Action Research Practices in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Addis Ababa University: Implications for Quality Language Teaching

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Abstract: The world trend today demands of higher education institutions to focus on learning, particularly higher order learning skills. This entails focusing on the actual classroom activities rather than the planning. This is because it is whatever actually happens in the classroom that really matters, that makes a difference to the level and the type of student learning. This in turn calls for teacher empowerment and commitment to base his/her classroom decisions and actions on self-initiated research. This study, therefore, aimed at investigating the level of EFL teachers' action research practices and its implications for enhancing quality language teaching at Addis Ababa University. Data were collected from purposively selected 25 language instructors at the University. Whereas the overall research approach was descriptive, qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in analyzing the data. The results have shown that even though the instructors had some knowledge and awareness about the importance of action research, they actually did not practice it due to several hindering factors, inter alia, lack of motivation; time constraint; paucity of research fund, facilities and materials; dealing with poorly prepared students; rushing for content coverage; large class size; and work load. It is, therefore, recommended that the University create enabling environment by empowering the forefront practitioners to take ownership of inquiring their practices so as to create and sustain quality language teaching in particular, and contribute enhanced efforts for excellence in Ethiopian classrooms in general.

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Background

Addis Ababa University (AAU) is the oldest higher learning institute in Ethiopia. Currently, it is a research and graduate university constituting nearly 90% of the country's capacity to provide post-graduate education.

AAU was initiated in 1950 with the founding of the University College of Addis Ababa, which was renamed Haile Selassie I University in 1962 and then Addis Ababa University since 1975. AAU and the other subsequent Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) strived with considerable early success to meet international quality and standards. But since the end of the second half of the 20th century, there has been a great concern from different stakeholders that HEIs in Ethiopia are declining in quality though they are increasing in quantity. This concern has come partly with the recent higher education expansion in some countries including Ethiopia and partly with the global attention to quality particularly since the nineties. Both events have enhanced heightened interest in quality for institutional existence and/or compliance with external demand for accountability, intrinsic need to increase efficiency and effectiveness; and a change of institutional mission to meet the demands of ever competitive world (Levin and McEwan, 2001; Brennan and Shah, 2000, in Firdissa, 2006a).

This calls for a) informed self-initiated inquiries; and b) a shift of institutional research focus from a concentration on technical to reflective practices, both of which entail empowerment and commitment of the forefront implementers at HEIs. 1998).

Today very few issues are demanding more attention worldwide than empowering teachers to be a) reflective thinkers, practitioners, and agents of their own professional renewals with specific and general pedagogical knowledge of the art and the craft of teaching; and b) explorers of their classrooms to improve, among others, functional language by creating conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope with learning activities through improved language of instruction, i.e. English.   This is

because the English language is widely regarded by students and parents alike as the language of opportunity, opening the door to higher education, a better job, upward social mobility, and efficiency and effectiveness in the globalized world. Consequently, there is a wide spread general desire to learn the language at all levels of schooling and through tailor-made short- and long term training programs.

In many countries, for instance, in India, English is the dominant medium of higher level administration, higher education, the learned professions, large scale industry and commerce, and a considerable literacy and artistic activity (Prabhu, 1987). In Ethiopia, there is an already established and long-term system of working in and through English. It has been the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education in the country since long and is currently being taught as a subject starting from grade one (TGE, 1994: 24). Currently, decrees and practices also show that it has become a medium of instruction starting from the second cycle primary school level in many regions of Ethiopia.

Even though it is more often said than done, high in the agenda of the Ethiopian government is the need for improvement of the English language ability of teachers for their personal as well as professional development. It is in conformity with this that the English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) was initiated in 2002 with an overall goal of improving the quality of teaching in the Ethiopian education system by raising the level of English of all teachers. It aimed to "bring about a significant improvement in the English language competences of all teachers in the Ethiopian Education system by raising their language proficiency in relation to their professional needs as teachers (ELIP, nd. P.1). As of 2006, ELIP became the English Language Improvement Department (ELID) in the Ministry of Education (MoE).

The intents seem to qualify teachers for enhancing quality and standard of language teaching by adapting the currently practiced Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach to the contexts of Ethiopian

classrooms. CLT is learner- and life-centered approach in which teachers are expected to setup situations that students are likely to encounter in real life. This in turn demands teachers to be involved in research and development as these relate to their own classrooms and give them ways to explore their own practices.

