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WHY CAN'T WE TEACH AND LEARN EFFECTIVELY? LESSONS FROM AN ACTION RESEARCH FAILURE

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ABSTRACT

One may learn a lot from success, but often forgets that we can learn even more from failure. This presentation focuses on how a well-designed and supported action research project aiming to improve learners' language and communication ability has come to its unsuccessful ending. The authors will elaborate on why about 300 students who had registered and committed to attend grammar and communication classes failed to complete their courses with regard to the teachers, learners and other related issues. Lessons learned, and the presenters would then reflect on their experience then suggest possible solutions to avoid similar future failures.

Participants of this are expected not only to listen but also encouraged to bring unsuccessful stories of their own and share their learnings and/or reflection with others.

BIOGRAPHY:

The authors (Tran Le Nghi Tran, M.A., Pham Thi Kim Sa, M.A. and Le Thi Thanh Hoa, M.A.) are lecturers at Banking Academy - Phu Yen Branch, and experienced teachers of English. Their expertise areas include teaching English for communication, English for business and preparing learners for international proficiency examinations like TOEIC, IELTS, etc. Their research interests are in business English, language teaching and linguistics, learning technology, and action research. They have achieved some accomplishments in their profession and have presented in several international TESOL conferences.

1. Introduction:

1.1. The Context:

Banking Academy – Phu Yen Branch is a branch of Banking Academy, a Vietnamese’s leading economics-specialized university whose mission is to train the labour force for the banking and finance sector of the country. The Academy’s exit criteria include that students must obtain a Toeic 450 score, a real challenge for teachers and learners of the school.

Firstly, there are only 5 teachers of English at the school, among them only 2 had experience sitting the Toeic Test as well as training students for this exam, the others are totally inexperienced or even know nothing about it.

Secondly, students at the Branch come from various provinces across the countries and therefore have different backgrounds and English competence. In each class, there are about 40-60 students, many of those come from remote areas with very little English training before and not even value English learning and its importance.

As for the in-curriculum English training, our college students would have to complete 12 credits (180 periods), half is for business English and the rest is for banking and finance English. TOEIC training is not included in official school time. However, we have built up a series of TOEIC syllabi for our students.

Lastly, there is WIFI at the school, but the signal is very poor. There are 2 labs, but one is out of date and broken, the newer one is not big enough for most current classes so it has never been in use. Moreover, the few English centers in the city hardly offer any TOEIC courses because of too little demand.

In short, the above difficulties make students’ meeting graduation requirements sounds very much like a “*mission impossible*” for us all.

1.2. Why This Project?

On hearing so many concerns on students’ likeliness to satisfy the exit criterion, their poor performances and language abilities, we decided to carry out a TOEIC sample test to see what the real situation is and what should be done to address the problems.

The TOEIC test paper was provided by IIG Vietnam at a Toeic teachers training workshop in Danang, 2011. After the test, students’ raw scores were converted into the 990 score-scale using the conversion table taken from Longman’s Preparation Series for the TOEIC test. 208 students sat the tests and only 9 got more than 450 marks (about 4%), 14 students got 405-450 marks (6,73%). This means the vast majority of the students (about 90%) were only at elementary levels or nearly zero-English capability. There would be no point in their taking TOEIC classes or other test preparation courses as what they really need at the time was basic grammar, vocabulary and communication training before they could go any further in achieving the exit criteria of the Academy.

There were no basic grammar or pronunciation courses offered anywhere in Tuy Hoa city where our school is located. There are foreign language centres that offer English communicative classes, however they are neither TOEIC-oriented nor last long enough to help students build up their language ability. Therefore, we decided to initiate free basic grammar, pronunciation and communication classes for our students, with hope to better prepare them for the following test preparation and improve their English competence as well as class performance.

