

# The Teacher-Researcher Paradigm: Elevating English Language Learning of Kerala's Tribal Learners Through Action Research

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**Abstract**—There are different aspects of teacher development, including training, education, orientation, learning, and acquiring; however, the most important aspect of teacher development is research. Such research that follows scientific methods of analysis to approach and solve a problem related to different aspects of education is called educational research. Furthermore, education is a basic human right that should be available to everyone, regardless of their class, rank, or background. The current paper focuses on the discourse of educational research in English language teaching and learning, the role of an English teacher as a researcher, the competencies related to the role, and its implications for the classroom. It also aims at discussing the concept of action research in the context of tribal schools, where the lower primary students are from selected districts of Kerala, India. The paper is an attempt to discuss the importance of action research in English classes of tribal students, the impact of collaborative action research in the contexts, its purpose, the difference of such action research from other fields of academic research, the procedures involved in the action research, and the need for action research to enhance English language learning of the tribal learners.

**Index Terms**—action research, collaborative action research, reflective practice, research paradigm, tribal learners

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of research has manifold implications. The general notion about research is that it is an act of creating something new and is done by exceptionally intelligent and extraordinary people who have a lot of time to spend on research. However, this grand narrative of research undermines what it actually is. There have been various attempts to define the concept of research. Kothari (2004) defines it as “a systematic investigation to establish facts or principles, or to collect information on a subject”. Leedy and Ormrod (2014) have a more specific definition of research, declaring it a systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information (data) to increase our understanding of a phenomenon. However, research is a timely inquiry into a situation or an intellectual problem demanding focus, hard work, and critical evaluation of information found while conducting the research. Research, based on its purpose, can be broadly classified into three types: fundamental research, applied research, and action research. A detailed overview is provided in Figure 1.

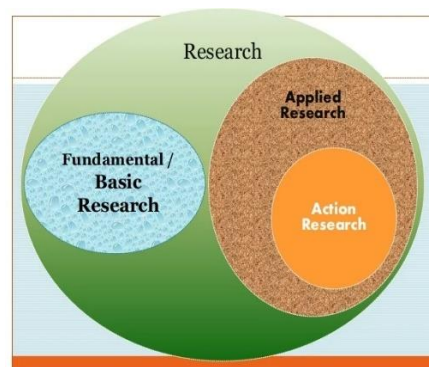


Figure 1. Types of Research

Fundamental research aims at finding a more comprehensive knowledge or understanding of the subject under study, without a specific application in mind. It is driven by curiosity and the aspiration of expanding all the available yet limited

human knowledge (Kothari, 2004). This type of research is conducted primarily on the belief of knowledge for knowledge's sake. It is exploratory in nature without any pre-assumption of any utility.

Applied research is conducted to solve specific practical problems. According to the Frascati Manual (2015), "applied research is defined as an original investigation undertaken in order to acquire new knowledge". It is, however, directed primarily towards a specific, practical aim or objective (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.). Applied research is more demand-driven, as it is carried out with an intention to find a solution to specific problems.

Creswell (2014) describes action research as a "reflective process of problem-solving led by individuals working within a community of practice to improve the way they address issues and solve problems". It is mostly undertaken by the practitioners with a focus on an immediate application.

#### *Objectives of the Study*

1. To evaluate the role of teachers in action research.
2. To analyze the background of tribal learners in an English language learning context.
3. To identify whether a lack of competent subject experts is the reason behind the incompetency.
4. To establish a constructive approach to language learning.
5. To incorporate culture-specific co-curricular activities with English language learning of tribal learners.
6. To evaluate the efficiency of Faculty Development Programmes based on creative ways to teach English.

Furthermore, this study was conducted among almost 100 tribal learners of the primary classes who were at their beginner stage of English language competence.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of English language teaching and action research is an area of interest for many researchers and teachers. It significantly influences educators to enhance their pedagogical practices through systematic inquiry, assessment, and application of effective remedial measures. There are numerous studies and research publications that highlight the teacher-researcher paradigm and showcase the interest in the multidisciplinary area.

In *Action Research: An Evolving Paradigm?* Burns (2010) discusses the development of action research in the context of English language teaching classrooms since the 1980s. In *Action Research: An Evolving Paradigm?* Burns (2005) discusses the development of action research in the context of English language teaching classrooms since the 1980s. This is a comprehensive study of developing stages of action research, offering a comparative study of traditional applied research and unique action research conducted during the millennial era after the drastic changes in the fields of pedagogy.

