

CHAPTER THREE

THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

In this chapter, I will describe the subjects, state the five features of the action plan and elaborate on the sources from which data for analysis were collected as well as how these data will be analysed.

The Subjects

The sample for this Action Research comprised the Form 4 Science A students in a National Type Chinese Secondary School I was teaching. The class had 32 seventeen-year-old students, 19 of whom were boys and 13 girls. These students had just entered the Form 4 class after completing their PMR exam the previous year. They are all Chinese and had attended National Type Chinese Primary Schools. They speak mainly Mandarin and Cantonese. English is seldom used in their everyday conversations with each other or at home. When interviewed they however said that they see English as an important language to master if they want to succeed in life. They came from varied backgrounds but the one thing they had in common was that they were all bright and highly motivated students who aspire to be professionals someday. I can very confidently say this as most of these students were the cream of the form. Criteria and selection for entry into Form 4 Science A is based on academic excellence.

The main reason why I had chosen this class of students was because I was teaching the class. That made it easy for me to carry out my action research. I also knew the students better since I was their Form teacher. Most importantly they were the right candidates for the kind of tasks I had in mind to try out. They were adolescents of intermediate proficiency level in their command of the English Language, literate and well educated, having had nine or ten years of education (those who skipped the Remove class due to good UPSR results would have undergone nine years of formal education while those who did not would have had ten years). According to Celce-Murcia's (1991) grid of the Variables that Determine the Importance of Grammar (see Chapter 2, p.20) students with such characteristics need to learn grammar and they should be able to cope and benefit from tasks which require them to analyse, discuss and think through issues relating to language form.

In this piece of Action Research, the students are code named e.g. 3a(student 'a' from Group 3), 6d(Student 'd' from Group 6), 6c(Student 'c' from Group 6), etc.

Design and Rationale of Action Plan

Lessons and tasks focusing on the use of the simple be-passive were carried out over a period of two and a half weeks or approximately 420 minutes during which time ten lessons would be carried out.

The design of the lessons and handouts in this study rested on the

contention that given the proficiency level, educational background and age of my students, they would be capable of discovering the form, usage and rules governing the simple be-passive for themselves if they were given sufficient and focused input to process (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

The following are the five features of the action plan:

a. Prioritising and Delimiting Features of the Be-Passive to be Revealed

Cazden (1993) said that students often find grammar lessons fed to them indigestible for use. To make it more digestible, I first prioritised and delimited the features I wanted to bring to their awareness.

1. I have delimited and prioritised the features of the be-passive construction to be taught according to how important each feature is within the context of describing a process. Following that, I decided that students will only need to know:
 - i. agreement of the auxiliary "be" with the recipient of action which is placed before it
 - ii. that the past participle verb form is used after the auxiliary "be"
 - iii. that they have to be consistent in the tense of the be-passive sentences within a description of a process.
2. In terms of its usage, the students should also know that the passive construction is preferred
 - i. when the attention is being drawn to the "receiver" rather than the

doer,

- ii. in more formal writing such as a description of a process when the writer wants to sound objective and
- iii. when the same grammatical subject is retained in successive clauses.

These were the factors that guided me in the choice of passages I used in the handouts and in the kind of questions I posed to the students for group discussion

b. Sequencing of Lessons

Secondly, I also segmented these features, breaking them up into little processable components to enable them to focus better. In sequencing the lessons, I used the macro-micro-macro approach. In other words, I sequenced the lesson in such a way that the students first got an overview of the form and usage of the simple be-passive. Then, I contrived for them to focus on one aspect of the simple be-passive at a time. By segmenting and revealing small units of the be-passive a little at a time, students were encouraged to process it more efficiently for themselves.

Finally, I got them to consolidate the different aspects of the simple be-passive to once again return to an overview of the whole picture.

However, their understanding of the grammar feature must be hinged on meaning-making; they should be made aware that grammar and meaning-making are inter-connected. This is a point which was made at the beginning (Lesson 3) and weaved into the class discussion throughout the two and a half weeks.

By slowly revealing the features of the simple be-passive the students

would hopefully be enabled to build their own hypotheses with regard to this grammar feature.

c. Feedback From Students

At the end of each handout, students were asked to fill in a "What I Have Learnt" section, to say very simply what they think they had learnt and put down any new insights they had received from the lesson. This would be very useful both for me as a researcher and to the students. Their response would be data which will give me insights into how the students were processing the be-passive and if they were interpreting the tasks correctly. Such feedback would help me modify and improve upon the handouts and tasks. This is an important feature of action research, that there is constant objective reflection and enquiry on the part of the researcher (Crookes, 1993).