1.3. Significance of the Project:

The most obvious result of the highly-set exit requirements of the Banking Academy are that students are not properly motivated to learn English either because

they feel 450 Toeic score is too hard to reach. Therefore, if they still can graduate without a Toeic certificate, they will not ever make any effort to learn English. By attending these courses, students could achieve the elementary language ability, be better-prepared to take further TOEIC courses and gain confidence and motivation in learning English.

On the other hand, teachers are exhausted with the heavy English training curriculum and have no time for Toeic extra-classes. The low pay on overtime and evening language classes (less than 2 USD per period) also prevents them from investing their time and effort on teaching Toeic. By taking part in this project, teachers can enjoy their freedom in trying out what they think is good for their students and the delight in doing something significant as well as earn more experience in teaching and doing research. Therefore, they all are willing to teach these classes for free.

In short, English teaching and learning at our school require immediate actions to be taken, therefore we carry out this research project to provide students with free basic English grammar, pronunciation and communication training and earn research experience as well as innovative solutions to our problems.

2. The Research Project:

2.1. Research Question:

Can students of near-zero English competence at Banking Academy – Phu Yen Branch grab the basic grammar knowledge, improve their pronunciation and communication abilities and be appropriately prepared for further TOEIC preparation courses by attending short free courses of grammar, pronunciation and communication?

2.2. Research Objectives:

- To find out how competent students of Banking Academy – Phu Yen Branch are at English Grammar, how accurate their pronunciation is and how well they can communicate in English.

- To provide these students with 60 periods of training in grammar, pronunciation and communication skills and see if their competence is improved after the course and if yes, what the rate of improvement is.

- To spot the strengths and weaknesses of English teaching and learning at Banking Academy – Phu Yen Branch and suggest possible solutions to its problems.

2.3. Literature Review:

Although a myriad of teachers, educators as well as linguistics have concerned the improvement of English for learners especially when social needs of communicative skills and ability are accelerating, there are not many works related to our study whose research subjects are non-linguistic major students in tertiary education based on action research. It is, therefore, necessary to give some studies associated with action research, communicative language teaching and reality of teaching and learning English to non-English major students at Vietnamese universities to give a better understanding of the rest of the study.

2.3.1 Action Research

Up to now, there have been many well-known English researchers investigating action research. Lewin, a social psychologist and educator, is generally regarded as the “father” of this field as he first built up the foundation of the theory of action research in the middle of 1940s. In his book “Action research and minority problems” published in

1946, action research is depicted as “a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action” (P.34).

Also relating to action research and its appliance in education, Stephan Corey (1953, p.70), a Columbia University professor, asserts that “the consequences of our teaching is more likely to change and improve our practices than is reading about what someone else has discovered of his teaching.” He debates that the effectiveness of formal research with a scientific method on educational practice is not high. Changes in educational practice can only take place through action research.

In 2001, in order to provide a closer look to action research, O’Brien has considered its nature and claims that in reality, action research is known under a lot of various names like collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, participatory research, contextual action research or action learning. Also, he states that action research is considered as “learning by doing”- a group of people identifies a problem, does something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts were, and, if not satisfied, tries again (p.28).

2.3.2 The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

The communicative language teaching has been considered one of the new approaches drawing the attention of loads of scholars, teachers and researchers all over the world for decades. According to Richards (1986), the CLT is employed to teach foreign or second language with focus on acquiring communicative competence.

When looking at the features of the CLT, Littlewood (1981) alleges that TLC pays systematic attention to a foreign language not only in term of function but also in aspect of structure, merging these into a more fully communicative view. In addition, he also believes that CLT really goes beyond conveying grammatical rules of the target language and by using meaningfully the target language, learners’ communicative competence will enhance.

Richards and Rodgers (1986) affirm that the CLT is used to improve the learner’s four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) which authorize learners their independence of language as well as communication.

Despite the divergences in wording among researchers, there has been agreement that the main goal of LCT is to facilitate learners’ communicative competence.

