IMPROVING EXPLORING HUMANITARIAN LAW (EHL) TEACHER TRAINING THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

By

Toh Wah Seng, Phd
Batu Lintang Teacher Education Institute,
Jalan College,
93200 Kuching, Sarawak.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to share the results of using action research to continuously improve EHL teacher training in the context of Malaysia where the school system and teaching practices are not congruent with the pedagogy of EHL. Through action research, the trainer was able to identify training problems and needs and introduce changes to overcome the problems. This paper provides a brief description of the action research process undertaken by the trainer and the results of the process in enhancing training effect.

INTRODUCTION

The Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL)[1] program has been designed to effect learning not only in the cognitive domain but more importantly in the affective and psychomotor domains. This makes the teaching of EHL rather challenging to teachers who are more comfortable with teaching cognitive knowledge and skills. The training of EHL teachers is therefore a challenging task to the EHL teacher trainer. Given that teachers come for training without any knowledge of the EHL content, the effectiveness of the training depends on how successful the teacher trainer has been able to facilitate participants' learning in mastering the content, the methodology, the skills, and the attitudes necessary to teach the program effectively. Although the EHL learning modules set out clearly and systematically the learning objectives and the lesson plans for each exploration, the training of teachers is necessary to ensure that teachers will be able to deliver the program without losing the essence of the program goals. The worth of an educational program, such as the EHL program, is measured by its program goals. If the same measure is used to ascertain the worth of its teacher training program, it is crucial that teacher trainers seek ways to best train EHL teachers to achieve those program goals.

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[1] EHL is an educational program to educate youths between the ages of 13 to 18 on humanitarian law.

The EHL methodology guide[2] describes a series of ten workshops for conducting EHL teacher training. This methodology guide should not be taken as the only way to ensure effective teacher training. Teacher and teaching variables vary considerably from one context to another. The challenge to the teacher trainer is to identify those differences and to design the training program to meet the specific needs of the target participants. The suggested teacher training agenda in the methodology guide will need to be adapted and modified depending on the characteristics of the teacher participants and the specific contextual realities of the school system in the country or region.

Furthermore, it is only natural that beginning EHL teacher trainers will find that the effectiveness of teacher training is not always up to the desired level of success and the trainer must continue to identify the gaps and seek ways to improve training. One approach to ensure continuous improvement to EHL teacher training is the action research approach to training. This paper describes the experience of a EHL teacher trainer in using action research to improve the delivery of the teacher training program.

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research can be defined simply as the process of improving practice through self reflective enquiry (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). It is also the *"systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change"* (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). It is associated with the idea of the reflective practitioner as described by Schon (1983). Proponents of action research have consistently argued and generated much evidence to indicate that action research is a useful approach to engage the practitioner in reflection and to improve practice. The action research approach to training is illustrated in Figure 1.
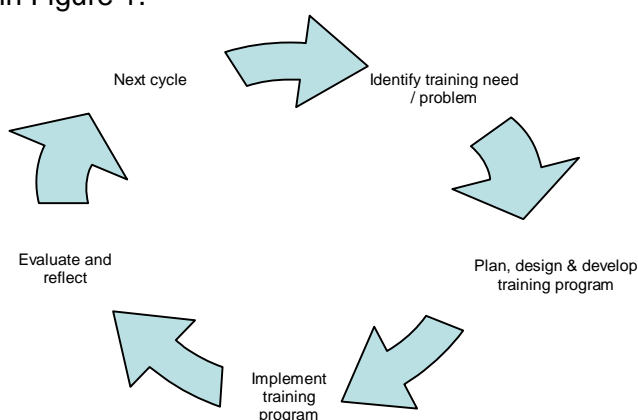

Figure 1. The Action Research Approach to Training

[2] The EHL methodology guide provides guidelines on EHL teaching methodology and teacher training.

Figure 1 clearly illustrates the iterative and continuous process of improving practice through four simple steps from identifying the training need or problem to evaluating the training program before moving to the next cycle of change and improvement. To ensure that the process is effective, the most important requirement for designing appropriate action is data collection. Several methods of data collection can be used and they include observations, interviews and the use of questionnaires. Problems are identified from the data collected and data is also collected to analyze the effectiveness of the action implemented. Findings from the evaluation serve as stimuli for reflection and for identifying problem/s for the next cycle of improvement.

In relation to EHL teacher training, the usefulness of action research is not in designing a new training program but in redesigning or making changes to the given training program suggested in the EHL methodology guide. The procedures and the methods of action research can be gainfully used to identify problems and gaps in the training of EHL teachers, to institute "action" to improve the training program, and to continuously seek ways to improve the program over time.

