

## RESEARCH ON YOUNG LEARNERS: ADVANCING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

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### *Abstract*

*Research for young learners has been receiving considerable attention from the respective world education institutions due to its increasing importance for teaching demands. As a result, the research has taken enormous strides over the past few decades, which has had its significance implications for the teaching of young learners. This article thus far discusses the nature of research in the area of young learners and then goes on to discuss its characteristics, current trends, and process of research in the area of young learners. Next, it concludes with the research method that most commonly carried out by undergraduate students in their field of study.*

**Keywords:** Young learners, undergraduate students, research for young learners, classroom action research.

### INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate research is very importance in the world of education. It will bring the undergraduate students into the world of the scholars by introducing them to the complex questions and problems that prevail in a given subject and increase the contact time between teachers and students (Kuh, 2008). When research, as example, is applied to academic matters, it also has the potential to strengthen the relationship between all campus community and campus itself and to help students recognize the relevance of work in the field. Beckman & Hensel, (2009); Echeverri et al., (2006); McNiff, (2013) defined undergraduate research become the project in which the students to investigate, analyze, and articulate findings in ways that help them understand the methods used in the field and to generate new knowledge and creative thinking.

The research itself is most commonly aided in the social sciences, sciences, technology, engineering, and religious studies. Indeed, in the contexts of research on young

learners, it will provide deep impact on student who conducts the research. This research will light up undergraduate students with new concepts, review their understanding of the materials, deepen their understanding of ideas, issues, and procedures, and to provide them with formative assessments of their progress in advance of summative evaluations.

Based on the studies as reported by several experts, the students who want to do research on young learners unfortunately do not know how to equip themselves for the task (Lopatto, 2006, 2010; Seymour, Hunter, Laursen, & DeAntoni, 2004; Turek, 2013). Being the students, their natural choice for research would be in the education for young learners rather than literature or other field of the studies. But, they do not feel encouraged to do research in this area because they do not have sufficient knowledge on the research methodology and issues.

The paper will discuss on the theoretical basis of research, characteristics, roles, and current trends for undergraduate

research on young learners. As a starting point in this paper, discussion on nature of research is focused on four features which have significant implications to the undergraduate students' knowledge about research on young learners itself.

## **RESEARCH ON YOUNG LEARNERS**

Research on young learners for undergraduate students should be connected with the field of the studies. According to (Turek, 2013), it is more than a set of skills or a way of thinking which is examining critically the various aspects of their professional work academically. It is a habit of questioning what they do, and a systematic examination of the observed information to find answers with a view to instituting appropriate changes in the field of young learner study itself.

As reported by several studies, the undergraduate research programmers have focused on different advantages to students. Those studies have assessed the extent to which interventions encourage students to complete their undergraduate education (Coppock, 2011; Toloa, McNaughton, & Lai, 2009; Turek, 2013). According to (Lopatto, 2010), it will provide measurement of cognitive, intellectual, professional, and personal growth. Lopatto (2010) emphasized that cognitive and intellectual growth benefits can gain in knowledge and skills. It can be also measured by performance on traditional evaluations (exams, quizzes, papers, reports, etc.) and demonstrated by self-reported improvements in intellectual and practical skills, benefits in this category include 1) greater gains in mastering both content and contextual knowledge; 2) enhanced ability to put classroom knowledge into practice; 3) Increased creativity and critical thinking; 4) Enhanced problem-solving skills; 5) Enhanced communication skills, both oral and written; 6) Enhanced technical skills within the discipline; and 7) greater understanding of the intersections of disciplines. Meanwhile, the

other sub benefits is to gain Academic achievement and educational attainment. Measured by grade point averages, persistence, and pursuit of advanced degrees, benefits in this category include 1) higher retention rates; 2) greater increases in course grades; 2) greater persistence in the major; 3) higher graduation rates; and 4) higher rates of acceptance into and enrollment in post-graduate education (graduate/professional schools). To understand about the research, the following section will describe on the nature, characteristics, type, issues, and the most commonly researesearch method conducting by undergraduate students on their research for young learners.

