Introducing action research into post-secondary foreign language teacher education

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Outline

1 Backgrounds

The background to action research in the area of foreign language teacher education

The teaching of foreign languages (FLs) at the post-secondary level in the USA increasingly reflects an interest in developing communicative proficiency, but at many universities, courses for the training of university-level foreign language instructors may not fully reflect this change. One major problem is that the curriculum for degrees in foreign languages reflects a heavy concern with literature and/or the structural characteristics of language, with little attention to pedagogy or provision for future faculty development. Key to this continuing structure is the fact that "*probably less than 1% of the entire*[foreign] *language professoriate in the US is a specialist in applied linguistics related to language learning and teaching. In short, we have no large population of language educators at the Ph.D. level. University language departments are, by and large, departments of literature and culture.*" (Italics in original; VanPatten, 1998, p.931)

One other major problem with more long-term implications is that FL teacher preparation programs, like teacher preparation programs generally, do not prepare the teacher to engage in a process of life-long learning, do not help teachers to use published research, and do not provide them with a problem-solving orientation to their own classroom teaching. Since, in addition, in the relationship between researchers and teachers, teachers are generally at the bottom of a top-down process, unable to provide adequate input into research operations (Berne, 1998), there is a real risk that the post-

secondary level faculty who are trained today will remain static in their level of professionalism and use of pedagogy. This is a recipe for obsolescence.

Action research

There is an extensive literature on US foreign language education addressing changes needed in the push towards more proficiency-oriented instruction. Proficiency-based approaches, also called communicative approaches, are advocated by supporters as likely to produce foreign language learning and teaching that will better serve national needs now and at the beginning of the 21st century than did the older emphases on structure, translation, and literature. Many proposals associated with moves towards proficiency-based approaches call for US foreign language teachers to be prepared to, for example, assess and modify curriculum, to be able to reflect on their teaching using "on a small scale the processes behind successful classroom-based research" or to "conduct their own investigative projects" (Nerenz, 1993, p. 190-191).

Calls for initiatives and actions of the sort Nerenz refers to have appeared in the FL literature off and on for many years (at least since Lane, 1962). Teachers who reflect on their teaching and conduct such investigative projects are often known as teacher-researchers. Typically, they begin with a general area of concern, or an aspect of their practice which they want to look at; thus, research questions emerge from a teacher's immediate needs and concerns. Data is collected and analyzed, then action is taken, and its effects evaluated as to whether the problem is solved or ameliorated. Further cycles of action may then ensue. Because of the action orientation of this work, it is also often called action research (AR), and indeed, this is the superordinate term—much action research also goes on outside education. Currently in teacher research generally, the investigative techniques used are mainly those of observation, interview, and the analysis of written material, such as student journal entries or tests, as well as teachers' anecdotal records or field notes. Such work is broadly describable as using qualitative research techniques, though quantitative techniques are also usable and used.

Ideally, action research is collaborative (cf. Burns, 1999). Teachers in many contexts attest to the benefit of getting together with at least one other teacher to talk over their concerns, and having a second perspective can be valuable in other aspects of the inquiry, as well. Another important characteristic of action research is that the findings of such research are immediately plowed back into the programs from which they stemmed. The immediate audience for action research is the teacher or teachers who conducted a particular investigation themselves, and then their fellow teachers—the other colleagues in the staff room, other teachers in their section, and so on. And after that, or sometimes

concurrently with that, local conferences are the sort of venue where one would expect to see action research presentations. Published accounts of action research in foreign language teaching appear in a variety of places, and at least one FL journal (*Language Learning Journal*) regularly has a section containing such reports (e.g., Johnstone, 1990; cf. Green, 1996). (See Crookes, 1993, and Chamot, 1995, for further description within second and foreign language contexts.)

Action research has tended to be conceptualized as something that established professionals do—teachers with some time in the field, who on the basis of their accumulated experience have questions and are prepared to try something new to get answers to them. Relatedly, this kind of work has also been seen as one of several major models of staff or professional development (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990), including for university-level teaching (e.g., Robert, 1993; Schratz, 1992, 1993); that is, as something the qualified teacher does to move forwards in professional competence and knowledge. In recent years, however, there has been interest in exploring its potential as a part of the early training of teachers, either at the pre-service stage or early in a teacher's professional experience. Reports or discussions of this sort of thing have appeared with increasing frequency in mainstream (non-F/SL) literature (e.g., Altrichter, 1988; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; McTaggart, Robottom, & Tinning, 1990; Tabachnik & Zeichner, 1991) and began to penetrate the FL literature at least a decade ago (e.g., Gephart, Gaitan & Oprandy, 1987). For a recent substantial attempt of this kind in US ESL teacher education, see Markee (1996a,b); for work under the more difficult conditions of EFL in China, see Thorne & Qiang (1996). Nerenz (1993) reports that ACTFL has been supportive of such developments, at least since 1991 when a day-long symposium on these topics for student teachers was held for the first time at an ACTFL Annual Meeting.

