From Business to Education: Action Learning in EFL Teacher Preparation Programs

Aya M. Khedr[1], Walaa M. El-Henawy [2], Jehan M. El-Bassuony[3]

[1]*Demonstrator, Faculty of Education, Port Said University*
ayakhedr5511@gmail.com

[2]*Lecturer of Curriculum &Instruction (EFL), Faculty of Education, Port Said University*
walaa.elhenawy@edu.psu.edu.eg

[3] *Professor of Curriculum &Instruction (EFL), Faculty of Education, Port Said University*
gehan.mahmoudedu.psu.edu.eg

Abstract

Action learning is an approach enabling individuals to work as teams on complex issues that encounter them in their academic field or in their workplace. Through dialogue, reflective listening, deep questioning, experimentation, and feedback, learning is gained, and individuals develop their capacities to professionally solve any upcoming problems. In this paper, action learning is a cyclical process that values EFL pre-service teachers as being a source of knowledge and users of knowledge to bring out innovative ideas and actions collaboratively and through action learning sets work on issues related to EFL education. The purpose of this paper is to review literature and previous studies and research presenting the nature of action learning, its components, stage systems, process, and benefits. Besides, the paper sought to propose a framework to involve action learning in the EFL preparation programs by presenting a set of recommendations for promoting EFL pre-service teacher program at the faculties of education, as well as in the field of EFL education.

Keywords

Action learning, EFL preparation program, pre-service teachers.

Introduction

The pre-service teachers' preparation program at the faculties of Education primarily seek to equip pre-service teachers of all majors with the pedagogical theories, approaches, skills, and tactics needed. Besides, there is a remarkable consideration given to EFL preparation programs. However, and due to the ongoing progress and the upcoming pedagogical trends, there is a compelling urge to work on the complex issues of the teaching profession, starting with the pre-service teachers for being the opening move to progress that leads to more development.

Accordingly, the role of scientific research comes to work on finding methodologies consistent with the requirements of society, and the trends of the modern era to develop EFL education at all levels with major consideration to the development of EFL pre-service teachers' preparation programs through utilizing experiential approaches and practices that address professional development. Action learning is a well-established approach that seeks to facilitate skill development through the integration of knowledge with practice, outlined with insightful questioning and critical reflection in a group of four to eight members working on complex issues that encounter them in their academic or career settings.

Reginald Revans, the founder of action learning, first implemented action learning in the 1940s working on issues concerning the low productivity of coal mines. But at that time, Revans did not mention the term of action learning in any published form till 1972 during which Revans began publishing about action learning. Kuhn (2009) stated that the idea of action learning raised as a result to the lack of professional managers in 1945. As a result, Reginald Revans formed groups of managers called "sets" to share experiences, discussing the effective practices and actions as well as work on problems they encounter in the workplace using reflective listening,

questioning, and dialogue. He organized managers into small groups or "sets" that required managers.

Revans did not introduce any definition to action learning, in order not to constrain its meaning. Revans (2011) named action learning as a methodology of learning, so that learning occurs in the experiential doing of missions where the learner experiences comfort and flexibility in the process of learning.

Nature of Action Learning

According to Marquardt (1999, p.4), action learning is both a process and powerful program that involves a group of people solving authentic problems while at the same time focusing on what they are learning and how their learning can be beneficial for the individuals and the organization as a whole. Marquardt and Banks (2010, p.21) referred to action learning as a process enabling individuals and groups to learn while solving problems and implementing procedural actions.

Besides, Zuber-Skirrett (2002) stated that action learning is learning from concrete experience and critically reflecting on this experience by a set of means such as discovery, trial, and error, and mostly through group discussion in which learning occurs from participants and with each other while targeting workplace issues. According to Pedler et al. (2005), action learning is both an ethos and a methodology. In addition to being a framework with the ideals of learner responsibility, engagement, and friendship at its very core, they demonstrated it as an ethos for being a general way of thinking about learning and development. However, it is a method because it entails a particular set of practices that are experiential and action oriented. Moreover, Cho

(2013) revealed that action learning involves the complex tasks where participants work in teams bringing their exceptional skills and competences.

