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Discussion

Teachers as researchers

Friederike Klippel Professor Emeritus Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitaet Muenchen, Germany
klippel@lmu.de

A dedicated teacher, keen to try out new methods of teaching English and French and different ways of getting learners to talk. The teacher knows it is important to motivate the learners by bringing the real world and the target culture into the classroom and uses authentic newspaper articles on current events and takes the class out of the classroom to observe and discuss a phenomenon of physical geography which was mentioned in one of the reading texts. For three years this teacher keeps a diary of ideas for individual lessons, questions about materials and procedures as well as learner reactions and their learning difficulties and successes. Their language work is documented and analysed. As a result of these analyses, the teacher selects different procedures for further lessons, which are likewise analysed. Finally, the teacher publishes his observations, reflections and analyses for the benefit of other language teachers as well as academic discussion on language teaching methodology.

This sounds very much like modern action research with its cycles of teaching, observing, analysing, and modifying the approach. In the social sciences, action research started around the mid-20th century; its main purpose lay in giving research into social conditions a more participatory and emancipatory stance, i.e. a very different one from the then common experiments. In education the use of action research is much more recent and tends to focus on an individual teacher's questions regarding an aspect of teaching. There is general consensus today that teaching ought to be accompanied by a cycle of reflection and change, in order to improve results and motivation on the part of the learners.

We tend to think that empirical research into teaching is a very modern phenomenon, one connected to the rise of Applied Linguistics and Education as academic disciplines. And yet, we may assume that individual language teachers in the past also reflected on their teaching and then presented their classroom experience to a wider audience, in order to spread innovative ideas, stimulate discussion and – possibly – market their own methods and books. In the 18th and early 19th century those thoughts are often to be found in the prefaces to grammars and other textbooks. But the scenario described above is taken from two books which Hermann Klinghardt published at the end of the 19th century on his own classroom work covering a period of three years. This was the time of the Reform Movement in modern language teaching, which was happening in several European countries. A number of factors helped make this one of the most innovative and exciting periods in language teaching. Phonetics as a new science provided information on sound production and description

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and thus helped the teaching of pronunciation and speaking. There were enough teachers involved in language teaching to create a discourse community and a network of professional organisations, journals and publications. Finally, travel and transport between countries had become easier and less costly so Klinghardt could indeed order original newspapers from England and use them in his classroom. His books were reviewed and discussed at the annual meetings of language teachers,[1] as were similar reports by other teachers. For us these are a fascinating read and prove that a basic form of action research was practised in language classrooms long before it became established in the social sciences.

[1] Klinghardt, Hermann (1888). Ein Jahr Erfahrungen mit der neuen Methode. Bericht über den unterricht mit einer englischen anfängerklasse im schuljahre 1887/88. Zugleich eine anleitung für jüngere fachgenossen. Marburg: Elwert.

Klinghardt, Hermann (1892). Drei weitere Jahre Erfahrungen mit der imitativen Methode (Obertertia bis Obersecunda). Marburg: Elwert.

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