Simon Borg (2010) has an entirely different view on the subject, as he explains the limits and unexplored extents of teachers' involvement in action research. The focus is on individual benefits for teachers and how they, in turn, influence society. Borg critically examines the concept of the teacher-researcher and its impact in the area of pedagogy. In his work "Language Teacher Research Engagement", Borg states that teacher engagement in research should be influenced by institutional support, motivation, and professional development opportunities. According to McGlin Manfra (2019), systematic and intentional changes in teaching practices can be achieved through action research.

However, multiple studies have been conducted over the past few decades on the teacher-researcher paradigm since it has its direct influence on students and, eventually, the whole of society. Reflective teaching, identifying, analyzing, and solving the problems found inside the classroom remain a cyclical process that lays the foundation for effective teaching and learning methodology. Reflective teaching plays a crucial role in professional development (Richards & Lockheart, 1996). Derya Atay (2008) conducted a significant study on the teacher-researcher paradigm and published their study in *ELT Journal*. The study shows how the role of teachers, as researchers, contributes to their professional development and career growth. The research presents clear evidence through the testimonial statements of teachers who found themselves more confident and competent in pedagogical strategies.

In the edited volume of *Voices from the Language Classroom*, Kathleen M. Bailey and David Nuan (1996) analyze texts from teachers who have experienced the direct result of classroom research. These accounts are a perfect example for those who have doubts regarding the practicality of classroom research.

There are various studies that have been conducted among tribal learners of Kerala that trace their English language learning, as English language learning is adequate in schools in the state. In his work *Matthew Effect and Tribal Learners*, John (2014) rightly notes that students from tribal families perform much more poorly in English language than students from mainstream society. Moreover, tribal learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) are especially weak in reading and writing skills. Thus, there is always a disconnect between formal education and the indigenous knowledge system of the tribal community (Manojan, 2018).

Tribal education in Kerala has already won significant recognition, but the scope of English language learning should be problematized with utmost importance. Since it is a necessity of our modern era, indigenous learners should not be overshadowed due to their lack of competence in the English language.

### III. RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A researcher can be anyone who is interested in questioning the existing knowledge by finding out the scope of further study in it. The role of a researcher is exciting and intense at the same time. The significance of a researcher lies in his/her commitment towards society and to the broader community, and this commitment may be manifested in many ways, such as ethical responsibility, social impact, community engagement, advocacy for justice, and dissemination of knowledge without selfish concerns. In such a scenario, a teacher who is popularly known as a social engineer shall be appropriately placed as a researcher. From the very beginning of a banking system of teaching-learning, the process of education evolved via a broad spectrum where the teacher and the learner have become contributors of knowledge, and in recent years, to learner autonomy.

Manifesting English teachers as researchers is an interesting idea, as the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) is constantly evolving, with new perspectives and approaches emerging to meet the changing needs of learners and the innovative ideas of teachers. English classrooms can always be a platform to initiate action research, as there is a demand for the teacher to find out solutions to problems related to the systematic teaching/learning process. The scope of teacher-conducted classroom research lies in clarifying and resolving practical teaching issues and problems. In such a scenario, the word *action research* refers to two dimensions of teaching activity. The term *research* indicates a systematic approach to carry out a study and collect data from the class, and the term *action* refers to practical solutions to resolve the problem identified through the systematic study.

Action research in the English classroom involves a cycle of simultaneous or continuous activities. The primary steps are to identify a problem, collect all the available and possible information about the cause and effects of the problem, devise or plan the strategy to iron out the problem, implement the strategy planned, and observe the result. The result may or may not support the intention. However, reflecting on the issue, cause, impact, action plan, and systematic observation report will definitely help in teacher development.

The research does not end here, however. With the innovative modification and contributions from the community of teachers or peers or from self-reflection, the cycle can be repeated and reach the desired solution. Mostly, the process will reach fruition as the method or approach slightly changes with the suggestions drawn out of reflection. Even if the solution was successful, it is inevitable to go through the same cycle again to substantiate the effectiveness of the plan and to find its reach and limits. Figure 2 below summarizes the idea of the cyclical process.