ACTION RESEARCH AND EHL TEACHER TRAINING IN MALAYSIA[3]

The first teacher training experience was challenging and as a novice EHL teacher trainer, it was not an easy task trying to cope with the many demands of the training program. The program design closely followed the suggested teacher training workshops in the methodology guide. A group of trainers were involved in the program and each trainer was assigned a few trainees to coach and supervise. Trainers also work in pairs to lead the early explorations to serve as demonstrations on how to conduct the explorations using the teaching methods described in the methodology guide. Coaching the trainees who were preparing to conduct the explorations proved a tiring task which sometimes stretched into the night. Providing feedback and conducting discussions after each exploration were two difficult tasks for the trainers and trainers were very dependent on the methodology guide to conduct these sessions.

IDENTIFYING THE TRAINING NEEDS AND PROBLEMS

The first step towards improving practice and program effectiveness was to identify the areas that need improvement. This action research approach to training started at the evaluation stage of the first training cycle. Data had to be collected both on the process and the product of training. Data collection was made easy with the evaluation instruments provided by the EHL

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[3] EHL was first introduced into Malaysia in 2002 and has now become part of the Civics and Citizenship Education curriculum taught at the lower secondary level.

evaluation guide. These include the daily ballot, the pre and post training questionnaires, and the post implementation questionnaire. Additional data was collected using observations and informal interviews with the trainees.

The daily ballot was useful to gather data on trainees' learning, their concerns and questions on a daily basis while the pre and post questionnaires were very informative on the extent the program objectives were achieved. Although the data may not be absolutely trustworthy the general consensus can be deduced from the pattern of responses that emerged over the days. Data from the daily ballot was read together with the data collected from the observations made by the trainer. It was a simple technique to triangulate the data to ensure trustworthiness of the data.

The technique used for collecting observation data was simple but tedious. The trainer made notes on two major aspects of trainees' teaching. The first aspect is the content and the second aspect is the teaching methodology used by the teacher. Notes were taken chronologically noting the time and describing the action or behavior of the trainee as the trainee or trainees conducted the exploration. The trainer used the EHL module as a checklist to observe the extent the trainee followed the content in the lesson plan provided in the module and the difficulty faced by the trainee or trainees in following the steps in the module. Observational data also include the trainee's use of the teaching methods and the extent the trainee was comfortable and skillful in using the teaching methods.

The follow-up informal interview with trainees who had difficulty in conducting the explorations was useful to clarify the data collected from the observation. The interview data was able to identify some of the problems related to the program design besides problems related to trainee attributes and teaching competencies.

The findings from the data collected from the first training cycle indicated some of the major problems and the needs for improving the training program. These are listed below.

- Trainees who were assigned to conduct the early explorations could not perform adequately and were somewhat unsure of the teaching methodology. Those assigned to conduct the later explorations were better in their performance. The informal interviews revealed that those who conducted the later explorations had more time and opportunity to observe and discuss the earlier explorations and this made them more sure and confident of the methodology and the nature of the EHL content.
- Beginning teachers (less than two years teaching experience) were found to have more difficulties in dealing with the teaching methods.

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Teachers who lack proficiency in the English language found difficulty with the program.

- Teachers were not very comfortable with learner-centered teaching methods and tend to resort to teacher-centered teaching techniques.
- Teachers indicated the need to include more explorations into the training program instead of just focusing on selected explorations which could not provide them with a complete view and understanding of the whole EHL program.

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING THE ACTION

Given the findings from the first training cycle, and after reflecting on the possible remedial actions, it was decided that several changes had to be tried out in the next training cycle to address the shortcomings in the context of the Malaysian school system. The Malaysian school system is centralized and all curriculum matters are top-down in practice, meaning that all decisions are centrally made and disseminated from top to bottom. The medium of instruction is the Malay language and teachers' proficiency in the English language is limited. Teaching in the classroom is very examination oriented and promotes a teacher-centered approach in teaching and learning where learners are not given much opportunity to participate actively in the classroom. The emphasis is very much on cognitive learning, drills and practice to prepare students for the public examinations. The problem of big class size is common in the urban schools.

Given this background, the following changes were planned for the second training cycle with the second cohort of EHL teacher trainees:

- Trainers to provide more demonstrations on how to conduct the explorations before the trainees start to lead the explorations. This was to give ample opportunity for trainees to observe how the explorations are carried out. Modeling through demonstration is an effective means of facilitating learning in training. It is a widely accepted training methodology based on Bandura's social learning theory (1977) which emphasizes on learning through observation.
- Reduce the teacher training workshop activities suggested in the methodology guide and increase the number of explorations. For example, viewing the teacher video was selective and not all the video clips would be used. Lesson planning activity was excluded.
- Selection of EHL teacher training participants had to be reviewed and only experienced teachers proficient in the English language were to be selected.