Research, thus, has increasingly become something that teachers are expected to include in their repertoire of skills (Richards and David, 1990). Consequently, there is a need to conceptualize teachers as researchers, which has its root in action research. Action research is a) purposive, deliberate, solution-oriented investigation that is group or personally owned and conducted with the role of understanding and changing practices; and b) it is envisaged to give the English language teachers new opportunities to reflect on and assess their teaching, particularly exploring the effectiveness of CLT approaches and making adaptations to their classroom contexts.

This paper deals with the level of EFL teachers' action research knowledge, practice and environment for quality and standard in EFL classes at AAU. Implicitly, there is an intention to explore the potential of action research in implementing CLT by adapting it to EFL classrooms in particular and to other disciplines in general.

Statement of the Problem

The current world trend demands building bridges between teaching and research, calling for the need to empower teachers to extend their roles beyond mere deliverance of knowledge by being vigilant to practice, in practice and changing practice. The initiative for change needs to be driven directly from the challenges that the teachers face in their respective classrooms and their institutes. The consequences, therefore, are of immediate relevance to them in practical as well as academic terms.

Particularly in implementing innovations, teachers lie at the heart of the process. The success of innovations in teaching, no matter how planned

they are will be only inadvertent unless the teachers who are actually responsible take the driver's seat for that matter. It is really innocence to expect great success from an uninformed, uncommitted and poorly motivated teaching body.

Practically today when the quality of learners has gone down in our country, classrooms have become busy places and teachers have become busy people. The teachers, thus, might be threatened by the extra amount of time required of them to conduct research in addition to supporting the poorly prepared students and maintaining full responsibility as classroom teachers. They might also fear the idea of action research, of starting with their own classroom 'problems' by feeling that the result could expose their professional weaknesses. In some circumstances this could even tempt them to feel that their own continued employment could be put in jeopardy (Allwright et al, 1994).

Research in the field of language teacher education also shows that there has been an unusual relationship between research and practice; teaching and research staffs are physically and visually separated. As a result, researchers nitpick that teachers ignore research findings; teachers, in turn, mutter that university-based researchers do not acknowledge the realities of classroom teaching. Consequently, there are some tensions and abnormalities between research institutes and faculties. These are challenges- compounded with the destabilizing trends of the rapidly and radically changing methods of teaching and learning the English language.

 As a Tutor of the Higher Diploma Program (HDP) at AAU, I used to observe classrooms of different disciplines and instructors of different background. From such observations, I have come to learn that teachers seem facing challenges to create authentic, life-based activities and to reflect on their practices in classrooms. Students were also observed facing problems to effectively use the English language to communicate in socially and culturally appropriate ways and to achieve academically in all content areas.

This could, among others, be due to limited teachers' reflections (if at all) upon their practices and upon the challenges in their respective classrooms. Precisely, it was due to the teachers' lack of preparation to undertake action research other than what might be required for their graduate programs. What is required for graduate program may have little applicability to their activities and interests at their actual work places. In line with this, Richards and Nunan (1990) indicate that one of the problems with teachers as researchers is that they often lack appropriate training in collecting and interpretation of classroom data. EFL teachers' knowledge of action research and the level of their empowerment to investigate their practices for betterment, therefore, are the issues of concern in this study.

Objectives of the Study

The main concern of this study was to investigate EFL teachers' action research knowledge, practice, and environmental implications for either or for both of them. This concern has come out of my concern for empowering the frontline implementers to take ownership of improving learning rather than tinkering here and there, and 'trying to teach students how to swim in a dry land' (methodological anomaly).

The specific objectives of this study, therefore, are:

1. to investigate how widespread the knowledge of action research is among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at AAU;
2. to explore the level of EFL teachers' involvement in doing action research, and the rationale for the observed level;
3. to investigate whether EFL teachers have been prepared (professionally, morally and materially) to undertake action research; and
4. to find out the motivating and /or de-motivating environments for EFL teachers to be engaged in researching their own settings and/or practices.

In the attempt to achieve the above objectives, the study tries to find answers to the following questions.

1. Do teachers of EFL at AAU have some knowledge of action research?
2. To what extent do the teachers actually practice action research? How often? Why?
3. What motivating and/or de-motivating environments are there for EFL teachers to be engaged in researching their own settings and /or practices at AAU?