As well as incorporating action research within teacher education, it is possible to conceptualize of action research on teacher education. That is, teacher educators, too, as professionals, can reflect on their practice and take action to improve it, reporting their efforts to their colleagues. It is also desirable that they do this, and disseminate the results, since teacher education, along with research on higher education generally, has been under-researched compared with primary and secondary education. In a 1993 review of research on foreign language teacher education, Hammadou decries the lack of work in this area, and calls for efforts on a variety of methodological fronts, including in particular action research on FL teacher education, of which she can find no actual examples.

The interest and encouragement found in these various related literatures has been taken up by at least two National Language Resource Centers, that in Hawai'i and that in Washington DC, in the form of inquiries into the possibilities that action research holds in

FL teacher education as a form of structured reflection on, or inquiry into one's teaching. The Washington DC site has concentrated on training teachers in action research. According to Jen Delett (personal communication, 1998), Research Associate there, "The Action Research Project is a mentoring/teacher education project. The papers that result from the project are from the participant researchers."[1] The Hawai'i site has explored action research with student teachers.

In this report we attempt to respond to Hammadou's call for action research on FL teacher education. In this regard, we would like to point out that conceptions of validity which are applicable to action research may be different to those applicable to traditional academic research, just as those advanced by qualitative researchers are often different to those accepted by quantitative researchers. While it is true that a teacher doing action research may conclude their efforts by simply solving a problem in their classroom, much action research is disseminated, orally or in writing. Reported action research that does not lead to improvements in practice specifically because of the way it is presented or reported may be regarded as, in a sense, invalid (though future research and/or changes in teaching may reflect learning from the research project). Teachers' investigations of teaching should be presented in their own language. That is, they should be presented in language appropriate to an audience of teachers who are unlikely to be familiar with or have patience (or faith) in the language of academics. That way they may be of more use. However, use, or uptake, is not the sole responsibility of the presenter. Indeed, it is primarily the responsibility of the listeners to decide if they will make use of the ideas that come out of action research. At least to some extent, we intend the style of this report to reflect such considerations—it will be a first-person, personalized narrative which should by the standards of academic writing, be somewhat informal; and, we hope, a little more digestible as a result.

Background to the project

It was with ideas such as these that we first conceptualized and proposed the introduction of action research training into the education of teachers of undergraduate Spanish and German at the University of Hawai'i at MÅnoa (UHM). Graham had been promoting action research for some time, with teachers in the MA(ESL) program at the

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An early version of this report was presented at the ACTFL Conference, Chicago, Illinois November 1998.

[1] Their work can be found by contacting Delett at <`nclrc@nicom.com`>.

University of Hawai'i, with elementary and secondary school teachers in the State of Hawai'i Department of Education, and in foreign (EFL) settings. Paul had been concerned about getting new teachers in touch with their students' needs to help guide their development as teachers as well as to help match the students' goals and needs with those of the course. The existence of the National Foreign Language Resource Center within our College at UHM allowed these interests to manifest themselves in an actual project.

Background to the authors

Our personal backgrounds, which the reader should know something about, are as follows: We are faculty at the University of Hawai'i, in adjacent departments. Graham is in the Department of English as a Second Language, Paul in the Spanish Division of the Department of European Languages and Literatures, and we are both Anglo males, in a profession heavily female and, in Hawai'i, ethnically diverse. We feel we are to some extent boundary crossers—Graham, who is English, lived and worked in Malaysia and Japan before arriving in Hawai'i; Paul has lived and worked in Spain, Mexico, Indiana, and a multi-ethnic area of California before coming to Hawai'i. Among our professional interests and responsibilities are practice teaching and teaching methodology for student teachers in our respective programs.

2 Project setting

In Spring '97, we added a component on action research into an existing graduate course recommended for new foreign language teachers in the Department of European Languages and Literature (ELL) at the University of Hawai'i. The course is an optional course, carrying credit towards the MA in European Languages and Literature. The MA in ELL is a course of study related to European culture as expressed in languages and literatures (UH Mǎnoa General Information Catalog, p. 124). (The extent to which it is, or is not specifically intended to prepare students for a career in FL teaching will be important later. The class in question actually is numbered as belonging to the curriculum of the UHM College of Education.) This class, known informally as "the Methods Course" (EDCI 641) lasts the conventional 15-week semester, and typically covers teaching methodologies, skills instruction (including culture), materials preparation and assessment. On this occasion, besides the regular materials and readings addressing an introductory overview of FL pedagogy at the post-secondary level, we (Paul and Graham) introduced and reviewed materials on action research in educational contexts, including extracts from Altrichter et al. (1993), along with Ur (1996) and others. During the semester, Graham attended about half of the sessions, and together with Paul took the students through a

basic introduction to action research. Concurrently, Paul was teaching one section of a first-semester course in Spanish, as a demonstration class in which Spanish student teachers regularly participated. As a major component of this experimental offering of the Methods Course, students conducted action research projects on topics arising out of their classroom practice. These included improving listening comprehension; adding and enhancing cultural materials; the benefits of reteaching and retesting; what makes students successful; study strategies of successful students; using journals to improve teaching; and the effects on motivation of wanting versus having to take a language.