2.3.3 Teaching and Learning English to Non-English Major Students at Vietnamese Universities

Recently, the studies of reality of teaching and learning English to non-English major students at universities in Vietnam has been carried out by a number of researchers and authors. According to Mai (2013), learning English of non-English major students is restricted due to a significant difference of language competence among them. Mai (2010) states that it is very difficult to teach listening skills for non-English major students at Phuong Dong University because classes are overcrowded and learners are in various levels of proficiency. The feasible solution she suggested concerns designing a mixed variety of tasks for multilevel students: difficult tasks for more competent students.

2.4. Research Method

This study was carried out based on the foundation of an action research with the use of a mixed variety of instruments like observation and questionnaires to ensure research validity.

2.4.1 Instruments

- Observation

Through observation, the researchers could recognize how many students engaging in the free classes and how much progress the participants made during the process of conducting the study indicated through scores of entry and exit tests.

- Pre questionnaire

The pre-questionnaire was implemented in early October so as to discover the students' level of communicative skills especially listening and speaking skills which were supposed to be the worst, the way they learned it and what they really expected to enhance. Based on the results of the pre-questionnaire, we identified the problems and design action plan.

- Post questionnaire

The post questionnaire was conducted at the final week of experimental teaching to find out the reasons for engaging in the free classes, high rates of dropping out and suggestions for further improvement. The questionnaires, in fact, were conducted in Vietnamese so that students could comprehend easily.

2.4.2 Procedure

Our action research was composed of the four following steps.

-Step1: Diagnose the problems which need tackling or outperforming.

-Step2: Design and implement strategies for improvement

-Step3: Collect the data and analyze them.

-Step4: Discuss findings and find out solutions to address the problem.

3. The Free Classes

3.1 Students Background

Located in Central Vietnam, Banking Academy-Phu Yen Branch has attracted the majority of its students from the highland regions and coastal provinces where educational conditions are not as good as those in the large cities across the country. It is, therefore, not bizarre when we, through the results of the entry test - one of the most effective ways for teachers to determine and assess the background knowledge of students - realize that our students come with disparate levels of the English language as summarized in the table below.

<i>Scores</i>	<i>Number of students</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
0-100	1	0.48
105-200	52	25.00
205-300	100	48.08
305-400	32	15.38
405-450	14	6.73
455-550	5	2.40
555-700	2	0.96
705-990	2	0.96

Table 1: TOEIC Sample Test Results

It is evident that 73.56% (153/208) of the students are at pre-TOEIC levels (their scores were less than 300). A mere 46 students are likely to achieve the target of TOEIC 450 with adequate training. Obviously, this creates challenges for not only the teachers but also the students to reach what they really expect. Furthermore, almost all of this test takers had various motivations, interests, skills, experience and preparation.

3.2 The Entry and Exit Tests

In order to check the students' general competence in grammar, pronunciation and communicative abilities, we required them to take the entry test at the beginning of each course. Those who wanted to engage in communicative classes had to take the entry test in pronunciation and listening. In the former, there were 10 multiple choice questions which aimed to examine whether students could identify the differences between sounds especially final sounds or not. The time allotted for this was 10 minutes and the total score was 100. Likewise, the later was under the form of 25 KET listening questions in around 30 minutes and the total score was 100, too. Those who desired to become the learners of the grammar class had to take the Grammar test comprising of 50 multiple choice questions of grammar points related to tenses, parts of speech, passive voice, reported speech, etc. The time for this test was 20 minutes with the total marks of 100. In reality, only 116 students sat the entry test although the number of students who first registered was more than doubled (252).

The exit tests had the same format as the entry test and were organized in May when the students completed the free classes. There were just 103 candidates, with a decline of 13 students compared with the entry test.

3.3 The Syllabi

It is no denying that the syllabi make a great contribution of the success of courses irrespective of level or degree. The better the syllabi are, the more effective the courses become. Allen (1984, p.64) argues that objectives, duration of courses and level are the criteria of the selection of material.