Action learning frameworks such as Boshyk and Dilowrth (2010); Marquardt (1999); Raelin (2008); Revans (2011); and Vince (2012) focused on two themes: authentic complex work-based problems and teamwork learning. Action learning is based on the premise that learning positively occurs when individuals work on complex problems taking place in their work environment. Participants, called "action learning sets", learn while they analyze the reasons behind the issue, identifying the problem, offering insights, and reflecting with peers. The finest learning occurs when sets reflect with each other like-minded fellow workers.

Components of Action Learning

Marquardt (2004) formulated action learning in six components which are: (a) a problem, (b) set members, (c) reflective listening and questioning, (d) actions agreed to be taken, (e) an actual need of learning, and (6) action learning coach. Cho and Bong (2013) proposed five main action learning elements, which are: (a) sets, (b) complex issues, (c) efficacies, (d) deep questioning, reflective listening, evaluation, and feedback, and (e) coaches. The existence of these components as interactive and intertwined would promote learning and reach solutions of high quality as intended.

Figure 1

Components of Action Learning

Note: Components of the action learning program. Adapted from *Marketing91*, by Bhasin, 2020, from https://www.marketing91.com/action-learning/. Adapted with permission.

Action learning is based on the occurrence of a challenging problem taking place in the work settings. Thus, in action learning programs, members work together solving a problem, or a challenge. In other action learning contexts, the group members work together on a project seeking professional development. This project should be difficult for the participants to solve and should be valuable to the organization. The action learning group is the central component of action learning (also called set or team). It consists of four to eight people. During the action learning process, set members develop their cognitive and procedural skills. They improve their awareness of the content knowledge as well as other managerial skills using a set of tools and techniques for communication, decision-making, and problem solving.

Questioning and reflection are major components in the process of action learning. According to Revans' action learning formula which is "$L = P + Q$" (2011), learning (L) increases

when programmed knowledge (P) is employed with deep questions (Q). Programmed knowledge refers to knowledge and expertise. Although knowledge is one of the main components of action learning, but it is still insufficient. Thus, to develop this knowledge and make it more effective, questioning to create insight is necessary to be employed. Action learning questioning refers to high level questions that urge individuals to analyze, hypothesize, and theorize. This kind of questions requires people to engage in inferences, connections, experimentation, analysis, reflection upon actions. In this context, Revans demonstrated that the key to learning is not finding the right answer rather than finding the right question along with learning with and from peers.

Furthermore, action learning requires set members become capable of taking procedural actions on the problem they are working on, as the proposed actions increase the learning experience, giving the solution more credibility by experimenting them, then investigating their effectiveness later in the reflection sessions, and evaluating an action's outcomes in relation to what was anticipated of it brings about reflection.

The existence of a coach is another action learning component. The coach's role is to monitor set members during the different processes and guide their learning through communication, decision-making, problem-solving, and reflective listening tools, and techniques. Coaches offer assistance for those who are unfamiliar with problem-solving, questioning, reflection, critical thinking, and feedback processes. Pedler (2016) labelled action learning coach as the catalyst that pushes forward set members. Through listening, modeling, and reflective follow-up questions, the coach focuses on the learning not on the problem. That is, the coach does not have to propose any response or insight.

Processes of Action Learning

According to Revans (2011), action learning follows processes of systems Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. In Alpha system, participants speculate the complex framework in which the problem is addressed and comprised. Beta system is based on five stages. In the first stage, sets begin observing and survey the nature of the problem through investigation and date collection. Secondly, members speculate about the problem, putting hypotheses. In the third stage, they test those hypotheses to verify their impact on solving the problem. A comparison between the results reached and the expected results is conducted in the fourth stage through reflection and cross questions among set members. In the last stage, assessment and feedback are employed.

System beta wraps up how members acquire knowledge and develop during the whole process of action learning. In Gamma system, personal development, and interaction between the social environment with the learner are very crucial. (Revans, 2011)

Applicability of Action Learning

Action learning takes different forms due to its implications by different peoples in various contexts. However, action learning process is cyclical, as shown in figure 2.

The most common action learning process can be summarized according to Cho and Bong (2013) which includes three stages: preparation, team meetings, and follow-up activities.

