# Using Action Research to Enhance ESL Learners' Productive Language Skills: Case Studies from the Maldives

A Multi-Modal Approach to Teacher Professional Development in Low Resource Settings

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## Introduction

The Maldives is an archipelago consisting of 1192 islands scattered across the Indian Ocean. Approximately 188 of these islands are inhabited by local citizens while over 111 are developed as tourist resorts. According to the 2014 Census, the country has a total population of over 407,000 people dispersed across the islands, with 38% of the population concentrated in the capital city, Male' (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). The dispersed nature of the population and geographical remoteness together with a narrow resource base including inadequate human capital, and environmental vulnerabilities (such as the sea level rise) have been long recognized as posing developmental challenges for the Maldives (UNDP, 2014).

In attempts to overcome such challenges education has been accorded a high priority in the country since Amin's Era (Ali, Hameed, & Vidovich, 2020). Since the introduction of formal schools in the 1920s, the demand for education has been steadily growing. A sea change in education in the country has been the introduction of English as a medium of instruction in 1961 (Lutfi, 2011), primarily as "part of a conscious effort to prepare individuals for training that they would receive overseas in order to meet the increasing developmental needs of the country" (Mohamed & Ahmed, 1999; p. 91) and out of necessity – due to lack of resources in the local language such as textbooks, and dearth of local teachers (Ali, Hameed, & Vidovich, 2020).

In contexts such as the Maldives where the mainstream education is dominated by use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI), academic achievement in general is significantly influenced by one's proficiency in the English language (Waluyo & Panmei, 2021). Research shows that students who are competent in the language of instruction tend to find learning other subjects more effortless and vice versa (Kök, 2023). Yet, evidence shows that students in the Maldives in general do not fare well on tasks that required verbal expression of thought, especially in writing in the English language. For example, in a study investigating the level of second language (L2) proficiency in relation to reading abilities and mathematical skills in 25 ten-to-twelve-year-old children in the Maldives, Bosch, Tsimpli, and Guasti (2023) have found a relatively low performance on all tasks, despite normal nonverbal intelligence. Similar was the finding of the needs-assessment baseline survey conducted by the National Institute of Education (NIE) in association with UNICEF from 2012-2013 which both tracked and compared the performance of Maldivian students (in grades 6 and 7) in science, mathematics, social science, and language with those in India who also took part in the same survey. The results showed that the performance of Maldivian students in subjects that require verbal expression of thought such as social studies, science, and language was appallingly low compared to their counterparts in India. The National Assessment of Learning Objectives (NALO) of 2015 and 2017 also showed that the average pass percentage of 4th and 7th graders in English language reached barely 50 per cent.

Hence, improving the English language standards of the students, especially in terms of their productive language skills has come to be regarded as a key imperative in language education (Kök, 2023). To this effect, the Maldives National Curriculum Framework (NCF) –

under Language and Communication Strand 3 – articulates use of effective strategies in writing and representing ideas through a variety of media to inculcate the 21$^{st}$ century skills in students (NIE, 2015). Hence, the present paper reports on three case studies done in the Maldives to improve students' productive language skills using an action research approach. While the three case studies focus on productive skills, two of them pertain to developing writing skills and one is concerned with improving speaking skills. Of the two case studies which focus on writing skills, one aims to develop students' argumentative writing skills while the other one deals with creative writing. The following sections in turn provide summaries of these case studies.

## Summaries of The Case Studies

### Case Study One

*Improving Argumentative Writing Skills of ESL Students using Toulmin's Model: An Action-Research in a Maldivian Secondary School*

This case study was conducted by a Maldivian teacher educator who was motivated by the observation that students entering higher education lacked academic writing skills, especially in argumentation and critical thinking. He also noticed that the current method of teaching argumentative writing in secondary schools was ineffective and did not align with the National Curriculum Framework that emphasized critical thinking as a key competency.

Hence, the research aimed to investigate how Toulmin's Model or Argument (TMA), a model that breaks down arguments into six components (claim, grounds, warrant, qualifier, rebuttal, and backing), could improve students' argumentative writing skills in terms of structure, cohesion, evidence, and quality. It also sought to explore the challenges that teachers might face in using TMA with their ESL students.