3.3.1 The Syllabus of Communicative Classes

Paying attention to the importance of the syllabi and the ability of language of the students, we had discussed several times and finally decided to select "Basic Tactics for Listening" written by Jack C. Richards as the syllabus for the communicative classes. The reasons why we chose the book are various. Firstly, it was suitable for the students' ability of language because many of them were at elementary level. Secondly, it featured high-interest topics which could inspire and motivate students. Last but not least, it absolutely focused on communicative activities and skills like speaking and listening. Together with "Basic Tactics for Listening", we utilized several units in the book "Ship or sheep" by Ann Baker. This was aimed to facilitate the intonation and pronunciation of the students as well. Apart from the contents of the materials supplied, we were also free to choose other topics related to the lessons for students to discuss to ameliorate their improvisation or design extra class activities to make the lessons more interesting.

3.3.2 The Syllabus of Grammar Class

Baston (1994, p.35) reckons that "language without grammar would be chaotic; countless words without the indispensable guidelines for how they can be ordered and modified". In accordance with Chomsky (1965), grammar is an essential part in language teaching. Hence, teaching grammar without charge for students was also our main task because it could help the students improve their English use: using the language more exactly and creatively in various situations and contexts.

With regard to the grammar class, we didn't follow any single book. As a matter of fact, the syllabus for this class is a combination of selective lessons from some grammar books, which was systematized. The first lesson would assist students in

distinguishing parts of speech because they were crucial and fundamental for those who have just learned English. The other lessons concerned tenses, relative clauses, passive voice, reported speech, conditional sentences, comparison, subject and verb agreement and so forth. The focus is on topics that students did not do well during the entry tests.

3.4 Class and Organization

As mentioned in 3.1, students who enrolled in the free classes had varied competence levels, which made it very difficult for our team to organize the free classes. Therefore, instead of dividing the students into classes according to their ability, we focused on balancing the class size.

We officially organized 3 free communicative classes for more than 50 students in our educational institution. There were approximately 17 students per class on average, a reasonable figure for a communicative class. Our school has a myriad of large rooms where desks are all fixed to the floor in rows, one type of seating arrangements which is relatively hard for student to be able to see each other's faces. That was the reason why before beginning each session, we tried to arrange space: sometimes we organized students around tables so that they could work or collaborate together in groups of 3 or 4; sometimes we attempted U-shaped desk configuration or a circle for whole group discussions. Although arranging space took time, it really helped us to create a friendly and comfortable environment for students to learn more effectively. Furthermore, the interactions between students were better and students had chances to contact and work with others.

Unlike the communicative classes, the only grammar class started crowded with over 70 students of different grammatical abilities. For several reasons, we neither divided the big class into smaller ones nor did seating arrangements like what we did in the communicative classes. We, however, attempted to make the students feel as welcomed and comfortable as possible. By doing so, we hoped that our students would go to the class more regularly.

3.5 Students' attendance

Attendance of students in school is very integral because it directly affects their academic performance as well as their life later. In spite of its importance, it seems that the frequency of students' absence has accelerated no matter how frequently educators and schools advise or encourage them. It will not be an exaggeration to say that this usually happens in almost all free classes where students are not bound to any responsibilities or obligation. Our group faced such a predicament during the process of teaching the free classes and this can be obviously seen in table 2 as follow:

Sessions attended	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Periods per session	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Number of Students	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	5	7	7	4	2	5	10	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 2: Students' attendance of the communicative classes

As can be seen from table 2 above, there were 22 sessions, 60 periods and no students took part in more than 15 sessions. This means all students attended less than two-thirds of the sessions in reality, which resulted in the failure to facilitate the

students' communicative skills. The table reveals that 10 students attended 14 sessions (20-30 periods), 1 student participated in 15 sessions (30-39 periods) while the figure for those who joined 4 or 5 sessions was just 1, too. Most students (37) were only present in between 8 and 14 sessions.