1- *Preparation stage:* the action learning coach conducts an orientation session in order to help set members better comprehend the processes of action learning sessions and the rules they must follow as a group.

2- *Set Meetings:* Action learning gatherings may involve several meeting formats. Although face-to-face action learning teams are more prevalent in the cases that have been reported (Park et al., 2013), blended learning for team meetings that include online and face-to-face meetings is on the rise to help action learning participants who are limited by time and location (Stewart & Alexander, 2006; Thornton & Yoong, 2011). In this stage, action learning set members deal with the problem encountered through dialogue, sharing experiences, critical listening, deep questions, putting hypotheses, and testing them in their settings.

3- *Follow-up session:* In this stage, sets share the solutions they tested with other same field members who have already faced these issues or might face at their work settings for a greater benefit for the public community.

Figure 2

Action Learning Cycle
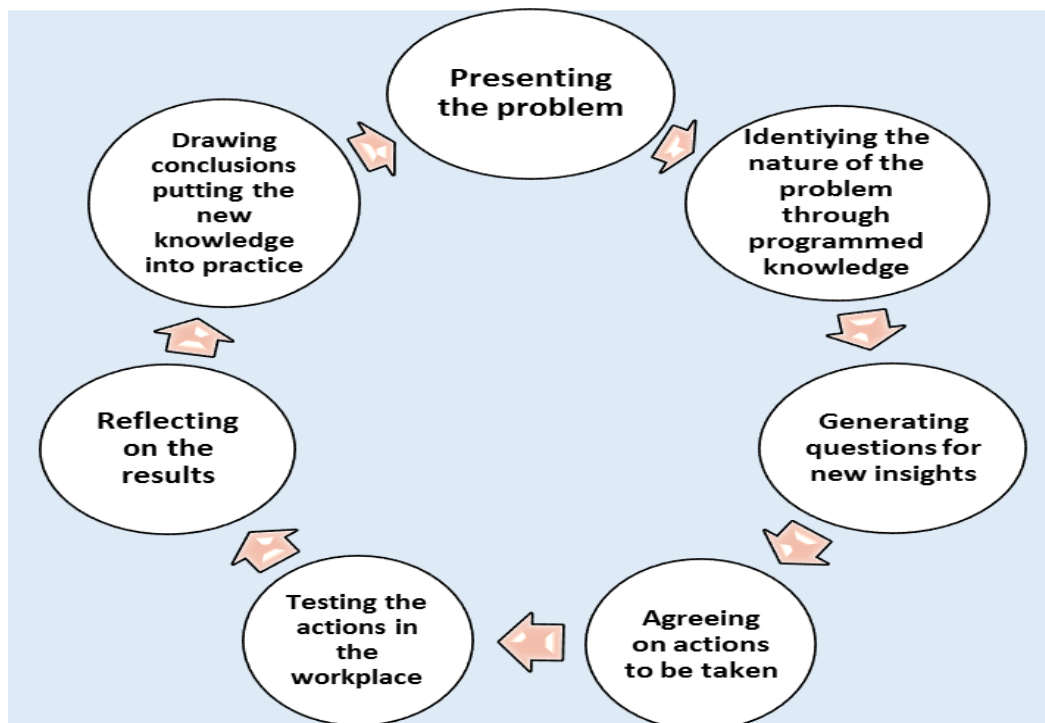
Benefits of Action Learning

Action learning has remarkable benefits as it invests time and paves the way for listening and reflecting. An action must combine reflection, giving learning more depth. People actually learn when they interact with others who resemble their experiences and try to solve complicated work issues. These real issues are addressed and resolved in the workplace with action learning, Thus, the learning gained can be conveyed to the work setting more easily and positively.

Action learning has advantages for individuals, teams, and organizations. People get the abilities necessary to succeed in their careers as well as an increase in confidence, comfort, and managerial responsibility (Marquardt, 2004). As a teamwork, action learning approach adapts problem-solving techniques from different work groups, creating optimal teams with the skills necessary to solve issues and collaborate effectively. At the organizational level comes the most significant advantage, quoting Dilworth (1996) in that action learning is "the DNA of organizational learning" as action learning transforms any business into a learning organization, increasing its competitiveness as they quickly learn how to acquire information and grow it to achieve the predefined goals. Increasingly, by reviewing literature, it has been found that action learning is commonly utilized in different contexts in organizations such as Boonyuenla et al. (2016); Dowson (2019); Hemmings (2014); Marquardt (2004); Muzindutsi et al. (2018); and Sommer et al. (2020). Due to the flexibility of the stages employed in it, action learning has been the subject of various interpretations of the original approach developed in the 1940s by Revans.