### **Definition of Research**

When one says that she or he is undertaking a research study to find answers to a question, she/he is implying that the process: 1) is being undertaken within a framework of a set of philosophies (approaches) e.g. qualitative, quantitative and the academic discipline in which you have been trained; 2) uses procedures, methods and techniques that have been tested for their validity and reliability (Creswell, 2008). Validity means that correct procedures have been applied to find answers to a question. Reliability refers to the quality of a measurement procedure that provides repeatability and accuracy; 3) is designed to be unbiased and objective in each steps of research.

In regard with the three criteria mentioned above, it enables the process to be called 'research'. However, the degree to which these criteria are expected to be fulfilled varies from discipline to discipline and so the meaning of 'research' differs from one academic discipline to another. The difference between research and non-research activity is, in the way we find answers: the process must meet certain requirements to be called research. Researcher can identify these requirements by examining some definitions of research. The word research is composed of two syllables, re

and search. re is a prefix meaning again, a new or over again search is a verb meaning to examine closely and carefully, to test and try, or to probe. Together they form a noun 'research' that describe a careful, systematic, patient study and investigation in some field of knowledge, undertaken to establish facts or principles (Gay & Airasian, 2000, 2003).

In line with the above definition, research is a structured enquiry that utilizes acceptable scientific methodology to solve problems and create new knowledge that is generally applicable (Creswell, 2008). Scientific methods consist of systematic observation, classification and interpretation of data. Although we engage in such process in our daily life, the difference between our casual day- to-day generalization and the conclusions usually recognized as scientific method lies in the degree of formality, rigorousness, verifiability and general validity of latter.

### **Characteristics of Research in the Area of Young Learners**

Research is a process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting information to answer questions. But to qualify as research, the process must have certain characteristics: it must, as far as possible, be controlled, rigorous, systematic, valid and verifiable, empirical and critical (Creswell, 2008; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006; Gay & Airasian, 2000; Karn, 2007). These are the characteristic of research:

a. Controlled- in real life there are many factors that affect an outcome. The concept of control implies that, in exploring causality in relation to two variables (factors), you set up your study in a way that minimizes the effects of other factors affecting the relationship. This can be achieved to a large extent in the physical sciences (cooking, bakery), as most of the research is done in a laboratory. However, in the social sciences (Hospitality and Tourism) it is extremely difficult as

research is carried out on issues related to human beings living in society, where such controls are not possible. Therefore in Hospitality and Tourism, as you cannot control external factors, you attempt to quantify their impact.

- b. Rigorous-you must be scrupulous in ensuring that the procedures followed to find answers to questions are relevant, appropriate and justified. Again, the degree of rigor varies markedly between the physical and social sciences and within the social sciences.
- c. Systematic-this implies that the procedure adopted to undertake an investigation follow a certain logical sequence. The different steps cannot be taken in a haphazard way. Some procedures must follow others.
- d. Valid and verifiable-this concept implies that whatever you conclude on the basis of your findings is correct and can be verified by you and others.
- e. Empirical-this means that any conclusion drawn are based upon hard evidence gathered from information collected from real life experiences or observations.
- f. Critical-critical scrutiny of the procedures used and the methods employed is crucial to a research enquiry. The process of investigation must be foolproof and free from drawbacks. The process adopted and the procedures used must be able to withstand critical scrutiny. For a process to be called research, it is imperative that it has the above characteristics.

### **Key Trends (Issues) in Research for Undergraduate Students**

Young learners scholars around the world have been using different trends suitable to the context, need, availability of resources and practicality (Karn, 2007). They have had more than a dozen of methods of teaching for young learners offered at different times. All of them are practiced in classrooms. Apparently,

these are the guidance for the undergraduate students who concern their research on young learners to follow the trends in doing their research as one of academic requirement to finish their studies. However, a majority of them instead of sticking on certain prescribed trends, pursue different ones at different times applicable to their contexts. Besides, they practiced different trends to grow academically; some of the interesting general issues that are taking place in research in the area of young learners for these typical students based on several studies.