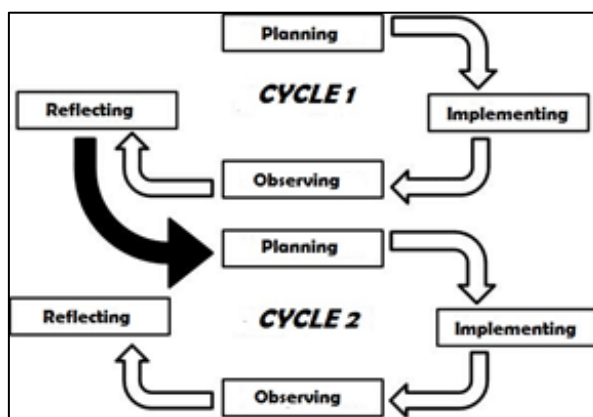


Figure 2. Activities Involved in Classroom Action Research

As a result of insight gained from undertaking an action research report, English teachers not only learn about their own teaching but can also become experts in investigating their own practice, which, in turn, satisfies the role of English teacher as a researcher. The focus of an English teacher, as a researcher conducting action research, should be improvement of language teaching and enhancement of proficiency.

English education in Kerala is also known as the “Kerala Model” due to the fact that Kerala is renowned as the first state in India to achieve a 100% literacy rate. The state literary mission, *Athulyam*, and its primary education equivalency drive have contributed much to achieving the title. A southern state being acknowledged as the foremost in literacy after competing with many economically and socially developed states of the same nation is something hard to achieve.

Still, hailing the achievements does not mean that the minor narratives of Kerala’s education are sidelined. Vimal and Subramania Pillai (2024) have rightly quoted that the educational system is adversely affecting students. Moreover, English language learning is one of the initiatives that should be considered with utmost importance because of the relative ranking of the English language, despite it being a second language. Keralites have a unique interest in listening to the trends of the West and learning their languages, especially English; therefore, English has a strong grip on the entire social scenario of Kerala. English for Keralites is not just a language—it is a pathway for better employment and opportunities for them.

The students of primary classes across the state have now started producing their own writing in English in the form of short stories, poems, and other language discourses. However, a large number of learners who have passed through

their primary education and those students from the rural sections of society are found struggling to use English for real-life purposes, even after completing a fairly long period of language learning. Simply, this disparity is evident in almost all the sects of English language learners.

Though there are a good number of ways of language learning available, most of them are practically impossible. The reason behind this disparity should be problematized and resolved. Some of the major reasons behind the problem are:

1. Incompetence in Acquiring LSRW Skills.

Most of the classrooms at the primary level do not follow the listening, speaking, reading, and writing (LSRW) pattern. The change in this step of progression to achieve language skills can cause adverse effects on the result expected. Simply, it can cause incompetence in language.

2. Competent Subject Experts Among In-Service Teachers.

Teachers who have language competence or adequate educational qualifications are not available at the faculties of many schools and colleges. Many schools support one teacher being in charge of more than one subject. The posts of English language teachers are vacant in many educational institutions, and no appointments are happening.

3. Lack of a Constructive Approach to Language Learning.

Language learning is different from learning literary pieces like stories or poems. The difference between learning language in depth and learning literary pieces should be addressed with utmost importance. A constructive approach should be created by learners rather than learning and forgetting the basics of language skills. Only usage can make language perfect.

4. Lack of Culture-Specific Co-Curricular Activities in English Language Learning.

Co-curricular activities like language tests or spelling or pronunciation competitions should be included in educational policies. Most of the learners are educated in English but are neither confident nor efficient in using the language.

5. Lack of FDPs Focusing on Culture-Specific Needs.

FDPs are necessary to share ideas regarding interesting ways to teach English. Proven ideas should be shared in a common platform in order to make others understand and try the same. Online or offline workshops can be arranged to evaluate the performance of learners as well as teachers. Continuous updating, as well as relentless efforts to improve, should begin with the teacher first and then should be imparted to the learners.