Significance of the Study

This study is expected to enhance EFL teachers' understanding of the liberating power of action research from routines. They may, therefore, engage in action research to bring changes to their practices, and develop skills that relate to their needs and maintain quality and standard. It is, therefore, believed to clear the doubt (among some people) about the teaching-research nexus by investigating the actual practices in EFL classrooms at AAU.

More specifically, the study is significant to:

1. enhance EFL teachers' awareness of the role of action research for understanding and improving the quality and standard of their practices;
2. inspire EFL teachers to be in charge of their own agendas emanating from their own classrooms rather than to be unduly influenced by the agendas of others;
3. contribute to EFL teachers' skills to design and implement classroom-based inquiries to bring betterment to their practices; and
4. give research-based answers to some of the most common questions asked by different level stakeholders about the feasibility and the potential contributions of action research to quality language teaching.

Methods of the Study

Descriptive approach was employed in the course of the research work. This is because the purpose of the study was to investigate EFL teachers' action research knowledge, practice and their environment from qualitative and quantitative data. Even though attempts were made to explore the rationales for the state of the art as manifested from the levels of EFL teachers' actual practice of action research, the study did not that much delve into digging the reasons for the observed levels of knowledge and practices of action research, and the environmental backdrops. Systematic review of relevant literature, practices and challenges pertaining to the issue under discussion have also been made.

Data Sources, Selection Procedures, and data collection tool used

Using purposive and expert choice sampling techniques, 30 teaching staff members from the Institute of Language Studies at the Addis Ababa University, who were attending Higher Diploma Program in the year 2005 had been selected as data sources for this study.

A questionnaire with both open and closed ended questions was given to all of them by hand delivery of which 25 teachers properly filled and returned. The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions of which 16 were closed and 5 were open-ended. The rationale for using questionnaire in this study was due to its a) expediency to dispatch it to all the 30 EFL teachers and let them fill simultaneously; and b) convenience for confidentiality since the subjects were advised not to write their names on any page of the questionnaire.

Methods of Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data were employed. The data collected by the closed-ended questions including the preliminary data were entered in to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program and quantitatively analyzed. Accordingly, analyses of simple

frequency and percentage supplemented with qualitative descriptions were made.   The data generated by open-ended questions were qualitatively analyzed and interpreted.

Conceptions, Characteristics and Processes of Action Research

There are different conceptions of action research. It is, therefore, known by many names, including participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, action learning, and reflection on practice. Exploratory teaching, teacher self-evaluation, teacher research, and self-understanding, are also manes that refer to Action Research. Analysis of practice, practitioner-based research, and 'reflective teaching movement', also refer to the same concept. A model of reflection on practice, action science, dialogic research, co-operative inquiry, and appreciative inquiry are yet other categories of the same notion. Experiential learning, 'self-reflective', 'critical' activity, contextual research, and many sorts of collaborative projects, are further variations of the theme 'action Research'.

All the terms implicitly or explicitly qualify action research as systematic inquiry into teacher practices that is conducted by an individual, a team of teachers and/or an institution. Action research, therefore, can be defined as systematic and active reflection on practice with a view to improve practice. It, however, should be distinguished from the everyday actions of teachers. For Kemmis and McTaggart (1992) action research is distinguished from the everyday actions of teachers in terms of the following.

- It is not the usual thinking teachers do when they think about their teaching. Action research is more systematic and collaborative in collecting evidence on which to base rigorous group as well as individual reflection.
- It is not simply problem-solving. Action research involves problem-posing. It does not just start from a view of 'problems' as 'pathologies'. It is motivated by a quest to improve and understand

the world by changing it and learning how to improve it from the effects of the changes made.

- It is not research done on other people. Action research is research by particular people on their own work, to help them understand and improve what they do, including how they work with and for others.

Recent years have seen the growth in popularity of "action research" for English language teachers (McDonough & Steven, 1997). This has come with the due recognition of the worth of focusing on the classroom, then on the doing rather than the planning just because it is surely whatever actually happens in the classroom that really matters, that makes a difference to learning and leads to sustain quality and standard (Allwright and Bailey, 1991).

Even though there is no correct order to be stuck with, some cyclical steps are evident in any action research process. A mingled understanding of the processes gives us the following steps.