By getting them to reflect upon and write down what they think they know about the be-passive from the lesson, the students were also encouraged to make explicit their hypotheses of the be-passive. After all, the whole point of the need to make grammar rules explicit to the students is to promote cognitive insight into a given rule and the eventual internalisation of the rule. (Dirven, 1990)

d. Teacher's Feedback

It would defeat the whole purpose of this action research, which sought to find out if tasks designed to help students make their own hypotheses of how a grammatical feature works, if the teacher in turn corrected every error she found on the students' output during the study. As a result, I had decided from the very

onset of the study, to refrain from correcting the students' output, but instead to give them the chance to do so themselves. In fact, by examining the kind of errors they made and whether they were able to correct their own errors, light would be thrown upon when they became conscious of that particular grammatical feature. These student-generated errors, could also be used as input for the students to study and discuss. This element too is integrated into the whole scheme of this action research.

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e. Individual and Group Work

Group work is employed in all the handouts designed. The students will have to compare their personal answers or hypotheses with the others in their group and arrive at a common answer. This is to encourage the students to interact with one another, to analyse the passage together and to give them the opportunity to learn from each other.

However, before they engage in group work, they were always given time to work on the tasks by themselves first. It has been found that students who were allowed planning opportunities before engaging in group work operate at a linguistically higher level, both quantitatively and qualitatively (Long, 1990 cites Crookes, 1989).

For convenience purposes, the students were asked to form groups of five to six students with those seated closest to them.

How these lessons were carried out will be elaborated upon in the next section.

Description of Lessons Carried Out

Just before the Action Research was carried out, the students were learning "Fixing Things", a sub-topic under the main topic of Processes and Procedures. The students were given several activities and exercises, over a period of one week, to aid them towards understanding instructions on how to fix things such as a leaking tap(1.4, 2.4 of the syllabus). The use of the imperatives was highlighted. Finally, the students were asked to write instructions on how to fix a leaking tap, based on sequenced pictures and brief notes. They were able to do so very well.

Usually, after the topic "Fixing Things", I would move on to yet another topic under Processes and Procedures; "Recycling" where the students would have to describe a process. These two are very different, in that while one's function is to instruct, the other's is to describe. The former uses the imperatives while the latter usually employs the use of the be-passive.

This focus on the be-passive in this action research is only part of the bigger picture of learning how to describe a recycling process.

Lessons Carried Out During The Action Research

Below is a chart on the organisation of the lessons, its objectives and the handouts used.

Chart 1

Chart showing the Organisation of Lessons,
Their Objectives and the Handouts Used

Lesson	Objectives	Handouts
Lesson 1 (1 period)	To ascertain students' grasp of be-passive (Attempt 1a)	Previous Unit's essay
Lesson 2 (1 period)	To comprehend a passage on how aluminium cans are recycled (Reading Comprehension)	Handout 1
Lesson 3 (2 periods)	To Sensitise Students to Inter-related nature of Form & Meaning	Handout 2
Lesson 4 (1 period)	To Focus on Overall Structure and Usage of Be-Passive	Handout 1
Lesson 5 (1 period)	To Focus on Subject-Auxiliary Agreement	Handout 3 #Attempt 1a
Lesson 6 (1 period)	To Focus on Past Participle Verb	Handout 4
Lesson 7 (1 period)	To Focus on Consistency of Tenses	Handout 5
Lesson 8 (1 period)	To Consolidate Lessons Learnt	Handout 6 #Attempt 1b
Lesson 9 (1 period)	To discuss Handout 6	Handout 6
Lesson 10 (1 period)	To Test Students' Performance in Writing a Description of a Process Using the Be-Passive	Handout 7

#: Attempt 1a which students wrote in Lesson 4 was returned to them to modify in Lesson 5. Attempt 1b was returned to them for the same purpose in Lesson 8.

Ten lessons, comprising eight single period lessons of 35 minutes each and two double-period lessons of 70 minutes each were carried out over two and a half weeks to help a class of Form four students master the simple be-passive.

Lesson One:

1 period : 35 minutes

I began by asking the students if there is any difference between "instructing" and "describing" a process. They unanimously agreed that there were. Without mentioning the term "passive voice", I asked the students to change the instructions on how to fix a leaking tap they had written in the previous lesson into a description.