According to Drew (2009), there are three broad issues of research on young learners. First category is focused on the influence of pedagogic levels on the teaching and learning processes (Mustafa, 2011; Shak & Gardner, 2008; Turek, 2013). These typical research can be found on on EBSCO and ERIC databases. According to Simard (2004), most of the research on young learners were typically experimental or quasi-experimental in nature and used pre-tests, intervention, post-tests and delayed post-tests. At this typical research, the data were collected from children through purpose designed summative tests (Harley, 1998); standardised summative tests (Butler & Lee, 2006); and performance tasks (Bae 2007). In regard with the purpose of each study and the age of participating children, the research methods differed. They employed picture description tasks (Aivazoglou & Griva, 2014), comprehension tests (Drew, 2009) and the Cambridge Young Learners Starters Test to compare the effects of various types of instructional approaches. In order to collect data on age-related language learning issues, researchers used story telling tasks with 5-12 year olds (White, 1998) re-telling a story which children had listened to with 4-6 year olds (Tagoilelagi-LeotaGlynn, McNaughton, MacDonald, & Farry, 2005) and a grammaticality judgement test with 8-9 and 11-12 year olds (García-Carbonell, Rising, Montero, & Watts, 2001, Bae, 2007). The other

studies investigated the development of various language skills and areas. The data were collected through picture based story writing tasks (Bae, 2007), reading aloud tests (Woore 2009), reading comprehension/fluency tests (Gebauer et al. 2013), oral and reading comprehension tasks (Toloa et al., 2009) and the BPVS II standardised test (Botting, Faragher, Simkin, Knox, & Conti-Ramsden, 2001; Mawhood, Howlin, & Rutter, 2000). Indeed, these research categories will beuseful insights into the effectiveness of various pedagogical practices.

The second issue of studies combined experimental design with research areas such as motivation (Petri & Govern, 2012) and attitude (Heining-Boynton & Haitema, 2007)). They tended to employ questionnaires whose results were sometimes compared with second language learners' performance (Shak & Gardner, 2008). Similar to the first group of studies, this type of research made children as objects of the study. It is meant that the child-friendliness of methods was determined by adult researchers, whose findings were influenced by adult interpretations and whose decisions about young learner education were made solely from an adult perspective.

Turek (2013) also found the third issue comprised a significantly smaller proportion of published research which engaged young learners more fully by treating them as subjects and eliciting their accounts of classroom practice as well as their views and opinions. This group of studies deployed a varied array of methods to collect data from children, including think-aloud procedures (Magliano & Millis, 2003), role play (Gardner & Yaacob, 2007), reflective writing (Goh & Taib, 2006), (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011; Papapavlou, 1999), smiley-face questionnaires (Enever, Szpotowicz, & Mihaljevic Djigunovic, 2009) and interviews (Kuchah & Pinter, 2012). Their aim was to collect data from the perspective of participating children, which seems to be the most significant difference

between this group of studies and the former two groups. In addition to these three categories, there were a few studies which attempted to ensure the active participation of children in other ways. For example, by negotiating a meaningful relationship between researcher and learners (Kuchah & Pinter, 2012) or by engaging young in the designing of research methods.

### **Process of Research on Young Learners**

Research process on young learners is similar to undertaking a journey. For a research journey there are two important decisions to make: i) what you want to find out about or what research questions (problems) you want to find answers to; ii) how to go about finding their answers (Gay & Airasian, 2003). Creswell (2008) states that research begins when the researcher decides to address a problem, investigate an issue in the field of young learners, or pose and answer questions. To choose a research issue, it is probably the most important and most difficult part of the research because it involves practical considerations that must be kept in mind such as limiting researcher to one issue or problem, usually an issue that he or she is really interested in and that will have a positive impact on the young learner education. Creswell (s2008) also suggests that when selecting a topic and purpose for research the following points should be considered:

- a. Purpose: Why is researcher engaging in this research?
- b. Topic: What area he or she is going to investigate?
- c. Focus: What is the precise question he or she is going to ask him or herself within that area?
- d. Product What is the likely outcome of the research, as he or she intends it?
- e. Mode: How is he or she going to conduct the research?