Teacher participants

The thirteen graduate students in the class were from a variety of backgrounds. Five were from outside the USA (Norway, Mexico, Chile, Sweden, Puerto Rico), the rest were from Hawai'i and the mainland USA. Three were in the German section of the European Languages and Literatures MA program and ten in the Spanish section. Two of the students were male and the rest female, and all were in their 20s or 30s. One of the Spanish students was actually auditing the course, but participated in all facets of the coursework, including the action research project. Most of these individuals were teaching during the course, and a few had been teachers before, so we will refer to them as teachers, or student teachers, in this document.

3 What happened during the first semester: our first action

In the Methods Course, one of the two weekly meetings was primarily devoted to discussion of action research for a majority of the semester. Initially, Graham and Paul presented basic concepts of action research and research methods. Subsequently, roughly one meeting per week was devoted to group review of the process of doing action research projects. This frequently included small and full group discussions of problems and challenges the teachers faced in carrying out a process that was quite new to them.

One of the key procedures in action research is the use of journaling. Throughout the semester the teachers collected (almost) weekly journals from their students in the various language classes. Since most of these students were in their first semester of language study (one group was a second semester German class, German 102), they were allowed to write in English or the target language, except for one second-semester course (in which most of them wrote in the target language).We and the student teachers assumed that if allowed to write in English, students would provide more data and feedback than if they were expected to struggle with language way beyond their means. Still, some students also responded in the target language to specific journal topics when guided by questions in

the target language (i.e., the instructor wrote his/her journal to the class, including questions, in the target language providing clear models upon which to base responses.).

Although action research can be carried out alone, we think that particularly for inexperienced teachers, collaboration is extremely valuable as they become familiar with both teaching and action research. Consequently we strongly encouraged the teachers to develop and carry out their projects in small groups or pairs. This was also necessary in some cases because not all of the graduate student "teachers" were actually teaching a course during this particular semester. As a result of these groupings, they were able to conduct and discuss peer observations of each other's classes. The peer observations were carried out rather frequently, especially during the latter half of the semester. Usually co-researchers observed (and sometimes participated in) their colleague's classes once or twice a week. These class visits increased during more intensive periods.

As the semester progressed, and as the student teachers got a clearer idea of action research, they utilized additional techniques in their classrooms and with their students, such as questionnaires and interviews.

An important feature of action research is the dissemination of findings to other practitioners. With this in mind, we proposed that the Methods Course teachers share their work with other language teachers from around the State at the Hawai'i Association of Language Teachers Conference near the end of the semester. As the date of the conference approached the teachers began to accelerate the pace of their research. And in the class, we began to rehearse oral presentations of the findings gleaned from the projects. This involved discussion of appropriate styles and formats for presenting findings to an audience of teachers. It also revealed the pressures and anxieties the teachers were feeling not only about the process of doing action research but also their apprehensions about presenting in front of a live audience of their peers (and more senior teachers), in most cases for the first time in their lives.

On the day of the Conference, the series of presentations went off very successfully. It was noteworthy that one of the individuals in the audience was a faculty member in the department with overall responsibility for the Spanish language classes—actually the Chair of the Spanish Division—who had been concerned lest the inexperience of some of the teacher-student presenters manifest itself in weak presentations, to the overall embarrassment of the Department or the individual student teachers. Subsequent to the day of the presentation, this person contacted both of us to say how pleasing it had been to find that the presentations were of high quality and exemplified professional attitudes. The Spanish Division Chair went on to mention the desirability of

more action research being conducted, or its further incorporation into the graduate program.

Student teachers whose projects had not yet attained a degree of coherence which would allow them to present at the conference had to present their findings in class, during the final two weeks of the semester. And this phase of the action research project concluded with teachers submitting final written reports along with sample materials to us as well as a final journal and evaluative comments on the course as a whole.

4 Findings - first pass

Benefits

The teachers reported several benefits which grew out of their projects. The most commonly mentioned was that the use of journals with their students helped them become closer in working with their students as individuals. Here are some extracts from their final journal entries which support this point (each entry is from a different individual):

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        I would use journals to have students communicate with me about
the class, if they're having problems understanding something. But I may
also ask them to write composition s in their journals, such as "Was
hast du am wochenende gemacht?" (What did you do on the weekend?)  This
will give me an idea as to whether my students are understanding the
material enough to compose logical sentences.

        I think I would use journals to find out how students feel about
the activities in class, how students study, if students think they're
learning, etc.

        I would like to use the journals as a communication tool in future
class to get feedback on my classes as well as uncover any personal
concerns that the student may have.

        I enjoyed the overall process of journaling with my students as I
learned more about them as individuals.

