outside contributions to their practice. They, in particular, refer to the Education Department's projects which seem at first interesting but completely inadequate to their own context.

Excerpt 4

Teacher 1:	the ones that are good for you.
Teacher 9:	That's right, personal ones. The questions you may have... well... questions that...that...doubts you may have and, on another piece of paper, how we gonna learn to do research... How? Where? How? How can we, teachers... how can a teacher do research? And on the other... we ask questions, we question...
Teacher 1:	Those would always be questions on the reasons. Why this? Why? ((UNINT)) Always you.
Teacher 4:	Do they want us to do only two?
Teacher 3:	Yes. They want us to give simultaneous answers. How can a teacher carry out research and ((UNINT)
Teacher 8:	They don't do it. (laughter). Teachers don't have the time to do it...

Here teachers are discussing the types of research questions they could be interested in, bringing about their awareness of the difficulties teachers have to do research due to the tight schedules under which they work.

Excerpt 5

Teacher 3:	Well, what else should we write here... should we add anything?
Teacher 8:	I was going to ask if they belong to Cesar Maia's gang. But then he could be offended, couldn't he?
Teacher 3:	What was the other question?
Teacher 8:	((UNINT)) I like those silly things, did you know that?
Teacher 3:	What was the other question?
Teacher 8:	They talk about so many funny things, don't they?
Teacher 3:	...through observation...
Teacher 4:	about observation...

In this excerpt, they actually doubt the seriousness and motives of the project, wondering whether the coordinators belong to the then "mayor's gang". Another point here refers to their lack of familiarity with research metalanguage.

Four months later, in the last meeting, the same teachers were asked to fill out questionnaires[5] in which they were expected to present their views about the whole experience. Their words show clear changes in how they saw their roles as professionals and how they evaluated the experience they had gone through. They sound assertive, self-assured, proud of their accomplishments, self confident, ready to face challenges as it can be seen in the following quotations:

The meetings were very good. They were excellent opportunities for us to share experiences and start new things.

[5]The questionnaires were informal research instruments designed by two coordinators of the project: Maria Izabel Azevedo Cunha and Inês Miller.

I've learned a lot. I've changed even more. I feel sorry for not having more time to go deeper into it.

It allowed me to think about my *performance as a teacher; it made me 'revisit' myself as a teacher.*

The sharing of experiences. New ideas. Different points of view. Opening up new horizons.

Excellent because they allowed us to see a little beyond what we do now and put an end to the myth in which we believed that teachers cannot do research, that this experience is too distant from us.

The meetings gave us a chance to think.

I see the work I do every day in a different way now.

After listening to the teachers' voices, we, then, triangulated this information with our own evaluation of what had happened throughout the process in order to have a better understanding of the positive and negative aspects of the project. Our conclusions can be summarized in the following items:

Positive aspects:

- First of all, the project represented a highly valued learning experience to the teachers.

  It opened my horizons when I discovered that I can do research and also lead my students into participating more actively in the process of creation, freedom and action... (questionnaire data)

- It also allowed the teachers to increase their self-esteem the moment they realized that they were given a chance to reflect upon their practice and to take control over their development as professionals. This experience motivated them to the importance of involving more people in action research projects.

  I found new strength to do my job (questionnaire data)

  Through the project I realized the importance of constantly evaluating my own work, of 'rethinking' my practice, which will allow me to improve professionally (questionnaire data)

- The project allowed teachers of different subjects (English, French and Portuguese) to work together and share common and divergent experiences, which, surprisingly, is not a common practice in our school system.

  An innovating practice that should be repeated in other types of projects because it leads people to share and exchange experiences (questionnaire data)

- The success of the project in bringing about changes in the teachers' lives can be explained by the metaphors they used to explain and evaluate their experience as teacher researchers.

  I could 'see' myself in the class, before that I could only see the students. (questionnaire data)

  The project clicked into place because it happened in a moment when I was almost defeated by disappointment and lack of motivation. (questionnaire data)
  I graduated 12 years ago but then I realized that it did not take more than a push for the flame to be rekindled. (questionnaire data)

Negative aspects:

- As action research requires a lot of time from participants (data collection, interpretation, the paper production, etc), the actual development of the project was made difficult by the fact that most participants, as usual in the teaching profession, were women, who had to work in more than one school to make ends meet on top of the usual chores demanded from mothers and housewives.