Table 3 supplies an overview of students' attendance of the grammar class. Overall, no students attended less than 7 or more than 14 sessions. As a result, teachers failed to improve students' grammar knowledge considerably. As transparently depicted in table 2, the number of students who took part in 9 sessions (21 periods) was the largest with 14 students, followed by 13 students (11 sessions-27 periods). The number of students attended 8, 10, 12 or 14 sessions (18, 24, 30 and 36 periods respectively) was 27. The number of students participating in 7 or 13 sessions was only 1.

Sessions attended	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Periods per session	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Number of Students	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	14	8	13	6	1	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 3: Students' attendance of the grammar class

In short, the results described in table 1 and table 2 refer a prominent feature the vast majority of students only attended 8-14/22 sessions, from one-third to two-thirds of the designed program in both communicative class and grammar classes.

3.6 Results of Entry and Exit Tests

As we have elaborated above, the attendance of all classes is disappointing, however the students' results of the exit tests in comparison to those of the entry test are promising. Specifically, the number of students scored less than 50 in all tests decreased whereas the number of those scored between 50-79 and 80-100 increased in all classes.

Scores	Entry test				Exit test			
	Pronunciation		Listening		Pronunciation		Listening	
	No. of students	%	No. of students	%	No. of students	%	No. of students	%
0-49	17	35,4	45	93,75	1	2,08	27	56,25
50-79	23	47,9	3	6,25	27	56,25	21	43,75
80-100	8	16,7	0	0	20	61,67	0	0
Total	48	100	48	100	48	100	48	100

Table 4: The results of entry and exit tests of the communicative classes

The above observations also hold true to the test results of grammar students, as summarised below:

Scores	Entry test		Exit test	
	No. of students	Percentage	No. of students	Percentage
0-49	28	51,9	6	11
50-79	27	49,1	41	74,5
80-100	0	0	8	14,5
Total	55	100	55	100

Table 5: The results of entry and exit tests of the grammar class

The above results prove that student generally make progress even when they do not complete the whole courses. This is encouraging to our teachers who have devoted our time and efforts to help students, and it also implies that even more improvement may be made if students attended their classes fully.

4. Discussion:

4.1. Why do Students Stop Attending Class?

At first, we asked students to register for the course on an online Google Sheet document, then on the first day of enrollment we let them sign up on a hard copy of the registration form. In 3 days, 120 students registered in the online form, the vast majority of them wanted to attend both grammar and pronunciation-communication classes. On the first session of pronunciation and communication skills, 170 students showed up, which far surpassed our expectation and class capacity. We soon realized that the intended 3 communication classes would be overcrowded and therefore became ineffective in improving students' performance. We also thought that not all students have strong enough motivation and determination to complete the course, and those who are attending the classes just for fun or because they are free should not be given our priority. We then decided to announce that even though the classes are free, students must first pay a "responsibility" fee of 600,000VND, which will be returned to them at the end of the course, to be sure they will be responsible for their attendance and learning. This was effective immediately. On the next communication session, only 57 out of 170 signed up students were present. The grammar class began a day later, and as students had been warned of the "responsibility" fee, only 82 students showed up.

The "responsibility" fee was intended to be returned to students in correlation to the percentage of their course completion, and the leftover was only for photocopying materials, gifts and rewards as all the teachers were willing to teach for free. However, in reality we did not collect this fee at all, as rumour had it that it was our intention to make money. Anyway, our intention of reserving our classes to only those who had the genuine desire to learn and improve their English was successful. Little did we know at the time that it also contributed to the high rate of students' dropping out later on.