        I've used journals before in teaching transpersonal psychology
courses, but I wasn't sure how they would work in a language course... I
was pleasantly surprised!

        I could use journals as a written activity dealing with
vocabulary, learning grammar or cultural activities, etc.
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In addition, in the final course evaluations on the matter of journals there were also a number of positive comments about journal use:

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        Journals are very helpful because they are a place to reflect on
my own teaching and on what's going on with my class, students,
materials, tools, etc.
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        I will keep using them as part of my class. They will be collected
frequently as feedback from my students to me and from me to my class.

        I will use journals in a future language class to improve and
learn more about my teaching and to gain insight into your students.
This will benefit everyone involved.
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Many saw the action research project as beneficial as a whole.

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        The action research project was a challenge. I saw it as an
opportunity to prepare for future projects where I would like to
integrate my other field of study, psychology, into my German teaching
(maybe for a future thesis).

        The most valuable projects have been the lesson plan and model
class, research review and action research.  I learned from all three.
I think the three activities worked well together.  Now that we're at
the end of the semester, I realize that I learned a lot, especially from
these activities.

        I appreciate the idea of action research, as it means that there
is a level of assessment and evaluation involved, which I believe is
critical for analyzing effectiveness in any profession.

        The action research project was interesting.

        I feel this project was a great experience and I put quite a lot
of time and effort into it.  I enjoyed being a part of B's class,
enjoyed getting videos weekly for viewing in class, learning teaching
skills and getting to know the students one-on-one.

        The HALT conference was enjoyable and a learning experience I'll
remember.

        I thought it was a great experience to participate in a conference
and feel it's valuable for graduate students.

        I don't feel like I learned from this course (except the action
research project, which was useful).

        I feel this project was a great experience and I put quite a lot
of time and effort into it.
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Drawbacks

In spite of the quantity of positive reactions to the action research project, the teachers generated an equal number of negative concerns or problems in their final journals and course evaluations. In our estimation these were primarily concerned with or grew out of pressure due to time constraints and risk taking. For example,

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        It was difficult to participate in the action research project
because of being a first time instructor as well as conducting research
in class.  There were many things to conduct at the same time.
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I also thought suggestions for possible research projects could have been shared instead of finding out through journals from students.

I can see the positive aspects for action research but not for beginning teachers who are just getting their feet wet. I think they should be allowed to get used to their new position and be allowed to create a relationship with their students and not be forced to examine every comment they make searching for a research topic.

I didn't like the action research project, though I see it as an important tool for teachers.

I think that the action research project would have had more value if we would have put more emphasis in the content, not in the form. I did not find the right guide to do the investigation. We spent half of the semester thinking about a topic to investigate and then, in a week, we had to present it in a conference.

This was a bit trying, having to prepare for my class everyday while constantly thinking what I could use as materials for my action research project.

I think the action research project was a little too much to ask, for us first-time teachers, especially when all the articles written were from experienced teachers. I can't imagine not teaching and having to do one.

The action research project shouldn't be a part of the class grade ... because it's time consuming and it's not very clear. Nor did we have the proper guidance.

I did not see the main objective of the action research projects.

The action research project was interesting but the course should state that we need to put in observation hours. I was not able to observe every week due to my work schedule and my schedule had been already set.

I thought the action research project was useful but I would have preferred it in one of the following semesters, not my first semester as a TA.

One of our false assumptions was that Paul's participation in the action research project in his own Spanish class would alleviate many of the worries and concerns of the student teachers. In this section, Paul worked with two of the student teachers who did not themselves have classes, and himself modeled the action research process. However, he found that in one case, the untrained teacher appeared to hold back rather than take any initiative due to the professor/student power relationship. The other student without a class was simply unable to grasp a basic understanding of the action research process and thus failed to complete the project. She did attempt to carry out action research in another

teaching setting at a later date. Neither of these two student teachers fully engaged in the action research process in Paul's Spanish class despite numerous attempts to involve them and to further develop the projects.

An important factor that must be discussed is learner differences. From the outset it was clear that this was a relatively non-homogenous group of student teachers, with radical differences in language competence (native and non-native), teaching experience (zero to several years, as well as in FL as well as SL setting) and academic orientation (at least two students had previous experience of academic social science research).

Among the more successful students, we note that one had experience with using student journals as well as counseling techniques; she fell right into her action research project with no hesitation whatsoever. This, however, was an exception. A pair of student teachers—one from German and one from Spanish—worked well together to prepare their project, glean data from classroom and other investigative student tasks, journals, etc. In that particular pair, one individual was familiar with anthropology and the other was interested in psychology, particularly learning theories; this turned out to be a natural grouping for productive work.