1. Diagnosis or initial reflection;
2. Identification of an idea/issue/ interest or focus/problem;
3. General plan of a change/ imagining a way forward;
4. Seeking knowledge;
5. Planning an action;
6. Implementing the plan /intervention;
7. Observation of the intervention (evaluating the results of the intervention);
8. Reflection on the observations;
9. Revising/amending the plan, if necessary; and
10. Implementing the revised plan, and soon.

In its simplest form, Coghlan and Brannick (2001, in Firdissa, 2006a) put the spiral research cycles starting with a process of identifying a problem area - a pre-step often based on the previous experience in the field of the

researcher in which case the actual cyclical framework comprises Diagnosis (data gathering, analysis and representation), Action Planning, Action Taking, and Action Evaluation. Susman (1983, in O'Brien, 2001) presents a more detailed action research model comprising five phases to be passed within each action research cycle. Initially, a problem is identified and data is collected for a more detailed diagnosis. This is followed by a collective postulation of several possible solutions, from which a single plan of action emerges and is implemented. Data on the results of the intervention are collected and analyzed, and the findings are interpreted in light of how successful the action has been. At this point, the problem is re-assessed and the process begins another cycle.
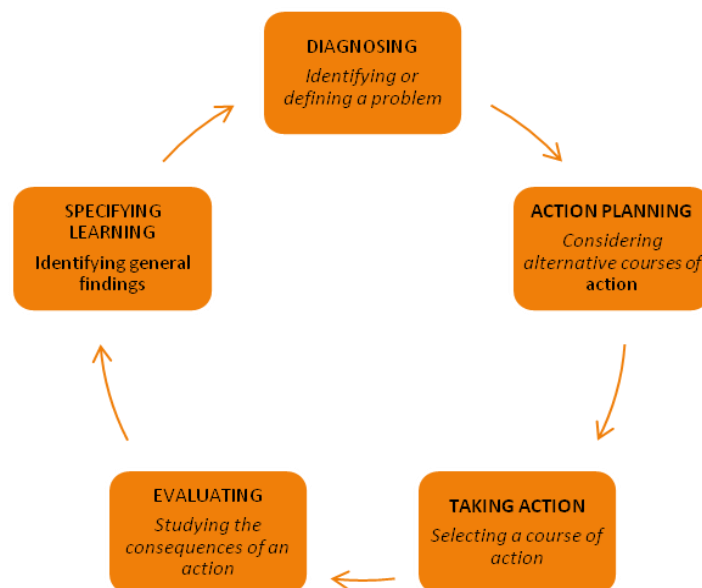

*Figure 1: Detailed Action Research Model (*O'Brien, 2001, *from Susman, 1983).*

The process continues until the problem is resolved. With its simplest form, the process is similar with PDCA Quality Circle as illustrated in Figure 2 below.
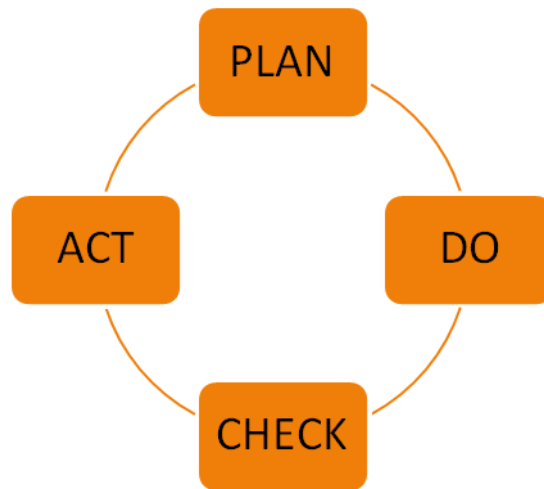

Figure 2: The Quality Cycle (Webel, 2005)

The PDCA Quality Circle denotes a continuous improvement by repeating the basic cycle of: Plan (get the data, Analyze the problem, plan solution); Do it; Check (measure the change); Act (modify as needed) (Breaker Associates, Inc., 2001, in Firdissa, 2006a).

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Of the 30 copies of the questionnaire dispatched to the subjects, only 25 were properly filled and returned. Of the rest, one was returned but it was disregard, for it was not properly filled in. The other 4 were not returned. All the questions of the 25 copies of the properly filled and returned questionnaire (including the personal data of the respondents) have been analyzed and interpreted in this section.

