

The Role of Action Research in Promoting EFL Teachers' Professional Development in Higher Education:

A Case Study of the Department of English at Constantine 1-Frères Mentouri University

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Received: 29/10/ 2025

Accepted: 06/12/2025

ABSTRACT:

Keywords:

action research,
professional
development, EFL
teachers, reflective
practice, higher
education,
professional
identity,

The present research attempts to investigate the role of action research in promoting the professional development of EFL teachers in higher education, focusing on a case study of the Department of English at Constantine 1- Frères Mentouri University. The major aim is to find out how engaging in action research influences teachers' reflective practice, instructional strategies, and professional identity, as well as the challenges they encounter in implementing it. This study is a qualitative case study which has used both a semi-structured interviews and classroom observations as data collection methods. In this study, eight university teachers of English were included. The thematic analysis found that action research improved the teachers' ability to reflect on their work, encouraged them to use more engaging teaching techniques, while also fostering a stronger sense of professional identity and autonomy. However, the analysis of the results have also shown teachers' experienced difficulties such as lack of time, limited support from their own institutions and insufficient training in methods of conducting research. Overall, these findings highlight the role of action research as a valuable, teacher-driven way to support professional development in higher education, and also underline the need for better policies and resources from institutions to make it work well. Additionally, this study adds to the small body of research on teacher professional development in Algeria and offers practical suggestions for building a stronger culture of reflective practice among EFL teachers.

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Introduction

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, where teaching methodologies and learner needs are constantly evolving, teachers are expected to engage in lifelong learning and reflective practice to maintain their effectiveness (Farrell, 2015). Professional development (PD) is considered important for raising teaching quality and helping students succeed in higher education (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Teachers are encouraged to undertake action research (AR) to investigate their own practices, reflect critically on their teaching, and implement context specific improvements (Burns, 2010). AR is defined as a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), offering teachers the positions of researchers of their own classrooms, thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice (Wallace, 1998). Many studies have shown that AR enhances teachers' reflective skills, encourages pedagogical innovation, and fosters a stronger sense of professional identity (Burns, 1999; Yuan & Burns, 2017).

In the case of higher education, teachers assume the role of researchers, and action research aligns with their institutional goals which encourage both teaching excellence and scholarly engagement (Borg, 2015). In the context of Algerian higher education, where the teaching of English has become increasingly important due to globalization and the growing demand for communicative competence among graduates (Benmoussat & Benmaamar, 2010), the traditional PD initiatives have often been criticized for being top-down, generic, and disconnected from the realities of teachers' classrooms (Haddam & Laraba, 2016). It is high time to find alternative approaches to PD that empowers teachers to take ownership of their own professional growth. Despite the benefits of action research, its adoption in Algerian higher education remains limited and underexplored (Benmoussat & Benmaamar, 2010). Although Algerian university teachers are increasingly aware of the importance of reflective teaching, structural and cultural barriers often hinder their participation in meaningful PD initiatives (Haddam & Laraba, 2016), there is still a lack of empirical research examining how action research could assist EFL Algerian university teachers to improve their teaching practices and overcome daily classroom challenges.

The present study attempts to investigate the role of action research in promoting the teachers' professional development at the Department of English, Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University. More specifically, it seeks to explore how engaging in action research influences teachers' classroom practices, and their professional identity. Thus, it intends to contribute to the growing body of literature on teacher-led PD and provide insights into how AR can be effectively implemented at university level.

1. Literature Review

EFL teachers need constantly to promote their PD as they encounter different linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical challenges (Richards & Farrell, 2005). AR has developed into a significant, teacher-focused methodology that fosters reflection, inquiry, and ongoing enhancement of practice (Burns, 2010). In this review, we attempt to emphasize the relevant literature on the role of AR in EFL teachers' professional development, highlighting its impact on teacher learning, classroom practice, and professional identity, and identifying areas that deserve further research.

1.1 Action Research and Teacher Professional Development

AR, as conceptualised by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), is a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting that allows teachers to examine their own practice in a systematic fashion. It is thus compatible with the reflective practitioner perspective of teachers (Schön, 1983) who never stop asking questions in order to facilitate student learning and their own educational capability. Research on general education has shown that action research facilitates teachers' critical thinking, allows for collaboration, and increases their sense of professionalism and sense of agency (Somekh, 2006; Zeichner, 2003).