Some students asked me to give an example of how a description of a process may look like and I obliged by changing the first instruction on how to fix a leaking tap into the present be-passive. The students immediately knew what I meant and some of them asked if I meant for them to change the sentences into the "passive". I answered in the affirmative. The students were clearly acquainted with this structure. There was a similar topic which introduced them to the simple be-passive in the Form 3 English Language syllabus. I was very careful however not to highlight the simple be-passive's grammatical structure to them.

This first piece of written work, henceforth known as Attempt 1a, a description of how a leaking tap is fixed, gave me my first view into the students' grasp of the simple be-passive and the problems they encountered in constructing such sentences.

Lesson Two

1 period: 35 minutes

The students are given Handout 1 which is a descriptive passage of how aluminium cans are recycled. The focus was on the comprehension of the text *per se*; it was important that I first focused on content before I focused on its form as I did not want the content to interfere with the form later in the study. Furthermore, in any teaching situation, it is the content that dictates the need for any focus on form and not the other way round.

This lesson was thus more a reading comprehension lesson, with the students silently reading the text followed by a teacher-guided discussion on how aluminium cans are recycled, and explanation of the difficult words or phrases as they arose.

Lesson Three

1 period: 35 minutes

In this lesson I wanted to sensitise the students to the fact that grammar and meaning are inseparable in the English Language before I launched into a series of activities to help students have a more precise awareness of the rules of use of the be-passive.

Handout 2 was distributed to the students. In this handout there are five sets of sentences, each sentence with a different grammar feature (simple present, simple past, present continuous, imperative, be-passive, perfect tense). Students read and worked out what each sentence meant in relation to the others first before they got into their groups to compare their answers with the others.

Using this handout, I asked the students

- a. why they thought the "doer" was dropped from some of the sentences
- b. to compare the placement of "doer" and "recipient of action" in these sentences and suggest reasons why some were located in front and some at the back.

They were then to rearrange the sentences and place those they felt have the same structure together in sets.

Lesson Four

2 periods: 70 minutes

Handout One was returned to the students. I asked the students to read the passage once again and attempt to answer the following questions:

- a. Which sentence pattern is mainly used in this passage?
- b. How would you describe this structure to a friend?
- c. Are there any rules governing this structure that would be useful for your friend to know?
- d. Is the doer present in these sentences? Why?
- e. Is the recipient of action present in these sentences? Why?
- f. From the passage, can you guess when such a structure is used?

After 5 minutes of pondering over the questions, the students were directed to get into their own groups and discuss the questions. They were to come to a common set of answers to be presented to the class.

My objective in this lesson was to get them to analyse the mostly simple be-passive sentences in the passage to get a feel and overview of it. Their answers

to the questions were of secondary importance.

The simple be-passive structure is not "simple". At sentence level, students would have to understand subject-auxiliary agreement and the past participle form of verbs at the very least. At inter-sentential level, students would have to understand that one should be consistent in one's tenses unless there are good reasons to do otherwise. These details would be revealed point by point in later handouts.

Lesson Five

1 period: 35 minutes

At the beginning of this lesson, I returned to the students their Attempt 1a (description of how a leaking tap is fixed) and asked if they would like to make any changes to it. They were strictly instructed to not make the corrections on Attempt 1a but to rewrite the description on a given sheet of A4 paper, underlining the places where corrections had been made and if possible to make a note explaining why they made the changes. This correction of Attempt 1a is termed Attempt 1b. Those who felt that they did not have any corrections to make were asked to write "No Correction" on the paper.

This was to enable me to compare their Attempt 1a and 1b, to chart their progress in their grasp of the simple be-passive structure.

Once Attempt 1a and 1b were collected, I distributed Handout 3 to the students. It was an exact replica of Handout One with one exception. Here, some of the auxiliary "be" had been replaced with erroneous ones.

Students were asked to examine the handout and asked if they were

"happy" with the handout and if they were not, they could make changes to the description. They were directed to work on the handout individually first before getting into groups to discuss and compare their answers.

The passive construction is not a straight forward grammatical feature, there are several details that must be mastered. Here, the students would have to manipulate with the auxiliary "be" form while all other variables were held constant. At this point, I elicited responses from the students to review the forms of the verb 'be' and match the correct form with its pronoun/s; and got them to draw up the paradigm "I am", "You are", "He/she/it is" etc..

At the end of the lesson they were also to state briefly what they had learnt about the simple be-passive structure at the bottom of the worksheet.

Lesson Six

1 period: 35 minutes

Handout 3 was distributed. The aim of this task was to enable the students to be aware that the main verb after the auxiliary "be" must be a past participle. In Handout 3, the same description of the process of recycling aluminium cans was used.