In reviewing our observations of and discussions with those student teachers who had the most difficulty conducting a piece of teacher research, we came to the view that if an individual had an attachment to a set way of conceptualizing and carrying out instruction, this may have made it difficult for them either to adapt existing routines or add in new ones which would have enabled them to effectively investigate concerns arising from their teaching. This group of student teachers included a teacher with a couple of years' teaching experience in another country. From our point of view, her focus on communicative language teaching goals along with a solid grammatical foundation seemed to inhibit the action research experience for this individual. Similarly, another student teacher preferred well-organized instructional agenda (with a heavy emphasis on linguistic structures) that allowed her relatively little flexibility in terms of activities or time use. Still another attempted to turn as many activities as possible into games to maintain an enjoyable, engaging classroom atmosphere.

Perhaps it was the inductive and exploratory nature of action research which made it difficult for some of the student teachers to get a handle on the overall project. Action research requires reflection and interaction in order to discover areas of inquiry. For us the inquiry process builds through journaling, peer observations and comments, field notes, etc. From such inquiry the student-teachers were to *discover* areas of concern which were then to be followed up (i.e., get more data, share further reflections, interview students, etc.). Thus, because action research is expected to grow out of classroom-based concerns

or issues, these new student-teachers were especially uncomfortable with the projects, at least in the beginning, openly preferring instead a research project of a more *a priori*, theory-driven nature, though this runs counter to the tenets of action research. It seems that some forgot the discovery portion of the process. The lack of *a priori* procedures simply seemed counterproductive to some of these new teachers. For this small group of teachers, projects seemed to generate out of a particular desire a student-teacher had to implement something of personal interest into the classroom (e.g., cultural videos), resulting in a more *a priori* type of project supplemented with action research types of reactions and follow-up procedures to test student reactions and learning.

The fact that these student-teachers have only one methods class as well as a fairly fixed teaching syllabus which they must use in all sections of the further compounded the difficulties some experienced. Since beginning FL student-teachers need to deal with other aspects of instruction and learning specific to the language they teach (e.g., how to teach culture, vocabulary, the past tense), a single course cannot possibly meet all their needs. This point will be further addressed in our conclusion through recommendations for future initiatives.

In general, those who were totally new to the classroom struggled the most with this project, while those who did not have a class of their own (i.e., they observed and assisted a colleague) had the most difficulty coming to grips with the project.

Interim summary
During the semester we found that:

First, the use of journals was highly praised by teachers.

Second, from our point of view, the students successfully learned how to do action research, at an initial level of complexity.

Third, the fact that most of them actually conducted a research project at this stage in their professional development provided a rationale for having them participate in and present research at the local FL conference. Doing something of this sort would be a characteristic of a teacher with greater time in the profession normally. On the other hand, active professional participation of this sort is highly desirable for the post-secondary instructor.

Fourth, jointly investigating teaching and learning with other student teachers provided a rationale for us to have those teachers not yet assigned a class to teach observe others teachers, talk with and tutor students, and engage in a purposive way with other FL classes.

However, again to summarize, during the semester we found that we were not able to present the concept of action research adequately. Students seemed to take a long time to

understand it and to develop a project. As a result, most students felt rushed and some were too rushed at the end to pull together a project to present at the local conference. And finally, as one student said "The action research project seemed to take over our methods class". Including material on action research and practicing presentations certainly was only possible at the expense of material on pedagogy that is normally covered more extensively in this solitary methods class.

5 Follow-up period: our second action is no action

Originally we had planned to guide the student teachers who had taken our action research training as they moved on into their second semester of teaching, and support them closely in their use of their newly learned action research techniques. But on reflection we realized that this would tell us little about their ability to make use of these techniques, or the utility of these techniques, as what they did would have mainly reflected power differentials. Paul was the immediate supervisor of the Spanish Graduate Assistants, for example. Accordingly, we decided instead to take a hands-off approach, and simply see what happened as the following semester unfolded. (An almost identical pattern occurs in Thorne & Qiang, 1996.) We then conducted follow-up interviews around the end of that semester with six[2] of the continuing student teachers who had been in our class the previous semester. We asked the now second-semester student teachers questions centering on what use, if any, they had made or were making of techniques or concepts they had been exposed to the previous semester.

The wider context for the study becomes important (from our point of view, at least) at this point. It happened that during this period, the University of Hawai'i experienced increasing financial effects of the worsening economic depression in the State. Most notably, during this time faculty and students in the department housing the project reported on here were very worried about the status of their department, as it had appeared on a list of units to be eliminated. Funds to hire teaching assistants and instructors were cut back, several faculty left the department while others began to seek jobs elsewhere, and several faculty positions were held vacant. Morale was extremely low and departmental and personal energy resources superfluous to teaching were directed to the holding of press conferences or strategizing with respect to the movements of the university administration and the state legislature. The university president eventually made a public statement denying the rumors of the elimination of the department, but loss of support had a negative effect on the views and possibly actions of the teaching assistant group at this time.

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[2] The remainder were mostly not teaching, and several had left Hawai'i and could not be reached.