Challenges of Action Learning

Despite the many benefits of implementing action learning, each action learning component can pose a challenge when implementing action learning in workplace. As the problem is the core component of action learning, it can turn into a challenge. Incorrect or vague problem statement would lead to false interpretation and inappropriate actions. Besides, the action learning set members can become a challenge. Behaviors such as bullying through threatening actions, joking, or blocking others' ideas while working on a problem can hinder the applicability of effective action learning.

Furthermore, all action learning set members should commit to learning. Any kind of resistance to change and test new or innovative actions in the workplace lags the development of individuals and holds back the common good. Thus, action learning members need to build a trust on the methodology and commitment to learning to solve the various problems.

Action Learning in EFL Teacher Preparation Program

Action learning relates to experiential learning through cooperative learning. Thus, Action learning programs are not limited to the business administration and managers in the organizations, but also to all individuals who seek professional or academic development in order to promote the current reflective learning based on exchanging new insights, discussion and listening. Educators must extend their teaching practices from being theoretically conventional to more workplace-based methods such as action learning.

The preparation program at the faculties of education primarily focusses on providing pre-service teachers with the knowledge regarding teaching profession. Although exerting efforts to

improve the EFL teaching process of pre-service teachers, EFL programs still thirst to more development in the pre-service teacher's preparation. Dutta (2018, p.493) noted that lecturing, discussion, or any other Socratic teaching method cannot alone compensate for authentic learning conveying distorted sense of reality which might weaken learning and problem-solving capabilities. Furthermore, in a study of Yook et al. (2016) about EFL teachers' perception of the impact of EFL teacher education upon their classroom teaching practice, they found that most pre-service teachers were dissatisfied with the insufficient practical implementation. In addition, they noted that the pedagogical theories and method they have learnt cannot be applied in the real condition.

Tarone et al. (2005, p.12) stated that the differences between the EFL pre-service preparation program and the real conditions that the pre-service teachers face in the EFL classroom appear to create a gap that cannot be bridged by pre-service teachers themselves. Several studies discussed how to bridge the gap between practice and theory, so that teaching practice can be running effectively.

In their teaching practicum, EFL pre-service teachers interact with a quite number of students with changing, immature personalities of diverse needs and various upbringing backgrounds. Moreover, this interaction is conducted in EFL. The EFL pre-service teacher delivers teaching communicating in a foreign language which leads, in many cases, to a huge gap in the student-teacher instructional communication causing classroom management issues (i.e., disruptive behavior, rebellion, lack of motivation, off task students, poor rapport with teachers, disengagement). These kinds of classroom management issues never end despite the wide range of literature and empirical studies. It is becoming apparent to us, that the theory taught in

preparation programs is difficult for EFL pre-service teachers to put into practice in the classroom. Hence, the need for more innovative authentic methods is vital.

In this context, Lizzo and Wilson (2004) stated that the professional preparation of undergraduate programs is the process by which students gain knowledge, skills and values that are combined with professional identity. The mission and vision of these programs are to bring out students capable of handling a number of various situations by reflecting, assessing, and professionally taking decisions.

According to Flett and Tyler (2019), action learning offers a classroom opportunity to support students' reflection and application of their theoretical knowledge more contextually with the goal of fostering a learning environment where students can explore and comprehend practice-related issues through dialogue and feedback, and reflection. Moreover, Egan (2014) revealed that action learning sets have been connected to the idea of transformative learning. During action learning meetings, members investigate their own identities in connection to their values and existing knowledge. Participating in various views sets might help one gain broader understanding.