In the second training cycle, the above changes were implemented except that there were still trainees who were not proficient enough in the English

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language. Trainers conducted the early explorations from the introductory exploration to Exploration 1c, a total of four explorations, before the trainees were assigned to lead the other explorations. Each workshop session had less activities compared to the previous training program which adhered closely to the activities suggested in the methodology guide. Each session was thus shortened in duration and thus it was possible for more explorations to be conducted by the trainees. After each exploration, the trainer-led discussion on the trainees' performance was focused more on their delivery techniques and the use of the teaching methods. An important question posed to the trainee was: "How would you do it differently?"

RESULTS

Observational and evaluation data were the main feedback data on the results of the changes implemented. The data indicated that trainees were more confident and able to lead the explorations better than the previous cohort of trainees. While the first cohort of trainees were able to lead the explorations smoothly only after the third day of the program when they have had the opportunity to observe at least three or four explorations conducted poorly by their peers, the present cohort were able to do the same after the trainers have led the first four explorations. Although there is no hard evidence that the positive effect was due to these changes or perhaps due to other factors, the positive result is that the immediate training effect was noticeable in terms of trainees' handling of the exploration.

However, trainees were still uncomfortable with the learner-centered approach and still tend to resort to much teacher talk rather than learner talk. They were not very familiar with using discussion as the main method of teaching. While some were able to respond appropriately with reference to the correct use of the teaching methods to the question of how they would do it differently, most were unable to respond accordingly. There was a need to refer trainees to the methodology guide as a checklist on their use of the teaching methods.

THE NEXT CYCLE

Training evaluation data gathered from the second cohort of trainees also provided important information on the areas that need further improvement. As mentioned, trainees were not comfortable with using discussion as they probably are too familiar with the teacher-centered approach used daily in their classrooms in school. There was a need to focus more on the discussion method and change teachers' beliefs about learner-centered teaching. There was also a need to be more structured in the follow-up discussion after each exploration.

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To address these needs, a few strategies were used in the training of the third cohort. Firstly, trainees were coached to use the flip-chart as a means to prepare their materials for the exploration as well as the questions they will use for conducting the discussion in class. Secondly, it was decided that the follow-up discussion after each exploration should be more focused on the EHL content and the teaching methods. This is a more structured approach where the trainer refers the trainees to the module to discuss the content and the methodology guide to discuss the teaching methods used. Since every exploration uses the discussion method, more attention was given to this method and the related techniques to make discussions more effective.

RESULTS

The evaluation data collected from the third cohort of trainees through the use of questionnaires indicated that the effectiveness of the program was somewhat similar to the results obtained from the previous cycle. However, the observational data provided useful information on the trainees' performance. The data indicated that trainees were more skillful in leading the discussion with the use of the flip-chart as a teaching aid. They were more confident because the discussion questions were prepared on the flip-charts. Furthermore, trainees were encouraged to use small group discussions instead of class discussions if they did not feel confident enough to lead a class discussion.

The follow-up discussions after each exploration were more focused on the content and the teaching methods. This probably helped the trainees to understand the content and the methods better. It helped them to see the flow and the continuity of the modules and the explorations. It also helped them to understand the mechanics of the discussion method. Although there was more use of small group discussion, the use of class discussion was noticeably better with the aid of the flip-chart.

The feedback data from the daily ballot and the questionnaire also indicated that trainees were happy to learn the various teaching methods and some expressed their intention to use some of the methods in teaching their subjects in schools. One interesting feedback was that although teachers had been trained to use most of the teaching methods used in EHL, they still found difficulty in using them because they have not used these learner-centered methods in their regular classrooms.

REFLECTIONS

Although action research to improve EHL teacher training in Malaysia did not end with the third training cycle, the description of the first and second cycle of action research in EHL teacher training in Malaysia is hopefully

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enough to share the power of action research with fellow EHL teacher trainers. On looking back, it has been able to improve teacher training over the last few years. While trainers become more skillful, there is also more impact on the trainees as their feedback to the Ministry of Education had been very positive and had in some ways led to the inclusion of EHL in the regular school curriculum.

One recurring feedback was that teachers were pleasantly surprised that their presumption about Malaysian students being too passive was proven wrong when they implemented EHL in the classroom. They found that their learners were in fact not passive if the teaching method is learner centered and when students are given the opportunity to speak and engage in discussions. The Malaysian curriculum makers had for years been trying to change teachers towards becoming learner-centered teachers but teachers' resistance had been the main obstacle. The EHL content and the pedagogy has somewhat made those teachers who had been involved with EHL see the need for this change!

There is still much to do to make EHL a reality in the school and there is still much training and action research to do to achieve the goals of EHL across the population of young minds and hearts. The efficacy of the EHL program in achieving its goals needs to be evaluated but for the trainers and the teachers, one useful way towards that end is to continuously seek improvement through action research.

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