6 Findings - second pass

In conducting these interviews, an initial concern we had was simply, had our student-teachers retained anything of what we had been exposing them to and with which they had engaged, under the pressure of their new teaching responsibilities? In answer to an initial question which addressed this point, most of our remaining TAs were able to explain action research, when asked. Here is one example of the digested understanding of action research:

> "*[Action research]* means actively researching what goes on in your classroom, documenting, getting feedback right away from the students, trying to figure out the best teaching methods for that particular class, cos I don't think what somebody found out in another class – it might help your class but there's always room for growth and improvement and different methods to improve teaching and that's going to depend on the energy of the class student makeup everything comes into play. So I think action research is collecting data studying your class getting feedback from them, journals are really good. I think that's really it."

For a few students however, the emphasis they placed on the use of journals when we asked them to say, at this stage, what for them was action research, led us to worry that journals alone had become action research *in toto* for some of them.

And then, logically, the next question to ask was 'Had they been able to do any further action research?' In response to this question, on the one hand, our interviewees basically said it had been impossible for them to conduct action research since their class with us, because of lack of time. On the other hand, they reported using simple techniques such as student journals and questionnaires to provide feedback from the students to themselves, the teachers, concerning the form and content of the class. For example, on the use of journals as a technique:

> "I used journals but very general – I'm not going into anything specific just asking them overall how they feel. I'm very concerned about feelings. I usually tell everyone let's talk about feelings in Spanish and they open up and that's very good; I think they do talk about how they feel in class and they do give me suggestion about how to do the class."

Another typical comment in this area was,

> "I don't do the journals regularly but in the middle of the semester I'll be wondering how the semester is going for the students so I ask them to write a journal, tell me how it's going, what improvements could I make, give me some feedback; and the students did give me some feedback this semester. I guess they felt that the class was a little slow so they said play other games, think of something and ask questions to guess what it is...

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     Last semester I did the same thing, ask them how the class was
going. So that I feel is important, to see what the students feel about
your teaching, whether they're learning or not, whether things could be
better. I like to hear from them because for me it's learning as well."
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And similarly,
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     "Umm, I would say just, you know, getting the students' feedback
as far as, like, I'll ask them questions like 'how is the class going?',
just a general question and then I'll ask more specific questions.
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Alternatively, one student had developed a routine of using a questionnaire with open-ended questions, as a homework assignment, as a means of getting feedback on various aspects of his teaching.

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      "Well, basically after the first exam I wasn't sure how they were
feeling... the first question was 'how was the class going, overall?';
... then I would... ask specifically about my teaching style, was I
comprehensible, do I need to write more things on the board, is there
something I should be doing better, do they need more worksheets, that
type of thing.... I typed up a little sheet of paper, and asked them to
answer the following questions to the best of their knowledge. And I'm
about to do it again as a sort of follow up before we get to the new
semester to see if there was anything that changed anything that I
improved on or anything they feel helped them the most."
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The use of journals and so on for general feedback was in opposition to the action research approach we had presented, which emphasized identifying a specific central concern to be investigated over a sustained period. Remarked one student teacher:

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     "I'm so hooked up with other problems that I don't have the time
to choose one specific point to work on especially having such a wide
variety of students that have different skill levels that I don't see
what am I going to work on 'cause they're all different - well they
share many things in common but I have a hard time choosing one thing
that I'm going to work on to benefit all students. Course, that would be
very good finding a topic or something to work on that when I finish my
research - I will have gained something that could help me for the whole
classroom not just for one or two individuals."
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During the Methods Course, we had emphasized the importance of the collaborative aspects of action research, and had set up most of the student teachers in pairs, who either worked on the same topic, or at least were to observe each others' classes and provide feedback on projects as they developed. A few of the teacher-student research teams worked well together while several others were less successful. During the following semester, student teachers did not, by and large, observe each other; they were mostly observed by senior faculty (if at all), as a check on performance. However, because of the pre-existing institutional arrangements, they were accustomed to meeting formally, in meetings chaired by the supervisor for the specific language areas, primarily to coordinate exams, but also to work on curriculum and share pedagogical problems and techniques. In these circumstances, student teachers received useful feedback and a chance to share. It

seemed that such meetings had the potential to provide a forum for sharing the results of the feedback or initiatives our student teachers were taking as a result of their soliciting journals and so on.

As they looked back on the action research experience, most of them were still convinced that while valuable it had been a very challenging thing to have done in their first semester teaching. However, even now, after more teaching experience, given the institutional context, they felt it would be hard to imagine being able to find the time to do action research, though several expressed a desire to do something like that in the further future. Several indicated a willingness to engage in sharing action research, but only if time could be formally allocated to it.

7 More action? or "What should we do now?"

The trajectory of an action research project is often presented as a spiral. One assesses a situation, or has a concern, one takes action, one establishes whether the action has been effective; and if it has not solved the problem adequately, one takes a different action or refines the first action and reapplies it. Several such cycles may be necessary before a satisfactory position is arrived at. What we have reported thus far is only the first couple of stages in such a process. What might be done, at this point in the spiral, is to refine the action we took of introducing teacher research concepts into the curriculum of the MA in ELL, by altering the point in the curriculum at which this might be done. Obviously we were not fully successful; a key reason we identify for this was our decision to use a pre-existing course located in the first semester of teaching of a cadre of student teachers (most of whom had little or no teaching experience and the majority of whom were not native speakers of the languages they were to teach).