The undermining narratives of the Kerala model of English language learning can contribute much to covering up the drawbacks still lurking behind the blindfolds by addressing, problematizing, and finding solutions. Some of the testing methods are given below:

*Methods for Diagnostic Testing of Strategic English Language Skills*

The diagnostic tests were conducted to measure the tribal learners' initial competence in the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in the English language. The details of the study are given below:

TABLE 1  
DIAGNOSTIC TEST: AN OVERVIEW

Sample Size	15 per class to make the group manageable
Total Number of the Students	60
Initial Ability	Mixed
Proficiency Level in English	Varied
Approach	Both Qualitative and Quantitative
Intervention and Strategies	Activity based learning, storytelling, audio- visual aids, group discussion, role play
Duration	3 months
Documents Collected	Diagnostic Test Report, Student Progress Report, Daily Diary, Self- Reflection, Student Feedback

*A. Listening Skill Assessment*

The diagnostic tests include video-based listening and audio-based listening. Before each class, an audio or video, carefully selected based on their exit-level competence, was shown to the participants, who were asked to describe the content. For students with poor command of the English language, a picture description was narrated using various picture cards. They chose the exact picture card based on the narration. As another way of enhancing listening skills in English, the students were given simple commands or oral instructions like touch your nose, stand up, sit down, turn around, and so on. For students of higher competence, comprehension questions based on short stories and interesting narratives were given.

The rubrics were set on a 5-point scale with criteria ranging from understanding instructions and responding to questions to identifying sounds and/or words. The following is the rubric table:

TABLE 2  
LISTENING SKILL ASSESSMENT: RUBRIC

Criteria	1. Needs Improvement (Score 0)	2. Better (Score 1)	3. Satisfactory (Score 3)	4. Good (Score 4)	5. Excellent (Score 5)
Understanding Instructions	Cannot Follow	Occasionally	Follows but doubtful	Mostly accurate	Complete accuracy
Response to Questions	No response	Irrelevant response	Partial response	Mostly correct	All correct
Identification of Letters & Words	No recognition	A few words	Basic words	Most word recognition	Accurate recognition

### B. Speaking Skill Assessment

Based on age and exit-level competence, the tribal students were given tasks such as picture narration, self-introduction, and storytelling. Most of the pictures were familiar, and some were unfamiliar to the students. The familiar pictures were chosen from the prescribed handbook for teachers. The criteria variants were pronunciation, fluency, and use of vocabulary. The rubric table is given below:

TABLE 3  
SPEAKING SKILL ASSESSMENT: RUBRIC

Criteria	1. Needs Improvement (Score 0)	2. Better (Score 1)	3. Satisfactory (Score 3)	4. Good (Score 4)	5. Excellent (Score 5)
Pronunciation	Unclear	Occasionally	Follows but doubtful	Mostly clear	Clarity and accuracy
Fluency		Irrelevant response	Partial response	Mostly flawless	Proficient and fluent
Use of Vocabulary	No recognition	A few words	Basic words	Use of good number of vocabularies	Plethora of vocabulary

### C. Reading Skill Assessment

The reading skills of the learners were assessed through the following tasks: letter and word recognition, phonemic awareness and decoding, fluency test, and comprehension check. There were various tools used to bring forward the reading ability of tribal learners, like the usage of flashcards, picture-word matching, listening to a sound and matching the letter, timed reading of phrases and words, reading aloud, cloze tests, and so on. The rubrics of assessment are given below:

TABLE 4  
READING SKILL ASSESSMENT: RUBRIC

Criteria	1. Needs Improvement (Score 0)	2. Better (Score 1)	3. Satisfactory (Score 3)	4. Good (Score 4)	5. Excellent (Score 5)
Letter Recognition	Struggling	Confusion but a few words were recognized	Mostly clear	Recognize most letters	Recognizes all letters and sounds
Phonemic awareness	Cannot decode	Omits unfamiliar words	Reads most of the words with major help	Reads most of the words with minor help from teacher	Reads correctly without help from teacher
Fluency	Cannot read	Slow reading	There are a certain number of pauses while reading	Less number of pauses	Reads smoothly with expressions
Comprehension	Neither comprehension nor reading aloud	Understands but struggling	Comprehends most of the meaning but struggles to answer back	Comprehension with limited struggle to answer back	Complete comprehension and answers are clear and precise

### D. Writing Skill Assessment

The writing skill assessment can be carried out via different methods, including letter formation, handwriting, sentence construction, creative and academic writing, self-correction, and proofreading.