This time, the focus was on the past participle of the main verb. The other variables were held constant and erroneous forms of the main verbs were inserted in place of the past participle. Once more, the students were asked to analyse the text for discrepancies and correct them. The aim of this task was to reinforce the awareness that in the passive construction one uses the past participle form of verb after the auxiliary "be".

As usual, the students were asked to detect and correct anything that was contrary to their feel towards the simple be-passive construction individually first before getting into their groups to discuss and compare their answers. They were also asked to make one sentence stating what they had learnt about the simple be-passive structure at the bottom of Handout 4.

Lesson Seven

1 period: 35 minutes

In Lesson 5, the focus on the be-passive had gone beyond the sentence level. Handout 5 was given out. Here, the same description of the process of recycling aluminium cans was used. However the tenses of some of the auxiliary "be", were changed. So while the auxiliary "be" agreed with the recipient of action within the sentence, it was inconsistent with the other sentences. Once again, it was individual work followed by group discussion.

Students were asked to analyse the description and asked if they needed to improve it.

Once they were aware of the inconsistency of tense used and were able to correct them, they were asked why they chose to change the tenses. They were also requested to write what they had learnt about the simple be-passive at the bottom of the handout.

Lesson Eight

2 periods: 70 minutes

The aim of this lesson was to consolidate the learning of the be-passive construction and check if students were able to monitor the use of this form.

I began by asking the students, working in their groups, to pull together all their observations of the be-passive to come up with a comprehensive description of the structure.

These were put on the board for class discussion. Then the students were asked to compile a list of descriptions of the simple be-passive; they could draw from any components of the other groups' descriptions for themselves.

The students Attempt 1a and Attempt 1b were returned to the students. They were asked if they would like to modify the description they had earlier written. This third modified piece, Attempt 1c, was collected for analysis and comparison with their other two earlier pieces. This recursive exercise was carried out to help me chart the students' progress in their understanding of the simple be-passive.

Then the students were given Handout 6. In this handout, aspects learnt from lesson one to three were incorporated into a description of how aluminium cans are recycled. Errors in structure usage (imperative instead of passive), agreement of auxiliary "be" with the subject, form of verb after the auxiliary, missing auxiliary and inconsistent tenses were worked into this text. Students were asked to correct the errors individually before handing in the handout to me.

The aim of this handout at this point was to give me feedback as to how well the students were able to spot errors in the simple be-passive construction.

This would enable me to gain insight into their grasp of the structure at that point in time. The number of errors they missed in their individual work was tabulated in the students' progress chart. In the chart, this exercise was simply termed "Handout 6".

Lesson Nine

1 period: 35 minutes

The students' Handout Six was returned to them and they were asked to get into their groups to compare their answers and discuss them. This was to enable them to consolidate all that they had learnt about the be-passive thus far.

Lesson Ten

1 period: 35 minutes

In this final lesson of the Action Research, the students were given Handout 7 which consists of 8 sequenced pictures (with short notes supplied at the bottom of each picture) illustrating how bottles are recycled.

The students were directed to write a piece of description of the process without discussing with their friends. They were to treat it as a "test". This piece of writing which I termed "Attempt 2" was required of the students to check if they were able to use their knowledge of the simple be-passive to write a description of a process.

Collection and Analysis of Data

There were basically 4 sources of data from which findings were derived from in this action research:

- a. the students' written work; Attempt 1a, 1b, 1c, Handout 6 and Final Essay.
- b. audiotaped class and group discussions. The class discussion and all group discussions (except the group discussions in Lesson 9 were audiotaped and transcribed).
- c. the students' feedback at the bottom of each handout they had attempted.
- d. interviews.

a. Students' Written Work

There were five pieces of written work which the students' produced. Those termed "Attempt" were so named because they were produced by the students while those called "Handout" were produced by me.

1. Attempt 1a : Based on a set of instructions "How to Fix a Leaking Tap" which the students had written for the previous unit, "Fixing Things", the students were asked to transform it into a description during Lesson One. This first attempt the students made to describe the process in the simple be-passive was termed Attempt 1a.

2. Attempt 1b : This refers to the modified version of Attempt 1a which the students did during Lesson 6.
3. Attempt 1c : This refers to the students third attempt at modifying Attempt 1a/1b during Lesson 8.
4. Handout 6 : Students were required to identify and correct errors dealing with the different facets of the simple be-passive such as errors in the agreement of auxiliary "be", with subject, missing auxiliary, form of main verb, inconsistent tenses and inappropriate language form in this handout.
5. Attempt 2 : The students were required to write a description of how bottles are recycled based on sequenced pictures and short notes.