By looking at the central idea of action learning, it can be seen that it is a means of development aiming to strengthen individuals' potentials in daily situations. Utilizing action learning in EFL preparation program would have larger benefits on EFL teachers who are not only be able to effectively react to classroom issues that might come up while teaching, but also help employ proactive strategies to prevent any unfavorable behaviors to occur thereafter. With action learning, EFL pre-service teachers become more critical and conscious of their actions, goals, and are able to behave more responsibly in classrooms. Action learning can be formulated within the EFL preparation program. It can be employed for instance in teaching practicum. Teaching practicum, as characterized by Gan (2014), is multifaceted practical course including student teachers, students, university supervisors,

inspectors in the major, and school principal in order to allow a space for the pre-service teachers to apply the faculty courses in a more contextual setting. EFL Pre-service teachers are assessed according to ratings of the supervisors on a set of specific rating scale that evaluate the three phases of teaching: planning, implementation, and assessment, as well as the instructional language used. The components of action learning are represented and conveyed in the teaching practicum elements, as shown in figure 3:

Figure 3

Action Learning Components in EFL Teaching Practicum
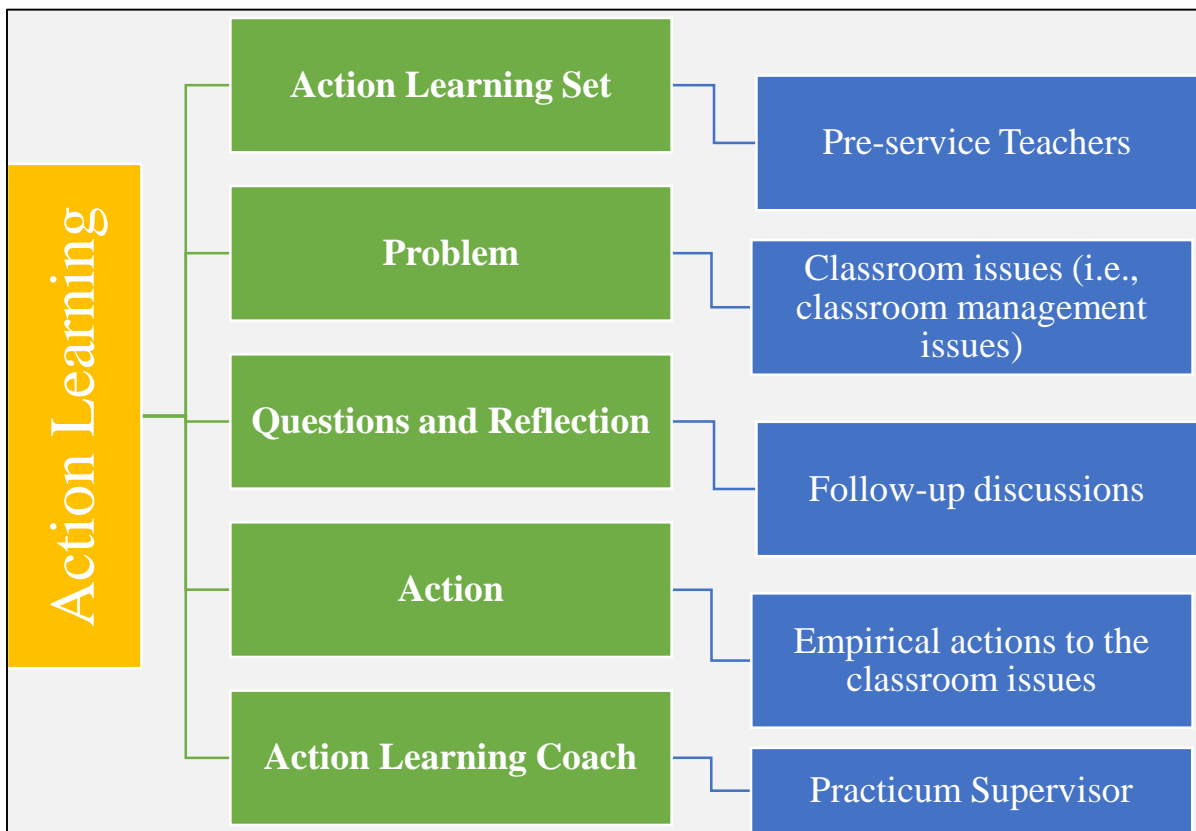
Due to the less experience EFL pre-service teachers have, any instructional mistakes bring about classroom unfavorable behaviors on behalf of students. Hence, EFL pre-service teachers are in serious need of not only acquiring, but also mastering proactive and reactive strategies that

prepare them to encounter the daily classroom environment in a real context. Action learning can be involved as a capstone course in the fourth year of the EFL teacher preparation program where pre-service teachers are required to work on any classroom problems that might hinder their teaching performance development. Through various insights of the action learning set along with experimentation and reflections, learning will be best gained.