TABLE 5  
WRITING SKILL ASSESSMENT: RUBRIC

Criteria	1. Needs Improvement (Score 0)	2. Better (Score 1)	3. Satisfactory (Score 3)	4. Good (Score 4)	5. Excellent (Score 5)
Handwriting	Difficult to write	Trying to write	Mostly clear but with major errors	Mostly clear with minor errors	Clear and well formed
Sentence Structure	Not a single sentence is formed	Phrases forming stage	Incomplete sentences with errors	Mostly complete with minor errors	Complete and meaningful
Spelling	Frequent errors	Choosing spelling based on pronunciation	Many but readable	Minor mistakes	No error
Creative Expression	Cannot express in English	Trying to express	Struggling to arrange sentences	Needs more clarity	Clear and creative ideas

The results of the action research conducted can be summarized as follows in Table 6:

TABLE 6  
TOTAL STUDENT PROGRESSION IN LANGUAGE SKILLS OVER THREE MONTHS

Skill Area	Initial Assessment (June)	Midpoint Assessment (July)	Final Assessment (August)
Listening	Avg. 20% understand basic words	Avg. 32% could understand basic sentences	Avg. 47% could understand narration
Speaking	Avg. 5% could speak basic words	Avg. 14.77% could speak basic sentences	Avg. 22% could speak about personal details
Reading	Avg. 12% could read aloud and comprehend and 10% could read and comprehend in silent reading	Avg. 35% could read aloud and comprehend and 32.23% could read silently and comprehend materials	Avg. 48.33% could read aloud and comprehend materials other than text and Avg. 56% can
Writing	Avg. 16.2% could write basic sentences as their own	Avg. 22% could write basic sentences.	Avg. 31% could write sentences of description.

The findings of the action research can be represented graphically, which indicates slow yet direct progression in all language skills.

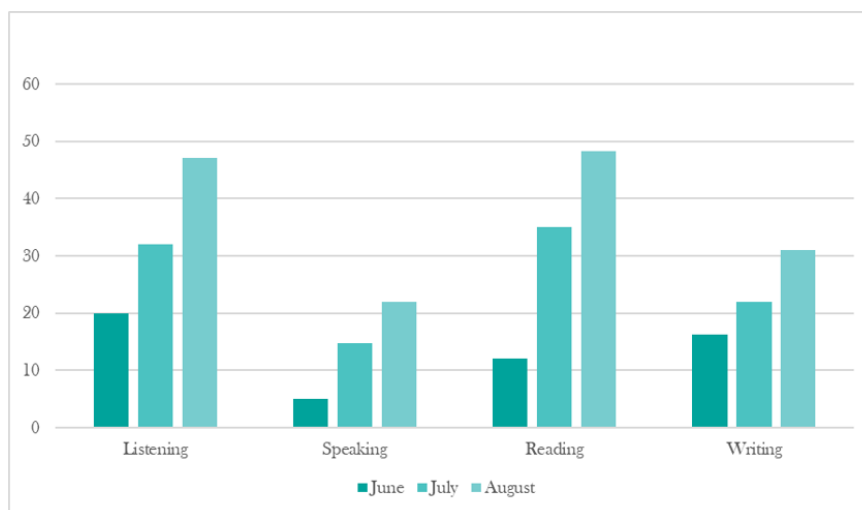


Figure 3. Progress Chart of Learners Over Three Months

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The study found that the teacher-researcher paradigm has a positive impact on expected student outcome. Action research in a classroom of heterogeneous indigenous students can help in improving English language learning skills. Proficiency in English should be aimed at first in an indigenous classroom, not accuracy. For that, the context should be culture-specific and familiar. A familiar text can yield more response from the learners, which in turn adds to their performance. The action research presented a higher success rate in need assessment and proposing solutions to enhance strategic language skills. The most progress was noted in the listening and reading skills of the learners after the study. The initial inhibition to speak gradually changed with the familiarity of the context. Moreover, training to identify and coordinate sounds and letters should begin from the very initial classes themselves. Reading aloud was a comparatively

easy task as the letters became familiar; however, the results of silent reading indicate a need to be given special attention by the educators. The major change visible was the active participation of the learners with the change in context. The same textbook, altered into culture-specific tools, made a huge change among the learners. Another major change noted was the change in roles of the learner and the teacher. Finally, the learner/teacher roles have significantly changed as the approach shifts from the banking mode of teaching to the interactive and experimental mode of learning.

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