

**STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF ACTION RESEARCH IN IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING – LEARNING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP) AT CAN THO UNIVERSITY**

Tran Thi Diem Can

MSc., Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Can Tho University

**ABSTRACT**

Action research has become a popular career development tool for teachers around the world and has begun to gain the attention of researchers in Vietnam. Courses in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are receiving a lot of attention in a variety of disciplines, especially in Vietnamese universities. Action research can provide teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to influence change positively in the classroom, school and community (Johnson, 2012; Stringer, 2008). This paper aimed to identify the students' perception of action research in improving the quality of teaching and learning ESP in Can Tho University (CTU). Data research were collected from 200 students at CTU who learned ESP of Sociology, Tourism, Economics, Information Technology, Aquaculture and Agriculture by direct interviews. The descriptive statistical method was used in the study to analyze the students' perception of the AR as well as applying the AR in improving the quality of teaching and learning ESP. Research results showed that CTU students have professional knowledge on AR. Moreover, they have positive perception of improving the quality of teaching and learning ESP through action research.

**Keywords:** Action research (AR), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Can Tho University (CTU), students' perception, learning and teaching

**1. RATIONALE**

Action research (AR) was founded around the 1940s, which has been used mainly in the field of sociology. This method has been used in order to refer to practical research aiming to bring about changes in the society. However, AR has been applied and developed in Western countries since the early 1970s with many different scientific fields. In the field of education, AR is considered an indispensable part of the curriculum and it brings many benefits to enhance professional qualifications for teachers. The main purpose of AR, which is getting student achievement, self-development of professional development for teachers, is to help teachers identify problems in

order to improve in the teaching process, research and propose solutions and test solutions to innovate teaching methods. In addition, AR has been encouraging teachers to become continuous learners in their school (Mills, 2011), or AR is all about liberation and intellectual autonomy, intellectuality, morality and spirituality (Stenhouse, 1983).

In the teaching environment, the need for progressive improvement of teachers aiming to improve the quality of the teaching has become a prominent speech in education which is not just in one nation but all over the world. Institutions and educators are constantly pressured to improve their performance to be more effective. In fact, teachers constantly seek appropriate measurements to help them improve their professional skills. Some researchers argued that research methods of courses, such as AR, could contribute to the professional development of the teachers and create improvements in the teaching quality (Schon, 1983; Hall and Booth, 1997). AR is a combination of research and action that is reflective of what you are doing, which is based on data (mainly based on daily observation) collected in the workplace, then they transformed into actions to improve one's work. In addition, AR has provided teachers with the necessary skills and professional knowledge to make a positive impact in classroom, school and community (Johnson, 2012, Stringer, 2008).

In the general trend of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), many studies referred to the teaching and learning ESP as a certain part which plays an important role. If English is a language for learners to study on intensive language or common communication, ESP is important for learners who study English for specific purposes of each field, and they could use the language as an expert in their field. As a result, The ESP institutions is keen to achieve large-scale both quantitative training and quality standards, in order to meet the needs of a large training learners and create the true training products.

ESP teachers are expected to use a new approach, which focuses on different language communication under applying new the methods in the teaching process. Teachers and learners must learn how to contribute to a constructive learning environment that bring benefits for the professional and personal situations of different students by working in partnership. The instructors are partners and the student plays a role not just as a learner but as a provider of information and knowledge for his or her expertise in the related subject (Pair, 2015). It is much easier to observe the increase learning students' motivation with the combination of language and subject content (Kennedy & Bolitho 1991).

It is very clear, however, that ESP has increased the expectations of the learners as well as considerable need of teachers. For a professional teacher, he/she is enthusiastic about improving the method of success in your job (Kennedy & Bolitho 1991). However, English teachers can not be expected to quickly become professionals in ESP teaching. Johns and Duley-Evans (1980)

believed that to be a professional teacher in ESP teaching, he/she has to stimulate the work through collaboration with expert of related fields under the form of group teaching, or at least consulted by a professional teacher.

The article learned about students' perception of action research in improving the quality of teaching – learning ESP at Can Tho University because ESP is being considered and urged into the curriculum for each specialized major training at the school in recent years. ESP refers to the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language in which the target learners are to use English in a particular field (Paltridge and Starfield, 2013).

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. Data collection**

Secondary data of the study: Secondary data collected through the report on ESP program of Can Tho University, the previous articles, analysis, research topics, research projects and relevant workshop materials.

Primary data of the study: Primary data were collected from 200 students by direct interviews who have learned ESP of Sociology, Tourism, Information Technology, Agriculture, Economics and Aquaculture. Random sampling method was used in the study (table 2.1).