- f. Timing. How long has he or she got to do the research? Is there a deadline for its completion?
- g. Resources: What are the resources, both human and material, that he or she can call upon to help him or her complete the research?

In brief, there are practical steps through which researcher must pass in his or her research journey in order to find answers to researcher's research questions. The pathway to find the answers to the research questions comprises research methodology. At every operational step in the research process he or she is required to choose from collection of methods, procedures and models of research methodology which will help the researcher to best achieve in the research objectives. Thus, the role of methodology is very important. There are processes to conduct the research, as follows: i) formulating the research problem, ii) extensive literature review; iii) developing the objectives; iv) preparing the research design including sample design; v) collecting the data; vi) analysis of data; vi) generalization and interpretation; and (vii) preparation of the report or presentation of results-formal write ups of conclusions reached.

### **The Most Commonly Research on Young Learners Conducted by Undergraduate Students**

Classroom Action Research (CAR) has been the most commonly used research in the study of young learners because it develop and redesign to meet particular settings and contexts on young learners (B. Johnson, 2001). This research method studies condition at classroom situation to understand and improve the quality of actions or instruction'. (A. P. Johnson, 2005) defined CAR as a systematic and orderly way for teachers to observe their practice or to explore a problem and a possible course of action. In addition to this definition, He also

asserts that action is ‘a type of inquiry that is preplanned, organized, and can be shared with others’.

The characteristics of CAR as stated by (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) is that (1) it is carried out by practitioners, rather than outside researchers, (2) it is collaborative, conducted by several members of the same interests, and (3) it is aimed at changing things. In addition, (Echeverri et al., 2006)’s principles of CAR contend that (1) The essential impetus is to change the system; (2) Concerned with the identification and solution of problems in a specific context; (3) Collaboration as an important feature; and (4) The aim is to improve the current state of affairs within the educational context in which the research is being carried out. The above principles share similar characteristics that CAR is done collectively by the teachers to improve inconducive learning conditions.

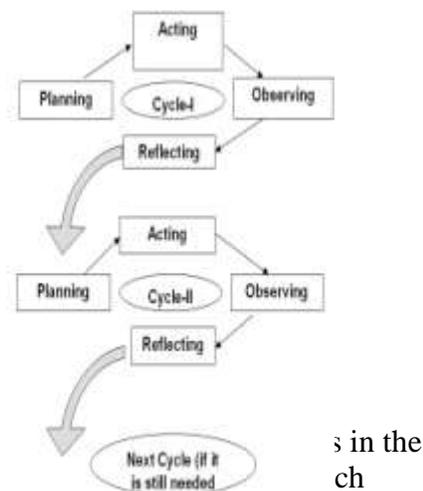
A. P. Johnson (2005) stated that CAR ‘integrates the two faculty roles of teaching and scholarship’. Accordingly, the steps of CAR begin with identifying a question, reviewing the literature, then planning a research strategy. The next steps are collecting data, analyzing data, followed by taking action based on results. The last step will be sharing the findings.

Another institution such as the BBC World Service, contends that it is ‘a reflective process which helps teachers to explore and examine aspects of teaching and learning and to take action to change and improve’. These and many other considerations shape us to the mainstream of classroom action research steps and methodology. BBC World Service further suggests seven step in doing action research including: (1) reflect; (2) explore; (3) plan; (4) research; (5) analyze; (6) act; and (7) review.