PD is of particular value in the field of EFL due to the fluidity of language teaching methodologies and learners' diverse needs (Richards & Farrell, 2005). AR provides EFL practitioners with a method of adapting their practice at the level of local contexts and evidence-informed practice (Burns, 2010). As Wallace (1998) notes, AR bridges the gap between theory and practice by allowing teachers to generate context-specific knowledge through systematic reflection.

1.2 Empirical Studies in EFL Contexts

Many studies have shown the importance of action research for professional growth among EFL teachers. One of the pioneering studies in this area was conducted by Burns (1999), which showed that EFL teachers engaged in action research developed a deeper sense of awareness of their interactions in the classroom, attempted new things through experimentation, and increased students' engagement level. Beyond that, Tsui (2003) demonstrated that action research allowed instructors to challenge consolidated practices and reconstruct professional identities. Further studies supported these conclusions. Borg (2015) pointed up the role of action research in the encouragement of reflective practice and teachers' confidence in curriculum decisions. Among EFL teachers in China, Gao and Chow (2011) found that action research encouraged teachers' movement toward student-centered and culture-sensitive practices of teaching. Together,

these studies underscore the transformative power of action research as a situated, practice-focused PD modality.

1.3 Effect on Reflection, Practice, and Professional Identity

One of the most important contributions AR does for professional growth is help teachers learn how to reflect on their work. Farrell (2015) asserts that AR systematically operationalizes reflection, which is crucial for teacher development. Educators engaged in AR often report high awareness of their assumptions and a willingness to explore alternative methodologies (Burns, 2010; Zeichner, 2003). Moreover, AR has been shown to enhance classroom procedures, leading to improved student outcomes and more efficient teaching (Gao & Chow, 2011). Changes in teachers' professional identities have also been associated with their participation in action research. Yuan and Burns (2017) observed that EFL teachers engaged in AR perceive themselves less as passive executors of externally established curricula and more as independent professionals who can influence their practice through inquiry.

1.4. Gaps in Literature

The literature indicates that AR is an effective strategy for enhancing PD of EFL teachers, as it fosters reflective practice, improves teaching skills, and reinforces professional identity. Even though there is some good evidence, there are still a few gaps in the literature. A lot of research is limited to small, qualitative studies, which may not fully show how AR affects systemic change on a larger scale (Borg, 2015). Even though the data is promising, there are still a lot of gaps in the literature. Borg (2015) asserts that the majority of studies regarding the value of action research are confined to qualitative, small-scale investigations, potentially impeding their ability to confirm the influence of action research on systemic change. Consequently, additional empirical research is required to address existing deficiencies and enhance comprehension of how AR can facilitate teacher development across diverse EFL contexts.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Questions

This study investigates how conducting AR helps EFL teachers advance professionally in Algerian universities:

1. How does AR change the way EFL teachers teach and what they do in the classroom?
2. How does taking part in action research change how EFL teachers see themselves as professionals?
3. What problems do university teachers face when they use AR to enhance their professional performance?

By answering these questions, we intend to gain a genuine understanding of if AR can be a valuable approach for teachers in Algeria to improve themselves in a sustainable manner and allows them to self-regulate.

2.2. Participants

Participants were eight EFL teachers at the Department of English, Constantine 1-Frères Mentouri University, with some experience in conducting action research in their classrooms. Purposive sampling was used in selecting participants in relation to their exposure to or experience in AR. The sample comprised teachers with diverse years of experience and ranks to guarantee a variety of perspectives and experiences.

2.3 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the role of AR in promoting EFL teachers' professional development at the department of English Constantine 1- Frères Mentouri University, and practices in their natural context (Creswell. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences, perceptions, and practices in their natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design focused on a limited system-the group of EFL teachers at a single Algerian university engaged in action research- providing rich, contextualized insights (Yin, 2018).

The data for this study were gathered using two qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations.