Of the 25 respondents, there was only 1 female respondent. The majority (96% of the total respondents) were males. This is due to the limited number of female teachers in general and those who attended HDP, at the time from the Institute of Language Studies.

Table 1: The Respondents' Service Years at HEIs

Years	Frequency	Percent
1-5	12	48
6-10	4	16
11-15	5	20
16-20	1	4
Above 20	3	12
Total	**25**	**100**

Table 1 shows that 48%, 20 %, and 16 % of the respondents had teaching experiences in years from 1-5, 11-15, and 6-10 respectively at Higher Education Institutions. This indicates that the majority had relatively short experiences in teaching at HEIs. This might be an indicator that the respondents might not have established inquiry culture which may come through some reasonable years of services. This is because, in some instances, some teachers need to pass through induction and acculturation whereas others may adapt themselves within a short period of time. It might not be easily feasible to conduct action research within the observed service yeas, particularly for those who need time to adapt themselves to institutional cultures and values.

Table 2: The Respondents' Academic Rank

Title	Frequency	Percent
Lecturer	13	52
Assistant Professor	7	28
Associate professor	4	16
Missing data	1	4
Total	**5**	**100**

As can be depicted from Table 2, the majority of the respondents, 13 (52 %) were lecturers followed by 7 (28 %) assistant professors and only 4 (16 %) associate professors. No one held a rank of full professorship from the respondents. This clearly shows that the respondents had low academic rank. This may have an implication for the instructors' level of action research knowledge and actual practices.

Table 3: Presentation of the Descriptive Data

Questions	Yes		No	
	No	%	No	%
1. Do you have some knowledge about action research?	20	80	5	25
2. Do you actually practice action research?	11	44	14	56
3. Do you think that teachers (in general) lack sufficient skills for doing action research?	11	44	13	52
4. Do teachers take commitment to improve their teaching?	15	60	9	36
5. Have teachers been prepared to undertake action research?	11	44	14	56
6. Are there constraints to make your classroom action research-led?	19	76	5	20
7. Do teachers often research their own settings, or the settings they work in so as to sustain the quality and standard of TEFL?	11	44	14	56
8. Do you believe that action research can make a difference in TEFL?	20	80	3	12
9. Do researchers in the research institutes of the HEIs and teachers have the same understanding about research and teaching link?	6	24	18	72
10. Do teachers often initiate classroom research, which seeks to increase their understanding of classroom teaching and learning to bring about improvements in language classroom practices?	5	20	20	80
11. Do teachers get support (policy, material and others) to get involved in action research?	6	24	18	72
12. Do you want or need more training on how to do action research?	20	80	5	20
13. Are there practical problems to do action research in your field?	19	76	6	24
14. Do you think that teachers lack motivation for doing action research?	20	80	5	20
15. Is there time constraint to do action research?	20	80	4	16

When seen along the rows in Table 3, there are missing cases-- one each for questions number 3, 4, 6, 9, 11 and 15; and 2 cases for question number 8. A further look at the Table shows that 80% of the respondents: a)

indicated that they had knowledge about action research; and b) reflected their beliefs about the fact that action research can make a difference in EFL classrooms. Such knowledge and beliefs, however, should be seen in line with social desirability for the fact that what we believe and what we actually do may or may not align as is the case in value. This means, there is a need to look for the alignments between what teachers would like to do and what they actually do in actual practices.

On the other hand, however, an equal number of the respondents (80%) indicated that:

A. they need more training on how to conduct action research;
B. teachers lack motivation for doing action research;
C. there is time constraint to do action research; and
D. teachers often do not initiate classroom research, which seeks to increase their understanding of classroom teaching and learning and to bring about improvements in language classroom practices.

In the same vein, 72% of the total respondents indicated that: a) researchers in the research institutes of the HEIs and teachers do not have the same understanding about research and teaching link; b) teachers did not get support (policy, material and others) to get involved   in action research.

It can be concluded, therefore, that even though the teachers had understandings of action research and its contribution to improve their practices and sustain quality and standard in TEFL classrooms, they did not consistently do it due to the constraints cited above.

Moreover, requested to indicate their ratings of the frequency of their reflection on their practices, collecting information, making decisions, and developing action plans; 68 %, 20%, and 12% of the total respondents indicated that they did that actually 'sometimes', 'always', and 'not at all' respectively (see Table 4 below).