Furthermore, a number of universities (i.e., Michigan, Maryland, Regina, Brandeis…etc.) provides a yearlong internship which aims to prepare pre-service teachers not only for their roles as teachers conveying knowledge, but also as professionals reflecting on their teaching practices, as well as decision making, problem solving, management skills to become a role model to their students, as great teachers make the greatest difference to students' personalities and outcomes. Thus, education internship is designed to be an intensive classroom experience that reinforces pre-service teachers' development, refining the skills and competencies needed to become effective. By referring to figure (3), action learning process and elements can outline the internship year through working on workplace issues with insightful questions and reflections among the internship pre-service teachers as action learning sets. Internees will work and learn as reflective practitioners.

Involved in teaching practicum, a capstone course or providing an internship year as a fifth year in the EFL preparation program, action learning would be the bridge that links the theory to practice representing the current and the desired, reaching professional development to better improve the authentic state of education.

Conclusion

To avoid responding to yesterday's obstacles as today's problems and tomorrow's solutions, traditional approaches, methods, and processes including lectures and conventional discussions are insufficient in preparing EFL pre-service teachers to address challenging situations encountered in nowadays ever rapidly changing work environment that require individuals to change their ways rather than continue to act according to current structures, procedures. According to the aforementioned literature and research, classroom issues are best managed through programs such as action learning programs that are cognitive by nature and experiential in its processing. To link theory with practice in EFL preparation program, action learning can be more appropriate to formulate the pre-service teachers' performance in the instructional environment, prepared to prevent as well as professionally react to any unfavorable incident while teaching.

Future Research Directions

There are other EFL areas in which further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of action learning. Thus, the paper provides the following recommendation for further research:

- Conducting an action learning program to promote oral expression of EFL learners.

- Investigating the effect of action learning on developing English receptive skills.

- Examining action learning impact on EFL learners' academic writing skills.

- Exploring the action learning impact on promoting 21st century skills in EFL teacher preparation program.

- Developing more action learning research concerning EFL negotiation and argumentation skills.

- Conducting a meta-analysis study based on action learning to explore EFL learners' foreign language learning anxiety and language functionality.

References

Bhasin, H. (2020). What is Action Learning? Definition and Components {Infographic}. Retrieved from https://www.marketing91.com/action-learning/

Boonyuen, S., Charungkaittikul, S., Ratana, U., & Archanya. N. (2016). Integrating transformative learning and action learning approaches to enhance ethical leadership for supervisors in the hotel business. *SHS Web of Conferences*. 26. 01136. 10.1051/shsconf/20162601136.

Boshyk, Y., & Dilworth, L. (2010). *Action learning and its applications: Present and future*. London, England: Palagrave Macmillan.

Cho, Y. & Bong, H. (2013). Trends and Issues in Action Learning Practice: Lessons from South Korea. DOI - 10.4324/9780203118894

Cho, Y. (2013). What is action learning? Components, types, processes, issues, and research agendas. *Learning and Performance Quarterly*, 1(4), 1-11. https://hdl.handle.net/2022/24689

Dickenson, M., Pedle, M., & Burgoyne, J. (2011). Virtual action learning – A New frontier? In: S., Voller, E., Blass & V., Culpin. (eds) *The Future of Learning*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230306356_8

Dilworth, R. (1996). Action learning: Bridging academic and workplace domains. (8).DOI - 10.1108/13665629610150171

Dowson, J. (2019). Transferring knowledge into practice? exploring the feasibility of action learning for improving knowledge, skills, and confidence in clinical communication skills. BMC Medical

Dutta, K. (2018). Solving Wicked Problems: Searching for the Cognitive Trait. *International Journal of Management in Education*. 16(3),pp 493-504. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2018.09.002