Each student's written product: Attempt 1a, 1b, 1c, Handout 6 and Attempt 2 was analysed. Their errors when constructing simple be-passive sentences in these 5 pieces of work were tabulated. (See Table 2) The following were the kinds of errors which were tabulated:

- a. not using the past participle form of verb after auxiliary "be".
- b. error in agreement (singular/plural) between the subject and auxiliary "be".
- c. not inserting an auxiliary 'be' before the past participle verb.
- d. inconsistent tenses: using the present and the past tenses for the auxiliary "be" interchangeably without any good reason.
- e. using an active structure when a passive would have been more appropriate.

I realise that the concept of "error" is a complex and controversial one in linguistics. However, I chose to use error as a unit of analysis because the focus

of this piece of action research was to see if tasks which lead students towards guided enquiry or revealing, helped them towards grammatical accuracy.

Accuracy can largely be mirrored by the number of errors students make or do not make in their linguistic production.

Furthermore, this was a separate set of lessons planned to iron out problems in accuracy. By analysing the errors students make or fail to make in their production of the be-passive, I would be able to answer Question One in this study: " Did the students use of the simple be-passive to write a description of a process improve at the end of the study?"

Comparisons of the number of errors found in students work prior to the study (Attempt 1a) and after the study (Attempt 2) would help to provide evidence if the focus on form had been helpful. According to Ellis, 1991 (p.136), "Errors provide evidence of the processes involved in interlanguage development".

Given the limited scope of this action research, I chose to only focus on those errors that have a direct bearing to the simple be-passive structure. Errors that did not fall within the scope of these five were ignored.

b. Transcripts of Class and Group Discussion

Every lesson and every group discussion carried out was audiotaped. The only group discussion which was not taped was their group discussion during Lesson 9 (discussion of errors the students missed and failed to correct in Handout 6). The students had requested that their discussion not be taped; they were probably tired of the presence of a "third party". During this group discussion, the students appeared to be more active and less self-conscious.

The students were briefed to press the "record" button of cassette players (which were set up and distributed to every group prior to each lesson) the moment they began discussing.

These tapes were transcribed. For a sample of a transcript of a group discussion, see Appendix 8. The students were identified by their codenames (e.g. 4d refers to Student "d" from Group 4) and every word uttered in English or Bahasa Malaysia was transcribed word for word. Those uttered in Mandarin were however translated into English and printed in italics. Great care was taken to ensure that the meanings of those words, phrases or sentences uttered in Mandarin were maintained in the translation. The aid of two native Mandarin speakers were engaged in this. The students were also asked to listen to their group discussion which were audiotaped and check if they agreed with the transcription made.

It was most unfortunate that despite careful arrangements made to ensure that there were enough cassette players, batteries and blank tapes for every group, such shortage still occurred and as a result a few of Group 2's group discussions could not be audiotaped. Therefore, Group Two's group discussions could not be included in the study of the processing of the be-passive.

Group One lost their tape when one of the students took it home to recheck the transcriptions made. Group One had also to be left aside from findings that required collaboration with the taping made of their group discussion.

The transcripts were used to open the Pandora's box of what went on during the group discussion; how the students responded towards the tasks. From these, answers to the second research question of whether the tasks had helped the students gain further insight on the be-passive and how were found.

c. Students' Feedback In Handouts

The feedback section at the bottom of every handout where students had written in what they think they had learnt during the lesson and any new insight they might have gained would be my third source of data to be used to collaborate with and substantiate my findings. To ensure that the students did not copy anything which had been put on the board or things other students had said, I explained to the students that the feedback was essential for me if they wanted me to "teach" them well; so it was important that they tell me what they think they had learnt as well as any doubts about the day's lesson so that I could help them. I also ensured that the board was erased before the students were asked to fill in that section. Students were also not allowed to write in their feedback during group work or class discussion but only after that. The rationale for this was that if they had really learnt anything, they should be able to remember and articulate it (not necessarily only in English) after the lesson.

However, this was found to be of very limited use. Firstly, the students' were not able to express what they wanted to say. To avoid the difficulties involved if they were to be very honest, many wrote very superficial things on the handout. Many were also found to collaborate with their friends what they would write in the handout. As a result, members in the same group would usually have the same answer. For these reasons, this source of data was not substantially used to triangulate the findings.

d. Interviews

Finally, to gain the students' perspective of the whole exercise, I also interviewed some students and asked them how they felt about this approach to learning grammar.

In this chapter I described the subjects and gave an overview of the design and rationale of the action plan. I also identified the sources of the data for this study and explained how they would be analysed.