**Table 2.1: The number of students following the school/college**

<b>Name of school/college</b>	<b>Observation</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
School of Social Sciences and Humanities	51	25,5
College of Information and Communication Technology	48	24,0
College of Agriculture and Applied Biology	46	23,0
College of Economics	33	16,5
College of Aquaculture and Fisheries	22	11
Total	200	100

Source: Surveyed by author, 2018

The table 2.1. showed that there are 51 students in School of Social Sciences and Humanities accounted for 25.5% of total observations, 48 students in College of Information and Communication Technology (accounted for 24% of total observations), 46 students in College of Agriculture and Applied Biology, 33 students in College of Economics and 22 students in College of Aquaculture and Fisheries accounting for 23%, 16.5% and 11% respectively. The study focused on student's surveys because these are departments that offer specialized English language instruction and the credit training system for this module is compulsory for students.

According to the research results, the surveyed students were in the last year students of the training courses. There are no freshmen in this semester. In fact, the module is compulsory, so the first year students have almost no one to study because they have to concentrate on theoretical and political subjects. At the same time, in order to study in the subject, students have to learn basic courses of a foreign language, so most students study ESP are in the third and final year students.

## **2.2. Data Analysis**

The descriptive statistical method was used in the study to analyze the students' perception of the AR as well as applying the AR in improving the quality of teaching and learning ESP as the indicators of the study like mean testing, statistical testing tools and frequency.

All scales in the study used Likert scale with 5 levels including 01 to 05 according to the degree of agreement as: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = normal; 4 = agree; 5 = strong agree with the students' perception of the AR as well as the application of the AR in the teaching and learning ESP at CTU.

## **3. FINDING RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1. Students' perception of action research in education**

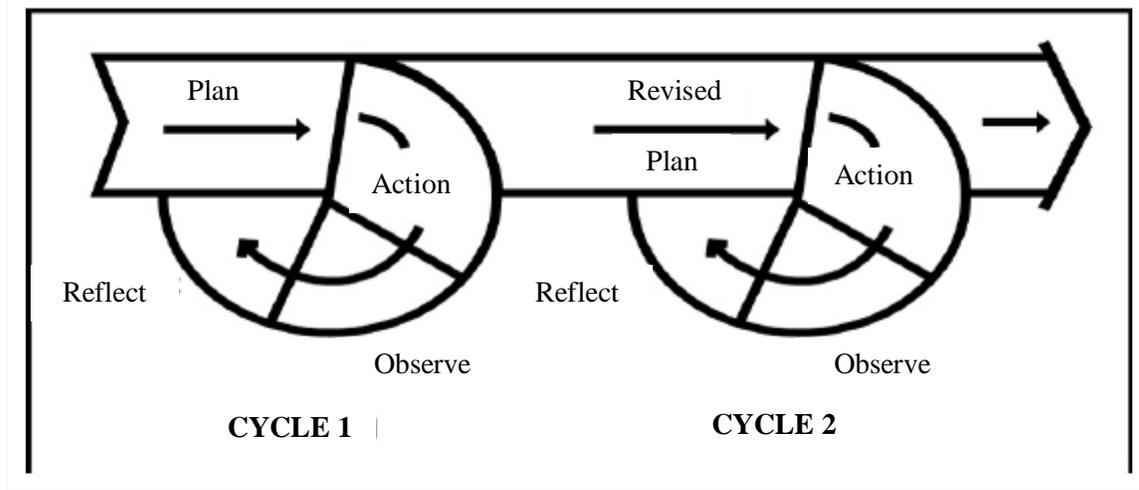
#### **3.1.1. Overview on action research in education**

AR is a process that both teaches and studies (Dick, 2002). AR paid much attention to the purpose of the AR as they determine that it is a form of self-reflection survey conducted by participants in social situations in order to improve their rationality in practical activity, their understanding of practices and situations in which practices are done implementation (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). AR is a form of problem exploration by self-examination and recognition. This form can be used by teachers to improve the appropriateness and legitimacy of the pedagogical situations that they encountered in teaching.

Although AR has many other names, including participatory research, collaborative investigations, liberal studies, action learning, and context action research, all are variants of a master. Other ways to understand, AR is "learning by doing" which means that a group of people identifies a problem, they do something to solve it and see how successful their efforts are, and if they are not satisfied, they will try again (Rory O'Brien, 2001).

Many researchers have developed a model of AR based on the reality of the problem. They proposed a spiral model consisting of four steps: plan, action, observe and reflect. In particular,

the first circle may be repeated in a spiral until the doer has met the research goal or meets the requirements set out (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).