2.3.1. The Semi-Structured Interview

2.3.1.1. A Description of the Semi-Structured Interview

To examine the role of AR in facilitating PD of EFL teachers, a semi-structured interview was conducted with eight educators from the Department of English at Constantine 1 Frères Mentouri University. The interview consisted of six open-ended questions that examined the participants' experiences with action research, its influence on their teaching methodologies, reflective capacities, and professional identity.

2.3.1.2. Analysis of the Results of the Semi-structured Questionnaire

This section discusses the study results drawn from data collected from eight EFL teachers at the Department of English, Frères Mentouri University, through semi-structured interviews. The findings are reported in line with the principal issues raised: reflective practice, changes in instructional strategies, professional identity, and challenges encountered. Tables summarizing key frequencies and percentages are included to support the qualitative analysis.

Theme one: Reflective Practice

All the participants said that doing AR really helped them get better at reflecting on their practice. It helped them look at their teaching more closely and change it to better meet the needs of their students. The teachers mentioned that they grew more conscious of the assumptions they held and became more systematic in evaluating their teaching choices. Table 1 summarizes the frequency of teachers' perceptions of reflection improvement.

Table 1: Perceived Improvement in Reflective Practice

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Significantly improved	5	62.5%
Moderately improved	3	37.5%
No noticeable improvement	0	0%
Total	8	100

As shown above, teachers claimed that action research had greatly improved their reflective practices, with the majority (62.5%) describing the improvement as significant, and 37.5% of them as moderate.

Theme Two: Instructional Changes

When examining their answers, teachers agreed that AR had a significant effect on how they taught, making them focus more on getting students involved and interacting with each other. They also declared they are willing to explore new experiences such as collaborative projects, receiving input from peers, and engaging with their students as they progressed. Table 2 summarized the most frequent teaching changes that the participants reported on.

Table 2: Instructional Changes Attributed to Action Research

Strategy Introduced or Enhanced	Frequency	Percentage
Increased use of group work	6	75%
More formative assessment practices	5	62.5%
Greater student participation	6	75%
Use of reflective journals in class	2	25%

The data showed that the most commonly mentioned strategies were increased group work and prompting greater student participation, both reported by six (75%) respondents. The introduction of extensive formative assessment was reported by five (62.5%) respondents. Yet, two (25%) participants stated that using reflective journals in class was the least used strategy. Therefore, teachers' responses demonstrated more dynamic and responsive teaching styles compared to practices prior to their engagement in action research.

Theme Three: Professional Identity

Seven of the eight participants (87.5%) stated that participating in AR enhanced their sense of professional identity. Teachers expressed feeling more autonomous, confident, and invested in their roles as educators and researchers. One participant (12.5%) described it as “a turning point in seeing me as an active agent of change in my own classroom”.

Theme Four: Challenges

Despite the positive outcomes, teachers identified several challenges in conducting AR. The most commonly cited barriers were time constraints (reported by all participants), lack of institutional support (reported by 5 teachers), and insufficient training in research methodology (reported by 4 teachers), the resistance from colleagues (reported by 2 teachers). Table 3 summarizes these challenges.

Table 3: Challenges Faced in Conducting Action Research

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of time	8	100%
Limited institutional support	5	62.5%
Lack of methodological training	4	50%
Resistance from colleagues	2	25%

It appears that AR is beneficial, particularly for EFL teachers seeking to enhance their skills. It improves reflective practice and teaching methodologies, enabling teachers to feel more professional. Nonetheless, there are institutional and structural obstacles that hinder the effective use of AR by teachers. These challenges prevent some teachers from utilizing research tools effectively, as institutional support may not always be sufficient or readily available. This situation may require reevaluation. Educators might require time away from other responsibilities, and intensive training along with specific resources also incurs costs. Addressing these limitations will enhance the utility of AR. Consequently, EFL teachers globally may advance their skills and become more reflective, effective, and overall improved.

2.3.2. Classroom Observation

2.3.2.1. Description of Classroom Observation Instrument

In addition to those semi-structured interviews, a classroom observation checklist was used to get direct evidence of instructional practices and teaching behaviors that were influenced by action research. Observation checklists are commonly used in classroom research because they help systematically document teaching strategies and learning dynamics in real-time. The checklist was actually designed to identify observable signs of professional growth, reflective teaching, and new approaches to teaching among EFL instructors in the English Department

at Constantine1-Frères Mentouri University. It basically assessed instructional strategies and classroom vibes, focusing on things like student participation, teacher feedback, and how well teachers responded to their students' needs. We prepared a checklist which includes different categories and we attempted to observe each item as we saw it during the lesson (Appendix B).