Egan, G. (2014). *The Skilled Helper – A client centred approach.* (10th ed.). Retrieved from https://nibmehub.com/opacservice/pdf/read/The%20Skilled%20Helper%20A%20Problem-Management

Flett, J., & Tyler, M. (2019). Action Learning and professional formation of youth and community work students. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*. 16(3), 38-58. https://doi.org/10.1921/jpts.v16i3.1173

Gan, Z. (2014). Learning from interpersonal interactions during the practicum: a case study of non-native ESL student teachers. *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy*, 40(2), 128-139.http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2013.869969

Goertzen, Brent & Squire, Brittney. (2019). Action Learning in a Graduate Online Course. *Journal of Leadership Education*. 18. 10.12806/V18/I2/A1.

Hauser, B. (2010). *Action Learning in an SME: Appetite Comes with Eating*. 7, 229–235. doi:10.1080/14767330903301906

Hemming, C. (2014). The Impact of Action Learning on Perceived Objective Career Success. © ProQuest LLC.

Kuhn, J. (2009).Using action learning to develop the cognitive dimensions of strategic innovation: Program design, methodological, and person-environment consideration. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com.library.capella.edu/.

Lizzio, A. and Wilson, K. (2004) Action learning in higher education: an investigation of its potential to develop professional capability. Studies in Higher Education. 29, 4, 469-488

Marquardt M, Banks S. (2010). *Theory to Practice: Action Learning*. Advances in Developing Human Resources. 2010;12(2):159-162. doi:10.1177/1523422310367878

Marquardt, M. J. (1999). *Action learning: The resource guide to performance interventions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Marquardt, M. J. (2004). *Optimizing the power of action learning*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black.

Muzindutsi, M., Haskins, L., Wilford, A., & Horwood, C.(2018). Using an action learning methodology to develop skills of health managers: Experiences from KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *BMC Health Services Research*. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-018-3693-6

Park, S., Kang, I., Valencic, T. & Cho, Y. (2013). Why are we using action learning and in what contexts? *Action Learning Research and Practice*. 10(1) DOI: 10.1080/14767333.2012.744299

Pedler, M. (2016). *Reginald Revans: The Pioneer of Action Learning*. DOI - 10.1007/978-3-319-49820-1_20-1

Pedler, M. (1998). *Action Learning in Practice, The Learning Organization*, Vol. 5 No. 4, pp. 202-203. https://doi.org/10.1108/tlo.1998.5.4.202.1

Pedler, M., Brook, C., & Burgoyne, J. (2005). Action learning–are Reg Revans' teachings being practiced? People Management, 9, 40-45.

Raelin, Joseph. (2008). Work-Based Learning: Bridging Knowledge and Action in the Workplace. Reyrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268373678_Work-Based_Learning_Bridging_Knowledge_and_Action_in_the_Workplace

Revans, R. (2011). *ABC of action learning*. Retrieved from https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=KAhBDgAAQBAJ

Sommer, I., Larsen, K., Nielsen, C., Stenholt, & Bjørk,I. (2020). Improving Clinical Nurses' Development of Supervision Skills through an Action Learning Approach. Research and Practice, 10 Article https://doi.org/10.1155/2020/9483549

Stewart, J. A., & Alexander, G. (2006). Virtual action learning: Experiences from a study of an SME e-learning programme. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 3, 141–159. doi:10.1080/14767330600885854\

Tarone, E. & Bigelow, M. (2005). Impact of literacy on oral language processing: Implications for SLA research. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics 25, 77–97.CrossRefGoogle Scholar

Thornton, K., & Yoong, P. (2011). The role of the blended action learning facilitator: An enabler of learning and a trusted inquisitor. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 8, 129–146. doi:10.1080/14767333.2011.581021

Vince, R. (2012). The contradictions of impact: Action learning and power in organizations. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 9(3), 209–218

Yook & lee.(2006). Korean EFL teachers' Perceptions of the impact of EFL Teacher Education upon their Classroom Teaching Practices. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(5):1-15

Zuber-Skerrit, O. (2002). A model for designing action learning and action research programs. *The Learning Organization*, 9(3/4), 143-149.