**Figure 3.1: Simple model of the cyclical nature of the typical action research**

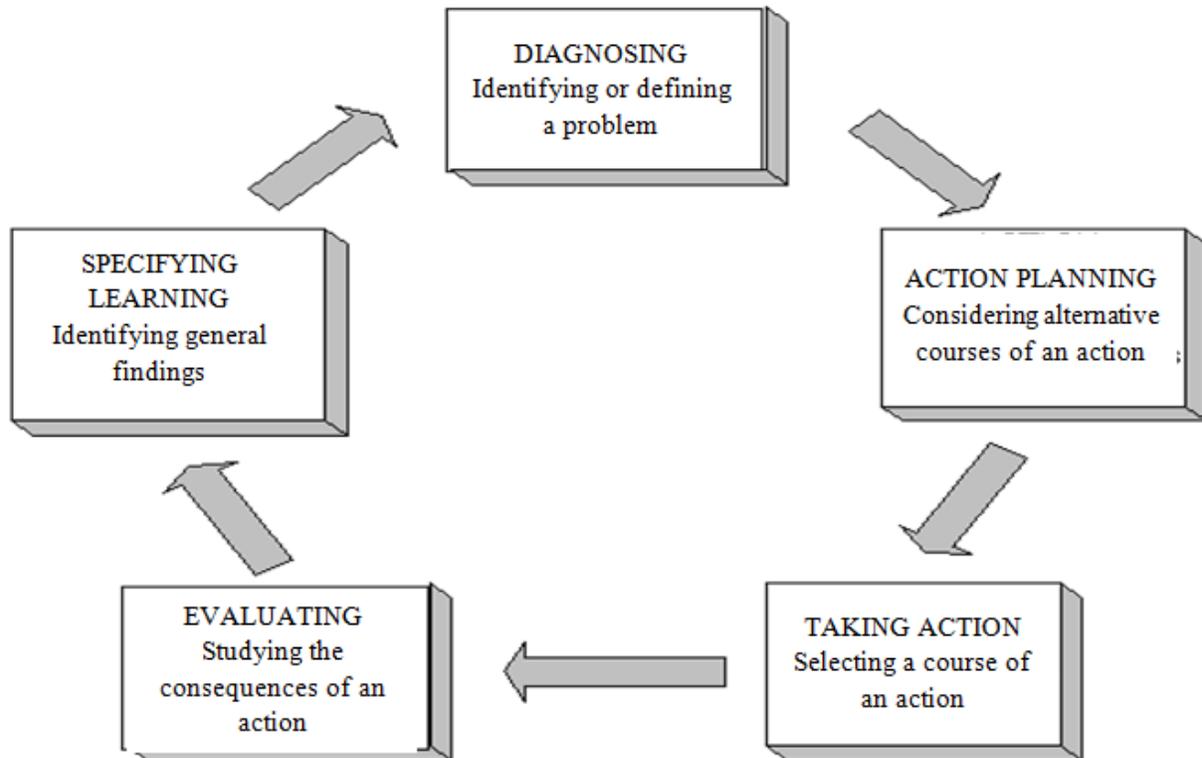
Source: MacIsaac, 1995

Gerald Susman (1983) suggested a more complex model. He distinguished five stages that are implemented in each research cycle. Initially, a problem is identified and data was collected for a more detailed diagnosis. The next is a set of possible collective solutions, from which a single action plan appears and is executed. Data on interventions are collected and analyzed, and these findings are interpreted in terms of the success of the action. At this point, the problem is re-evaluated and the process begins another cycle. This process continues until the problem is resolved (illustrated in figure 3.1).

AR is a holistic approach to the application of case studies and the results are not general as each class has different characteristics, which require different approaches to problem solving. However, there are certain principles in the AR. The researchers provided a comprehensive overview of the six main principles of action research (Minh, 2012).

- Reflexive critique: Notes, transcripts, information, data or other materials must be truthful, reflect the reality of yourself, your class, and not someone else's.
- Dialectical critique: In fact, especially in teaching activities, all activities are shared through languages. Dialectic in teaching activities with classroom reality is expressed through the classroom context, time and place flexible, unstable.