To explore issues related to argumentative writing skills of ESL learners and the impact of a potential intervention (i.e. TMA) to circumvent them, collaborative action research was used due to its democratic and participatory nature and its tendency to empower the participants. Since the research sought to find out the impact of intervention on qualitative aspects , it used the following methods of data collection. A face-to-face, focus group discussion was conducted initially, followed by individual interviews and a small scale survey was used. There were also non-participant interviews followed by follow-up interviews and reflection sessions. The action research was conducted in two cycles – each cycle lasting for 4 weeks. The case study produced the following findings in response to its research questions.

The interviews and lesson observations identified a typical pattern the teachers followed in an article writing lesson. This includes a whole class discussion, a speaking activity, a group brainstorming, or a similar activity used as a pre-writing task. According to

the teachers, this approach was useful in capturing student interest and generating ideas for writing. Some teachers also used a reading task that led to the writing lesson. At the department level, teachers had also been instructed to give students a template to help them organize ideas and plan their essays. However, instruction was differentiated to cater to mixed ability students.. Overall, it can be said that the teachers used a process approach to writing. However, there was not enough time in class for the drafting process which often got assigned as "homework" if it was not completed in class. The teachers used a template with guiding phrases/connectives to help them structure their writing and help them improve textual cohesion. Sometimes, sample texts were provided to students to model the process of argument building and structure.

The teachers found the approach more useful as a guide to structuring and improving the quality of argument than the template they had been giving students. As one teacher pointed out, "…this (TMA) is a very useful model. It shows how an argument can be built, using relevant supporting details. It shows that an argument is not just a claim; it must be well justified using logical evidence." The improvement in students' writing quality can be seen when the difference in students' writing before and after the intervention is compared. Prior to introducing TMA, students attempted to link ideas using connectives, but some of the ideas were repetitive and not very organized. Similarly, some able students were also confused when it came to providing supporting details. As one teacher put it, "they think that just using some phrases like "it's proved that or it's clear that" is enough for evidence. What they do is provide more claim…claim after claim". However, after being taught TMA, students improved this issue of circular reasoning. Their writing became more sophisticated, and better organized with improved quality of arguments. Overall, then, Toulmin's model of argument has helped students improve the structure and quality of their arguments by prompting them to think critically, offer more convincing evidence that bear logical relevance to their claims, identifying and refuting counter arguments where necessary, and by improving the overall organization and flow of ideas in their text (coherence and cohesion). In addition, TMA has had a positive effect on students' motivation to think critically and write argumentatively.

Contrary to teachers' initial fear, students did not find technical terms in Toulmin's model too difficult to grasp. Using relevant examples, teachers were able to make students understand the concepts and terms without many issues. However, there was a crucial challenge that students faced in using TMA in deciding as to what counts as evidence.

Teachers also faced other practical difficulties such as the limited time which did not allow teachers to hold sustained discussion in class and also to allow adequate time for students in class to attempt whole essays. Consequently, student numbers, having mixed ability students in the class and students' lack of reading habit posed challenges for the teachers.

Finally, most students and teachers at times seemed to consider English as a Second Language (ESL) just as any other subject. Rather than viewing it as a vehicle of communication and a means to further growth, motivation to learn ESL was limited to passing in the subject. This mindset seemed to prevent students from focusing on improving their skills beyond the minimum requirements of the syllabus. It also seems to have led teachers to concentrate on past paper practice and other test-taking strategies, rather than nurturing the communicative competence of students in a more joyful learning process.

The Case Study One has revealed that teachers were convinced of the potential of Toulmin's model and incorporated it in their lessons using a process approach to writing, specifically one that exemplified a PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) approach. Hence, TMA could be regarded as a useful pedagogical tool for all language teachers including those working in low-resource settings. The model helped students improve the quality of their writing in terms of its cohesion and coherence, argument structure and justification, complexity of expression as well as promote their critical thinking skills.

## Case Study Two

### *Using Comic Strips and Writing Process Method to Develop Creative Writing Skills in English Language among Key Stage 2 Students in Maldives*

This study was conducted by a Maldivian teacher educator who was concerned about school students' lack of fluency in idea generation and creative writing skills. Based on the observation that most of the English classes lack effective writing strategies and representation of students' ideas in creative ways, the study sought to explore the developments in creative writing skills in English language among students of Key Stage 2 (grade 6) using comic strips. The research was guided by the question: "How does the writing process method using comic strips help to develop creative writing skills in English among students of Key Stage 2?"