However, we feel that broader theoretical discussion is warranted. Our attempt at introducing action research can be seen in a wider context: besides pressures for the change of post-secondary FL curricula, there is a substantial debate within US (and other) educational literature, on the topic of "school restructuring". To some extent there is a parallel literature on university developments appropriate for the 21st. century. At the school level, there has been a widespread feeling that US public schools are increasingly failing to deliver on even minimal goals. This has resulted in repeated attempts to "fix" the US school system through a series of reforms, at least since the 1950s. Reviews of the various reform efforts have repeatedly documented, however, the very limited extent to which such reforms or innovations either solved the problems (of low achievement, typically) that they were addressing, and also the relatively short-lived nature of the changes that were made (e.g., Cuban, 1993). In recent years, this has led some proponents

of school reform (e.g., Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988) to suggest that single-factor solutions will not work: that simply tinkering with the system, and trying to change one thing here or one thing there, will fail. What is needed, these specialists suggest, is reform efforts which address at least several important and interlinked aspects of the system at the same time.

Taking this as at least a plausible proposition for the university sector as well, we do not at this stage simply propose to re-introduce action research at a different point in the MA curriculum of our FL student teachers. We need, rather, to examine the wider institutional setting as well.

Besides a theoretical support for doing this which emanates from the literature on school and university structures and professional development, the second reason for turning attention to the institutional setting is that it came to us. Since this project resulted early in our student teachers taking a prominent role in the local FL teaching community, it and its implications were immediately noticed. As the Chair of the Spanish Division of Paul's Department said later,

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 I remember taking notes... I remember talking to you and saying,
"Hey, we probably should do more of this because I think it had such a
positive influence on the students. They got so much out of it. Students
said to me, 'I never realized what goes into teaching, and some of the
things that we can do to affect teaching [positively]'".
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And informal discussions of the project which involved the Dean of the College our departments are situated in came to focus swiftly on the constricted aspects of the MA in European Languages and Literature curriculum for which the Methods Course was an option. The Dean rapidly indicated a willingness to involve Chairs and other stakeholders in a review of the status of the course vis-à-vis the wider curriculum.

Subsequently, we interviewed the Spanish Division Chair. Again, familiar themes came up. Time constraints were an initial concern, but the independence of the traditional tenured faculty member is a factor that may aid innovation here. The Chair commented that the institutional support for action research for student teachers is initially simply the orientation and attitude of the supervisor: "`... you could require it in the class, the pedagogical class.... He has enough autonomy to do that.... Each professor [develops] their own course.`" And she offered a suggestion that seemed to address the problem of the need for a longer duration within which to both expose students to action research concepts and enable them to carry out a project:

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If Paul really wanted to, he could devise a course that went over
two semesters.... I don't think we could afford to give 6 credit hours -
maybe it would be a one, two credit... not as intense but over two
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semesters of time, while teaching.... At that point, all of the professors would probably say how does this affect our focus?.... but I don't know if that particular idea would have to be passed through the curriculum committee."

The curriculum was identified as a problem. The MA is a 30-credit, two-year degree and its relevance to teaching is ambivalent. The Chair explained that "We really don't have a teaching degree, what we have mostly is a literature degree.... And I think now we've expanded it just a tad and I think linguistics is a little more important, but the pedagogy is something we don't put a whole lot of emphasis on, we're not training teachers, it's not one of our goals, it hasn't been, but in the background it kind of is because we really believe in having good TAs in the classroom....".

The immediate institutional context is, in one sense, the body of full-time Instructors who lie immediately above the student teachers in the departmental hierarchy. As is common at US universities, the responsibilities of Instructors are primarily teaching and associated curricular responsibilities. They are not required to do academic research. In our view, it may be difficult to inculcate an appreciation of an action research perspective in student teachers if they see no such appreciation in their immediate seniors in the profession. However, besides official responsibilities not being appropriate for this, Instructors too experience major time constraints. Said the Division Chair, "I was also thinking of extending [the Methods Course], though, and offering that opportunity to [full-time] Instructors thinking that that would help them - like continuing education - helping them to become even more professional, an opportunity they might not have otherwise.

The main problem always, as you know, is time. And with the cutbacks, everyone's doing more. I'm asking all of our instructors to take more people into their classes... so I don't know how the time factor would work. …

What sort of structures, or time - how could time be found [to support instructors]?

That's a real tough one, that's one reason why I have not pursued it.... I guess it would have to be voluntary.... it's not part of the job, unlike the TA s, some people would be interested in doing that, some wouldn't because of the time factor. I guess we'd just have to offer it....

Instructors' positions don't carry a research requirement. Do they carry a materials development requirement?

Yes, we do that, we write our own tests.... we do share materials, we make up materials together....