57 students were divided into 3 pronunciation and communication classes, and 76 students studied grammar together in one class. However, the size started shrinking after the first 8 sessions. Three communication classes were merged into two, and finally only one, and during the last sessions there were times when only 2 students showed up. Things were nothing better for the grammar class. With the understanding that there must be some reasons for such a high rate of dropping out, we carried out a survey asking students why they originally registered for the course, why they dropped out and their suggestions for improving. 83 students responded to the survey and their answers are as follows:

Reasons	No of students
a. Because I learned nothing new	6
b. Because there was not as much English listening, speaking and communication as expected	11
c. Because of poor teaching quality	0
d. Because I could not do well in these classes	18
e. Because I am too busy with the in-curriculum training and extra-curriculum activities at the school.	41
f. Because of overlapped schedules with other classes.	39

g. Because many of my friends dropped out.	9
h. Because I do not feel like going to class and doing homework.	6
i. Because the learning materials are assigned for reference for in-curriculum English classes.	0
j. Because I can not keep up with my classmates.	14
i. Others: - Lack of a consistent timetable for students to follow - Personal family business - Tiredness during evening grammar sessions after long days of learning at school	3

Table 6: Why did you stop attending the courses? (multiple reasons are acceptable)

As we can see, most students chose objective reasons for their dropping out, and only few admitted subjective ones like their own motivation, determination or efforts. We found it surprising that no students confessed that teachers' poor teaching quality and the selection of material from their in-curriculum reference list have an influence on their decision to stop attending classes. We guess that no students chose to blame on the teachers for their decision just as a way to say thank you for the free classes, not because the teaching quality is really high. The second factor can be possibly explained by the fact that almost no students had ever actually tried to use their reference material for learning before.

4.2. Proposed Solutions to the Problems:

During and after the completion of the courses, we have reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of what we have done and suggested possible solutions to improve the quality of English teaching and learning at the school and actions that should be taken in the future. Some main points are summarised below:

4.2.1. Teachers' Suggestions:

- For future classes, students must be allocated in certain classes according to their competence levels, not randomly or according to their official in-curriculum classes or their own preferences.
- Teaching materials should be all different from obligatory or optional reference booklists so that students would have to work with more various learning resources.
- Classes should not be totally free as liabilities would ensure students have genuine intention in learning.
- English learning content such as quizzes, crosswords, songs should be uploaded to the school's website along with useful links for students to learn and practice English.
- The library should enrich its collection of English resources for teachers' and students' reference.
- Teachers should exploit more modern technologies during classtime and encourage students to record their speaking and presentations for correction and evaluation.
- There should be consultancy sessions for students to ask questions and learn effective learning methods, experience and techniques followed by skill practice ones.
- Teachers support the school's English club in their regular activities and use social networking sites like Facebook to promote and facilitate English learning at the school.
- More English classes at all levels and specific skills should be introduced regularly to suit students' needs.

4.2.2. Students' Suggestions (Collected from the Exit Survey):

- There should be more free English courses to help students improve their English.
- There should be different classes focusing on each language skill.
- The present efforts should be kept up, but for future classes students must pay some fee (for enrollment, office supply, etc.)
- Students should be able to use the laboratory more frequently.
- English competitions or English using extra-curriculum activities should be held for students to practice their English.
- Students should be assigned more exercise.
- Teachers should be stricter and impose penalties to help students have learning habits.
- More classes should be initiated for students of higher competence levels.
- Students must pay tuition to prevent them from being absent.
- Class schedules should be better arranged and should not overlap with those of any other subjects.
- Students' autonomy should be encouraged and more time should be allotted for correcting students' exercises and writing.
- Vocabulary should be learnt everyday and the focus should be on listening and speaking, teachers should not give too much exercises. Learning and relaxing at the same time would help enhance learning quality.

5. Conclusion

Our action research project has been completed with both successes and failures, and some findings are really surprising. We were disappointed that the dropping out rates were so high, but felt console that students made progress in general and that our efforts were not just a waste. We have been through the diagnosis stage, spotted the problems, taken actions to address them, encountered new obstacles, tried to sort them out, and now it seems to to be the right time to start the procedure all over again. Lessons have been learnt, experience has been gained, and there are still lots of things to be done to improve the quality of English teaching and learning at our school. And we are eager to keep on doing more action research on the topic.

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