2.3.2.2. Analysis of Classroom Observation Data

Classroom observation data was analyzed to determine the extent to which teachers' methodologies reflected the outcomes of AR on their professional development. The investigation examined the frequency and quality of teaching behaviors that corresponded with reflective practice, student-centered instruction, and the implementation of innovative teaching concepts. Each of the eight teachers was watched during a class session, using a standard checklist. Whether certain actions were present or not they should be noted and counted later to spot patterns.

Table 4: Summary of Observed Practices

Observation Item	 Number of Teachers Observed	Percentage
Evidence of student centered activities	7	87.5%
Use of group work or collaborative learning	6	75%
Teacher solicits and responds to student feedback	5	62.5%
Implementation of new instructional strategies	6	75%
Use of formative assessment techniques	5	62.5%
Awareness of learner needs	7	87.5%
Positive classroom atmosphere	8	100%

The observation data corroborate the interview findings; indicating that most teachers have embraced reflective and student-centered instructional strategies—key characteristics of professional development through action research. All eight teachers made their classrooms dynamic and enjoyable, which shows that they all wanted to get students involved. A high number of student-centered activities (87.5%) and new ways of teaching (75%) show that most of our sample are using research-based methods in their

teaching. However, the use of formative assessments and the asking for student feedback were recorded at slightly lower frequencies. This suggests that some reflective practices are still being fully integrated into daily instruction.

In addition to the predefined checklist items, several other notable practices were observed across classrooms, reflecting deeper pedagogical shifts likely influenced by AR. Some teachers were seen integrating authentic materials such as news articles, videos, and podcasts to enhance students' exposure to real-world language use. The use of digital tools including interactive platforms and multimedia content-was also evident, supporting both learner engagement and instructional flexibility. Several teachers demonstrated instruction, adapting activities and expectations based on learners' proficiency levels as well as peer-teaching approaches, where students took an active role in leading discussions or explaining content to their peers. A few teachers employed strategic code-switching to clarify difficult concepts, particularly in mixed-ability classrooms. Notably, some classrooms featured reconfigured seating arrangements (e.g., group clusters) designed to promote collaborative learning. These practices suggest an increased focus on reflective, learner-centered instruction and reinforce the broader impact of action research on teachers' professional growth and classroom behavior.

These results highlight both the progress and the ongoing challenges in translating AR into consistent classroom practice. The observation data triangulate and reinforce the qualitative findings from the interviews, suggesting that AR, is contributing meaningfully to PD of the observed teachers.

2.3.2.2. Discussion and Interpretation of Finding

This study examined the role of AR in promoting EFL teachers' professional development in higher education, focusing on teachers at the department of English Constantine 1-frères Mentouri University. The findings provide evidence that engaging in AR positively influences teachers' reflective practice, instructional strategies, and professional identity, while also highlighting significant institutional and structural challenges.

The results demonstrate that action research significantly enhanced teachers' capacity for reflective practice, with all participants reporting moderate to significant improvement. This supports earlier findings by Farrell (2015), who emphasized that systematic reflection is central to teacher development and that AR operationalizes this reflection through a structured inquiry process. Teachers in this study reported becoming more self-aware and deliberate in evaluating their pedagogical choices, echoing Burns' (1999) observation that AR fosters critical self examination and informed decision-making. The observation data confirmed that teachers were more in tune with classroom dynamics and responsive to

learners' needs, reinforcing the argument that reflection is not merely a cognitive process but one that shapes observable practice (Zeichner, 2003).