Johnson (2005: 22) indicates the following steps of the Classroom Action Research process in circle (define question, problem, area of interest – plan data collection – collect and analyze data – create an action

plan – share findings and plan of action – review the literature). He further elaborates nine steps such as: (1) identifying a problem or research topic; (2) Setting the problem or research topic in a theoretical context; (3) Making a plan for data collection; (4) Collecting and analyzing data; (5) Questioning or problematic sizing data (if necessary); (6) Analyzing or organizing data; (7) Reporting the data; (8) Making or drawing conclusions and recommendation; (9) Creating a plan of action.

The concept of CAR as sponsored by Kemmis & Taggart (1988) is commonly represented in several cycles, each of which consists of 4 stages such as Planing, Acting, Observing, and Reflecting. A series of stages of the research can be drawn in the following figure as follow



There are several issues regarding the implementation of CAR which is used by scholars in the field of young learners in Indonesia, but most common problems can be seen in the case of students as action researchers and the struggles for achieving accurate results, namely frequent threats to validity and reliability.

A common trend of doing Classroom Action Research in our region is that it is

practiced for the completion of study program either in Undergraduate or Graduate programs. It constitutes a big issue since these researchers are persons who are struggling for the degrees and they may have limited experiences and lack authority toward teaching and learning process at the school. As the initiation of action research must be based on teacher's reflection, these students' researchers in fact, rely heavily on the teachers, thus, resembling second or indirect sources for the study. Further implication of this issue is that one easily questions the credibility of advisors. Who is responsible for this unscientific treatment? To deal with this issue then, comprehensive and more credible studies are needed to step up future classroom action research in this region.

Another issue is originated from frequent errors in methodology, especially those dealing with data collection and analysis. Any research including Classroom Action Research always confront with the problem of (a) accuracy and credibility; (b) validity, reliability, and triangulation; and (c) inductive analysis. The ultimate goal of action research is to use the findings to make effective changes or choice. Therefore, the collection and analysis of data must be accurate and credible. Accuracy in action research means that the data create fairly true picture of the bit of the reality being observed. Credibility refers to trustworthiness or capability of being believed. Through this way then it enables the researcher and others to use the data with confidence.

Johnson (2005: 9-10) suggests the following seven tips to establish more accuracy and credibility in collecting and analyzing data: (1) Record the observations carefully and precisely by double checking to make sure that things is recorded exactly as it is seen. (2) Describe all phases of data collection and analysis. Create a level of clarity whereby another person could duplicate the steps. (3) Make sure to record and report everything that is of importance. Record and report fully; do not omit data that may be counter to what you

believe. The goal is to understand fully all aspects of what we are observing. (4) Be as objective as possible in describing and interpreting what is seen. (5) Use enough data sources; (6) Use the right kind of data sources; and (7) Look long enough and deep enough.

All seven tips outlined above may have been the teachers' routine jobs at the school; therefore, teachers will not face serious problems in producing credible and accurate data for the study. However, all efforts beginning from initiating or planning the Classroom Action Research until the implementation or collecting data, including making the report, cannot be realized unless they are willing to change.

## CONCLUSION

This article critically discussed important and interlocked issues pertinent to research on young learners for undergraduate students. The discussion has highlighted the nature and importance of the research, key issues in the research. A conclusion was reached regarding the need to advance research on young learners for the students and meet the existing demands and challenges imposed upon them locally and globally. Research is very important for undergraduate students. It will provide them opportunities to participate in cutting-edge research and to advance their skills in literature, researching, and writing. They can learn how their supervisors know what they know. In other words, they know how to conduct research is also important for them contemplating graduate school in their discipline. Classroom Action Research is the most common method that used by scholars as well as researchers in the study of young learners. It is caused by doing this research, the researchers as well as the teachers are provided with an opportunity to share a broader sense of social responsibility in which they have been traditionally served before. As members of specific culture, teachers form and maintain special discourse that may only be understood

through special context. This kind of improvisation is due to rapid changes and development of information technology as well as massive change of social orders in some parts of the world. In this respect, teachers who concern on young learners should be able to bring these significant effects to view and practice the knowledge in social setting.

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