- Collaborative Resource: Participants in an action research project are co-researchers. The principle of co-operation is that each person's idea has the same meaning as the potential resource for generating analytical, interpretive analysis, negotiated among participants. It tried to avoid the deviation of the credibility derived from the previous state of an idea holder. It specifically makes the insights from recognizing the contradictions between the two views and in a single perspective.
- Risk: The process of changes can threaten all the established ways of doing things, thereby creating the fear of the participants. AR initiators will use this principle to dispel others' concerns and invite participants by pointing out that they will also have to follow the same process, and regardless of the outcome, too. The study will take place.
- Plural Structure: The nature of this study reflected the diversity of opinions, comments, and criticisms, leading to many possible actions and interpretations. The multidimensional structure of this survey required that data be diversified, and that many sources and results of research should be widely disseminated. Thus, a report served as a facilitator for ongoing discussion among collaborators, not the final conclusion of the event.
- Theory, Practice, Transformation: For AR researchers, the theory provides information for practice, in the process of practice that will refine the theory, in a continuous transition. In all contexts, people's actions are based on assumptions, theories and hypotheses, and every observed result and theoretical knowledge is enhanced. The two are intertwined aspects of a single change process. The subsequent practical applications must be further analyzed in a continuous cycle of change that shifts the emphasis between theory and practice.



**Figure 3.2: Simple detailed model of the cyclical nature of the typical action research**

Source: Susman, 1983

### **3.1.2. CTU Students' perception of action research**

According to the surveyed results, most of the CTU students surveyed had an understanding of AR (presented in Table 3.1). Most of them believed that AR is a way of teaching that helping teachers adjust curriculum, teaching methods to meet the needs of students in order to adjust the teaching under the actual situation (accounted for 21.8%), encouraging students to participate in decision-making on issues during the course related to the curriculum (21.4%), linkage in the professional development of the English teacher and the quality of learning of the learners (21.6%) and teaching through the doing research (accounted for 16.4%).

In particular, the AR helps teachers recognize the teaching methods for students in a more dynamic direction with the highest percentage. In particular, teaching methods change over time. In the past, students were mostly listening, but now students are more active in learning. This demonstrated how the teacher's education is parallel to social development. And AR will help teachers know each student, what teaching methods are the most effective and bring the best

results. In fact, when a teacher teaches a passive class, he/she will usually give more group work, play games, and more stimulation to raise students' interest in the classroom. For more exciting classes, teachers will offer students to argue for problems or use information technology to engage with the class. Moreover, encouraging students to participate in decision-making on issues during the course related to the curriculum has received more positive from students' opinion after creating dynamic environment. This results showed that during the learning process of CTU students, teachers always allow students to express their opinions so that they can express their abilities, creativity and so on. This will train students to have skills in issues such as self-study, expression and protection of views, communication and conversation.

**Table 3.1: Students' perception of action research in education**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
Teaching through doing research	82	16,4
Linkage in the professional development of the English teacher and the quality of learning of the learners	108	21,4
Helping teachers adjust curriculum, teaching methods to meet the needs of students in order to adjust the teaching under the actual situation	93	18,6
Helping teachers recognize how to change teaching methods to students in a more dynamic way	109	21,8
Encouraging students to participate in decision-making on issues during the course related to the curriculum	107	21,6

Source: Surveyed by author, 2018

**3.2. Students' perception of action research in improving the quality of teaching and learning ESP in Can Tho University**

As can be showed from table 3.2, CTU students' opinion on applying AR in teaching and learning ESP is that teachers have encouraged students to improve their reading comprehension skills (21.9%), applied many teaching methods for each skill very often (21.1%), helped students remember and use vocabulary effectively by many ways after reading (19.6%), stimulated students in reading skills by many ways (accounted for 19.4%), actively changed the teaching methods when classes are not active (18.0%) respectively.

**Table 3.2: Students’ perception of teaching methods of ESP through AR in CTU**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
Applying many teaching methods for each skill very often	101	21,1
Actively changing the teaching methods when classes are not active	86	18,0
Encouraging students to improve their reading comprehension skills	105	21,9
Stimulating students in reading skills by many ways	93	19,4
Helping students memorize and manipulate vocabulary effectively by many ways after reading	94	19,6

Source: Surveyed by author, 2018

In particular, teachers encourage students to improve their reading comprehension skills accounting for the highest percentage. This showed that CTU students have many limitations in reading comprehension when studying ESP and they havenot any right ways to learn effectively. In fact, most CTU students in particular and Vietnamese students in general always focus more on speaking and listening skills than grammar because it is suitable for job application as well as job seeking. However, if students know how to interact and communicate with their special fields, they are easy to get a great job which is related their major graduation.

The second position that CTU students’ consideration is to help students memorize and manipulate vocabulary effectively by many ways after reading skills. That learning ESP is the student can access to the amount of major vocabulary related to the right field of specialization. The major vocabulary will often be difficult to remember. Changing teachers’ teaching methods is an important part of improving students’ vocabulary and giving students some “tips” to learn vocabulary easily.