The study also found that participation in AR prompted teachers to adopt more interactive and students' centered strategies. Notably, 75% of teachers reported an increased use of group work and strategies to enhance learner participation. This agrees with Gao and Chow's work, which shows that AR helps teachers shift from teacher-led methods to those that focus on students. Classroom observations supported what teachers said, showing that AR causes actual changes in how they teach. This lines up with Borg's idea that AR lets teachers bring their teaching in line with current teaching ideas

The results further show that AR really helps teachers feel more professional, giving them a sense of autonomy, confidence, and control. This finding goes with what Yuan and Burns said in 2017 - that action research helps teachers see themselves as people who can actually make a change, rather than just being told what to do by others. The majority of teachers in this study expressed a renewed sense of purpose and commitment to their roles as both educators and researchers, illustrating how AR bridges the gap between teaching and scholarship, particularly relevant in higher education contexts (Wallace, 1998).

While the benefits of AR were pretty clear, the study also showed some major obstacles, like a lack of time, not much support from institutions, and not enough training on methods. These challenges aren't really new and are similar to what other studies have found in similar situations (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2010; Haddam & Laraba, 2016), which suggests that there are some deeper issues within institutions that often get in the way of teachers being able to fully get into AR. Time constraints were a big worry for everyone involved, which means there are needs to be some changes in how things are structured and how workloads are managed so that teachers can keep up with professional inquiry.

The classroom observations gave even more insight into this stuff by highlighting some other practices that were not on the checklist. These included using real-life materials, technology to help with instruction, and code-switching – all of which show that teachers are really thinking about what students need linguistically and cognitively. Furthermore, there was peer teaching, classrooms set up for different learning styles, and evidence that teachers were helping students think about their own learning, which suggests that teaching is moving away from traditional, teacher-centered approach toward a more thoughtful and student-focused approach.

2.5. Pedagogical Implications for Higher Education in Algeria

The findings show that AR works as a practical method for developing teachers in Algerian universities. The benefits appear only if institutions provide training, supply resources for research, and devote time for reflection. The study adds to the small literature on teacher PD in Algeria. Action research helps EFL lecturers grow by leading them to reflect, try new methods along with see themselves as professionals yet reforms remain necessary to remove the structural blocks that still restrict its use. Based on the findings, the following steps are recommended to strengthen action research in EFL teacher development at Frères Mentouri University and comparable institutions.

Institutional support - University leaders should add action research to official professional development policies, provide incentives along with reserve hours in the teaching load for data collection, analysis in addition to reflection

Training and capacity building - Faculties should schedule workshops plus seminars that train teachers in research design, data gathering tools next to basic analysis so they carry out inquiry with confidence and accuracy.

Collaborative culture- departments should set up regular meeting groups where teachers plan studies together, observe one another's classes, exchange findings, revise procedures- such joint work raises quality and keeps projects alive beyond a single semester.

Recognition of efforts- teachers' action research projects and findings should be acknowledged and disseminated through institutional platforms, such as internal conferences or publications, to validate and celebrate their contributions.

Conclusion

Action research represents a promising pathway for empowering EFL teachers to take ownership of their professional growth and to improve their practice in ways that are both reflective and contextually relevant. With appropriate institutional support and resources, it can become a cornerstone of sustainable teacher development in Algerian higher education. Future studies could explore the long-term impact of action research on teaching practices and student outcomes, as well as investigate its application in other departments and universities in Algeria to build a broader understanding of its potential and limitations.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview

The following questions were used to guide the semi-structured interviews with participants:

1. Can you describe your experience with conducting action research in your classroom?
2. How has engaging in action research influenced your teaching practices?

3. In what ways has action research impacted your ability to reflect on your teaching?
4. Have you observed any changes in your professional identity or confidence as a result of conducting action research? Please elaborate.
5. What challenges have you faced while implementing action research in your context?
6. What do you perceive as the main benefits of engaging in action research?
7. How do you think your students responded to the changes you implemented through action research?
8. What kind of institutional support would make it easier for you to engage in action research in the future?

Appendix B: Classroom Observation Checklist

The following checklist was used during classroom observations to identify evidence of instructional strategies and reflective practices influenced by action research:

Observation Item	Observed (✓)
Evidence of student-centered activities	
Use of group work or collaborative learning	
Teacher solicits and responds to student feedback	
Implementation of new instructional strategies	
Use of formative assessment techniques	
Teacher demonstrates awareness of learner needs	
Classroom atmosphere (engagement, participation)	
Other notable practices	