    I was forced to leave my family aside (questionnaire data)

- The amount of time allowed for the project as a whole was not enough for the teachers to grasp the underlying principles of action research. This was made evident in the difficulties they had in finding and proposing a research question.

    I feel sorry for not having more time to go deeper into it (questionnaire data)

- Teachers received little theoretical information on both research methodology and the question they were investigating. This was virtually restricted to what was discussed in the lectures.

    I wish we had been given more reading assignments (questionnaire data)

- The number of participants (around 30) was too large in relation to the number of coordinators (only 4). As a consequence, because people are different (some are more timid, for example), not everybody could equally share the benefits of group discussions. This large number of participants would have required more than the 9 meetings we had planned for and more coordinators.

- Some teachers were reluctant to accept the fact that research does not involve the finding out of a final answer. Quite on the contrary, it is a continuous process of reflection. This reveals their perception of research as product rather than the process of knowledge construction emphasized in this project.

- Participants found it very hard to believe that they could go on doing research without the help of the coordinators. This certainly draws attention to the need for more time for the development of autonomy on participants' part.

    It is a pity that I cannot go on doing research since I won't have enough time to attend the meetings next semester. (questionnaire data)

5.2.   Data derived from the participants'research reports

This section centers on the evaluation of the research reports produced by the participants at the end of the project. These reports were presented orally in a seminar on the last meeting. Seventeen participants out of a total of thirty wrote a paper.

- Writing the paper was a difficult task for most teachers due to the fact that they were not familiar with the academic genre. We actually had to teach them how to organize the information plus the usual conventions for paper writing. As a whole, the papers consisted of long narratives, which, from our perspectives, would have been alright if supported by evidence.

- Many of the research questions reflected one common worry on the part of all teachers: lack of students' interest in what is going on in classes. This seems to be related to the fact that students do not see the relevance between what is being focussed on in the classroom and the outside world. These research questions give evidence to

the fact that the teachers understood our concern with making teachers reflect on issues grounded on their own practice.

Below we list some of the research questions, investigated by the teachers, which provide evidence for this issue:

1. "Why aren't the students interested in the classes I give?"
2. "What is the relationship between explaining a point and understanding it for a group of 5th graders who are in constant conflict with their French teachers?"
3. "Could we ask students to prepare and give classes as a strategy to get them interested in what they are expected to learn?"
4. "Which strategies would help me getting closer to older students?"
5. "What is the relationship between the content of the lesson and pupils' interest?"

- Usually, although the research methodology paradigm was not explicitly identified in the reports, typical qualitative research instruments were listed (field notes, diaries, interviews, audio-recorded classes, school documents, etc). However, the data collected by the instruments were not adequately used as evidence to support the interpretation.

- The research results presented are usually pitched at a very general level. This seems to be due to the fact that teachers, on the one hand, may not have been able to make sense of the data they had in their hands to answer the question and, as a consequence, relied on common sense, and, on the other, they may have had problems in presenting, in the written form, the actual reflection they went through. In this connection, it should be noted that the oral presentations in posters were very properly done, showing that there had been involvement with reflection.

Although the product presented in the papers may be criticized, as shown above, there is no doubt that the actual process of research involvement was extremely useful for the participants, as already pointed out in the previous session. Certainly, the problems that the teachers had were not unusual since getting involved with research practice is a difficult task even for post-graduate students because of the lack of concern with research in our educational system. For almost all the teachers this was their very first attempt at carrying out research. However, had there been more time for the development of the project, there is a strong possibility that the quality of the research report would have been better.

6.   A last remark

As the project evaluation above indicates, there is ample evidence of the benefits of teachers' involvement with action research for their professional development. Likewise, the project also meant an important learning experience to us since, for the first time, we had the chance to see action research in practice and to be able to realize how to procede from here. A lot of difficulties were caused by our own lack of experience in designing a project as such and taking it into practice. This awareness on our part was only made possible because of the research stance we took towards our own work.

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