Table 4: The Frequency of Teachers' Reflection on their Practices

Alternatives	Frequency	%
Always	5	20
Sometimes	17	68
Not at all	3	12
Total	25	100

Evidently, whereas the majority of the respondents indicated that they engaged in action research practices actually 'sometimes', the figure increases to 88% when we consider the responses given to 'always'.

Moreover, when asked to list down whatever challenges they thought might have hindered conducting action research in Ethiopian universities in general and in AAU in particular, the majority of the respondents enumerated a number of challenges as follows:

1) time constraint due to: a) teaching load, b) committee and other routine works, c) rush for content coverage;
2) lack of financial or material support to conduct research;
3) unavailability of rewarding/motivating system for research quality and quantity outputs;
4) shortage of research facilities;
5) large class size;
6) presence of admitting poorly prepared and below standard students;
7) lack of action research skills and awareness (by some teachers);
8) seeking extra work outside the university; and
9) low enabling situations like collaborative thinking and collegiality at the university.

In an open-ended item in the questionnaire, all the subjects were asked to give any comment or opinion they had in relation to action research in EFL classrooms. Only 12 (48% of them) enumerated the following.

- Even though many of the teaching staff members know the importance of action research and have knowledge to conduct it, they work outside the University to supplement their income;
- Since many teachers do not have the culture of reflecting on their profession, let alone on general areas, ways of promoting such culture should be worked out by concerned bodies;
- Action research should be enforced to improve practices and standard at HEIs; and
- To conduct action research, there should be enabling environment and support from the university leadership.

Summary and Conclusion

In this study, the level of EFL teachers' action research knowledge and practice, and their environment have been investigated using descriptive research approach. Data for the study were generated from 25 EFL teachers, and analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. Related literature in the area has also been reviewed in the background and separately as a theoretical backstage for the overall study. It has been learnt that today teachers are expected to be in the driver's seat for creating improved learning environments suited to their classroom contexts. They need to understand their practice to transform it further so that they can understand it more. This calls for relating their teaching to research through action research approach. Teachers' commitment to improve practices and sustain quality and standard is the working conception of action research. Action research is intended to influence either or both of these things. This is because being effective classroom practitioner demands being alive to practice, alive in practices and alive on practices- sorting what matters, moment by moment, from what does not particularly in language teaching.

Analysis of the data has shown that EFL teachers have some knowledge about action research Also they have acknowledged its importance in making a difference in EFL classroom. Consequently, the respondents

reflected the need to improve their practices provided that minimum enabling environments are put in place. Related to the decree for enabling environments, the respondents enumerated a number of challenges to conduct action research, inter alia, time constraint, lack of financial or material support to conduct research, unavailability of rewarding/motivating system, etc.

This indicates that instructors of EFL at AAU were not doing action research as much as was desirable. This implies that their participations in authentic assessment of performances, in reflecting on their practices, in collecting information, in making informed decisions, and in developing action plans to sustainably improve EFL teaching quality and standard was negligible.

Failure to do this leads to pitfalls that have direct repercussions on the quality of teaching-learning not only in the teaching-learning of the English language but also in other subjects as English is the medium of instruction almost at all levels of schooling in our country. In principle, improving one's own practice is neither as sophisticated as 'rocket science' nor as provable as 'Platonic ideals'. It may of course demand inquisitive qualities like 'Socratic debates' so as to generate evidence for learning, understanding, and changing the practices; or 'Aristotelian diplomacy' to create collegial environment and collaboratively work for common value ends in relation to the practices.

Recommendations

It has been learnt from the findings and discussions made so far that the majority of the EFL teachers (at least those who participated in the study) had knowledge of and awareness about the role-of action research to improve practice. They, however, did not consistently practice it due to a number of constraints. It is, therefore, recommended that:

- The Addis Ababa University create an enabling environment for action research through motivating teachers, allotting time for research work by

staffs, allocating research fund and facilities, and assertively selecting students that fit the required quality and standard;

- Action research should be seen both by the University leadership and the staff as a requirement (not as an option) for improving quality and standard of the main functions of the University;

- The teachers should develop a belief that their commitment influences the leadership and whatever they do in classroom makes a considerable difference to student learning. Not all that happens to them and their classrooms are outside their control.   They, therefore, should take professional commitment and the 'driver's seat' to open discussions so that the University leadership develops awareness and may put action research agendas within its priority areas, and enforce its practices to sustain quality and standard.

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