Based on the CTU students’ perception of teaching methods of ESP through AR in CTU, the results indicated that the diversity in teaching methods, teachers have observed and applied each method to suit each class. At the same time, teachers also understand the weakness of students in learning ESP. From there, there are appropriate teaching methods to help students learn ESP better.

**3.3. Some recommendation to improve the quality of teaching and learning ESP in Can Tho University through action research following students’ perception**

On the side of the student: ESP is a subject which is very important for the study of each university for students in general and Can Tho University in particular. Therefore, each student should demonstrate his or her efforts in the learning process. In order to be able to study well, students need to learn and improve their knowledge of Basic English before attending the ESP

training. During the learning process, students should spend time learning new vocabulary related to the topic of the lesson before class. In addition, students need to apply a variety of learning methods as reading newspapers, watching videos, photos, thinking diagrams and so on. Besides, students should train the learning English through learning by group work to exchange materials and effective learning methods.

On the side of the teacher: In order to improve the quality of teaching of ESP, teachers should choose appropriate and lively teaching methods so as not to cause boring phenomena for students. In the process of teaching reading comprehension skills, teachers should pay attention to the use of specific curriculum, in accordance with the student's specialty aiming to create an interest in learning reading skills. Moreover, teachers should choose images, videos, mini games and so on to stimulate students in the lessons. In addition, teachers can give lectures on classroom situations. Students can exchange and discuss with their friends into groups. After that, the teachers will help students explain new vocabulary, instruct students to find materials related to ESP so that students can have self-study at home.

On the side of the school: Can Tho University needs to have a professional teaching division so that students can easily acquire knowledge from teachers effectively. The school should facilitate students to exchange, learn English through self-study group activities by setting up exchange clubs and learning English following the right program that students are learning about ESP courses. In addition, the school should support ESP classes or extra basic classes in the evening so that those who lose their English will have the appropriate learning environment before starting to learn ESP.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

CTU students have a great knowledge on AR in education, especially in the improving the quality of teaching and learning ESP. They believed that the AR helps teachers recognize the teaching methods for students in a more dynamic direction with the highest percentage. Most of them believed that AR is a way of teaching that helping teachers adjust curriculum, teaching methods to meet the needs of students in order to adjust the teaching under the actual situation. Moreover, CTU students' opinion on applying AR in teaching and learning ESP is that teachers have encouraged students to improve their reading comprehension skills. It is to help students memorize and manipulate vocabulary effectively by many ways after reading skills.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, R (2008) “*Essays on pedagogy*. London: Routledge” cited by Kevin Laws.
- Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical: education, knowledge and action research*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- Charles Fadel (2012) “*What should students learn in the 21st century? OECD Education Today*, 18 May, 2012”.
- Dick, B. (2002). *Action reseach: action and research*. Retrieved from <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/aandr.html>.
- Dudley-Evans, T. (1998), *Research perspectives on English for academic purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge Universiti Press.
- Duong Duc Minh (2012). “*Applying the action research in teaching activities aiming to improve the quality of teaching*”. The science journal 3 (26). p80-88.
- Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research reader*. (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed). Deakin University Press, Victoria.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2008). Participatory Action Research: Communicative Action and The Public Sphere. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (3rd ed., Vol. 2, pp. 271- 330). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kennedy, C & Bolitho, R (1984), *English for specific purposes* London: Macmillan.
- Kevin Laws, (2013) “*Learning Through Action: A Process Approach to Professional Development*”.
- Lewin, K. (1946). Action Research and Minority Problems. *Journal of Social Issues*, (2) 34. Retrieved from <http://www.comp.dit.ie/dgordon/Courses/ILT/ILT0003/ActionResearchandMinorotyProblems.pdf>.
- Mills, G. (2003). *Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher*. Upper Saddle River: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- O’Brien (2001). *An overview of the methodological approach of action research*. Universidade Federal da Paraíba, João Pessoa.

- Pati, P. (2014). Indonesian Foreign School Teachers' Perception and Capability to Undertake Classroom Action Research: Basis for Capability Building Program. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 4 (3), 67-89.
- Rainey, I. (2000). Action Research and the English as a Foreign Language Practitioner: Time to Take Stock. *Educational Action Research*, 8 (1), 65- 91.
- Robinson, P (1991) *ESP today: A practitioner's guide Hemel Hemstead*: Prentice Hall.
- Schon (1983); Hall and Booth (1997) "Action Research: Promise and Potential for Improving Teacher Professional Practice and the Learning Organisation".
- Schon, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
- Susman, G. I. (1983). *Action research: a sociotechnical systems perspective*. London: Sage Publications.