And that's required, it's part of the job?

It has become a requirement, I don't think it's written anyplace, it's expected, let's say that."

The Division Chair was willing to speculate about how action research might be presented as something of interest to instructors, though she offered no immediate concrete solutions to the problem: "For our own instructors I guess we'd just have to make it feasible, attractive, accessible, and people usually have to get something for their time - recognition, reputation, certainly not going to be money and it probably wouldn't be a course reduction - we can barely cover our classes, the Dean's office would be very [skeptical] about giving us a course reduction."

We are not necessarily justified in assuming that student teachers are actually affected by the outlook of the Instructor body in the institution where they do their student teaching. It is, however, the case that they are influenced by the policies and expectations of the institutions where they may be employed in the future, of course, when they are themselves Instructors, and at present those conditions, in much of the US post-secondary institutions conducting FL instruction, are likely to mirror those of the European Languages and Literatures department.

(As we moved to completing the present report, we made one formal presentation of this material at a national conference, which lead to yet another suggestion concerning institutional change, mentioned below, third.)

Our formal and informal interactions with influential colleagues about this project, at this stage in its development, has led us to think again about the next stage in the process of implementing an action research component in these FL teachers' education. At least four scenarios seem plausible without calling for further funding at this time. First of all, an additional course could be added to permit appropriate coverage of both theoretical methodological materials and more practical, hands on experiences, such as materials development, action research, etc. A second option would be to split the current course into a two-semester requirement. One semester could be a one-credit practicum in which action research and materials development are the focus, while the two-credit semester would focus primarily on the theoretical underpinnings of foreign language teaching and second language acquisition.

Yet another option would entail the inclusion of a series of action research workshops in ongoing teacher development activities such as those sponsored by the

university's Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center or in conjunction with the Hawaiʻi Association of Language Teachers/Academic Alliance Consortium. The latter merged groups, however, struggle to maintain even one yearly conference due to a general lack of time among a small pocket of active leaders.

Finally, the most desirable alternative would be the introduction of a Master of Arts for Teachers (MAT) in the language of study, similar to those offered at other institutions. (See the Appendix for one possible framework for the MAT: Spanish.) This would require students to take a healthy balance of courses in teacher education, second language acquisition, and linguistics, as well as literature and culture of the target language (as advocated by, for example, Tedick & Walker, 1994a,b, 1995).

Action research as a change agent

As action research projects have the spiral nature we mentioned before, it is difficult to know when they are complete. A written report may give a sense of finality, and in writing this one we feel pressed by pre-existing (and probably not entirely relevant) conventions of more or less academic writing to find a conclusion. However, action research has its own criteria for forms of dissemination, which (as mentioned earlier) are driven by the communicative needs and abilities of those involved, and the potential audience (cf. e.g., Winter, 1989, Ch. 7). In many cases, action research projects may never surface in a written form at all—the inter-practitioner aspect of the communication precludes this. In the case of the present report, its location within an academic milieu (not to mention funding requirements) will cause a written report to manifest itself, but more important oral reports of what was going on were already occurring long before the present document was constructed. Furthermore, these were not even the oral reports of the conventional conference, but rather, first, the ongoing discussions between Paul and Graham; and second, their own joint and separate accounts made to colleagues and superiors. When academics have their teaching and curriculum "hats" on, they do not necessarily wait for the final research report before initiating change. The willingness of various of our colleagues to contemplate several possible changes mentioned above has meant, however, that we cannot at this precise moment fully commit to the next phase of action implied from the various findings discussed above, if we are at the same time to finish this (overdue) report, otherwise it would in turn have to wait for a few more months of action to transpire. Accordingly, we will break off at this point, and in concluding, emphasize the following: putting a change into place and reporting on its effects, even in a relatively informal manner, may be more effective for change than one might expect. There is a lot to be said for just "getting stuck in", and then making course corrections or changes

that follow from an action research approach. In any case, educational change, when it does occur, is very rarely the follower of pure academic research. Though we don't always wear sneakers, we think this is an occasion where we can say to our readers, "Just do it".

Specifically, so long as the focus of the majority of graduate degrees in foreign languages continues to be literature, in spite of decades of first-hand knowledge that many of those students will become language teachers, albeit in large part unprepared to practice their profession, this recipe for obsolescence requires at a minimum that we provide these future FL teachers with tools, such as action research, through which they can better assess teaching and learning, thus fomenting useful procedures for life-long learning, review and improvement.

Appendix

Working Proposal for Masters of Arts for Teachers: Spanish
Specific courses would be determined with appropriate departments and curriculum committees.

Credit hours	course meetings/ requirements
9	EDCI 641 + 6 credits from Education and Curriculum Studies (TECS), Education Technology (ETEC), Educational Psychology (EDEP)
9	Second Language Acquisition, Linguistics
6	SPAN 451, SPAN 452, EL681 (Comparative Romance Linguistics)
12	Hispanic literature and/or Culture Studies at 400 level or above

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36 Total credits required

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