The research was designed as a classroom action-research, involving 6 grade 6 English teachers and their students from an urban school in Hulhumale', Maldives. The data collection methods were interviews, reflections, and tests (pre-test and post-test). The data analysis methods were thematic analysis for qualitative data and descriptive statistics for quantitative data. The intervention consisted of 5 lessons on creative writing using comic strips and the writing process method. The writing process method involved 5 stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The comic strips were used as a stimulus and a tool for students to generate and organize their ideas, create dialogue, and add humor and creativity to their writing. The teachers were trained on how to implement the intervention through a professional development workshop.

The findings showed that the intervention improved the students' creative writing skills, as evidenced by the increase in their test scores and the improvement in their writing aspects, such as content, organization, voice, tone, and conventions. The findings also revealed three recurring themes from the qualitative data: increase in students' involvement in the teaching and learning process; improvement in students' motivation to write using comic strips, and improvement in students' writing achievement. The study concluded that comic strips and the writing process method were effective strategies to develop creative writing skills in English among students of Key Stage 2. The study also suggested some implications for policy, practice, and further research, such as incorporating comic strips in the curriculum, providing more opportunities for students to write creatively, and conducting more studies on the impact of comic strips on other language skills and literacy outcomes.

## Case Study Three

### Use of Communicative Language Teaching Approach to Improve Maldivian ESL Learners' Speaking Competence

This study was also conducted by a Maldivian teacher educator who was concerned about school students' lack of competence in speaking in ESL context. In collaboration with in-service ESL teachers and literature review, the author identified fluency issues of students and possible causes such as those related to (a) learners (e.g., lack of language proficiency, skills, confidence, and learner anxiety and disabilities), (b) situational factors (such as large class size, cultural norms, conducive environment), and (c) pedagogical factors (such as teaching technique and feedback, time allocation, professional development of teachers). The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach was then proposed and trialed as an intervention to improve speaking competence against this background. The main question that propelled the study then was "How effective is CLT in enhancing ESL learners' speaking competence?"

Five teachers across three public schools were involved in the action research that was conducted to assess the efficacy of CLT in improving ESL learners' speaking competence. The teachers were trained in teaching using CLT and encouraged to use it in teaching their students. The resulting data were examined under three main categories: teacher as a facilitator, CLT activities, and learner factors.

- **Teacher as a facilitator**: The researchers found that the teachers changed their role from traditional teachers to facilitators when they implemented CLT. They reported feeling less stressed and more creative. They also created a more engaging and supportive learning environment for the students, who viewed them as guides rather than instructors.

- **CLT activities**: The researchers found that the teachers used various CLT activities, such as role plays, group work, pair work, and presentations, to enhance the students' speaking skills. They reported that the students were more motivated, involved, and confident in using the language. They also observed that the students improved their vocabulary, fluency, creativity, and grammar through communicative activities. The researchers also noted that CLT fostered peer learning, collaboration, and respect among the students.

- **Learner responses and reactions**: The researchers found that the students enjoyed the CLT activities and showed positive attitudes and behaviors. They reported that the students were more willing to speak, express their opinions, and take risks with the language. They also observed that the students were more relaxed, alert, and inquisitive during the lessons. They also noted that the students developed a stronger sense of autonomy and responsibility for their own learning.

Overall, the researcher concluded that CLT had a positive impact on the students' speaking skills and motivation. They also concluded that CLT led to a change in the teachers' roles and practices. They suggested that CLT can be an effective method for promoting learner-centered and communicative language teaching and learning.

## Conclusion

This report documents three case studies done in the Maldives to improve students' productive language skills (writing and speaking) using an action research approach – a collaborative and reflective approach to solving practical problems. The first case study explores how Toulmin's model of argumentation can improve students' argumentative writing skills in terms of structure, cohesion, evidence, and quality. It also identifies the challenges and benefits of using this model with ESL students. The second case study investigates how comic strips, and the writing process method can develop students' creative writing skills in English. It also examines the impact of these strategies on students' motivation, involvement, and achievement. The third case study evaluates how communicative language teaching (CLT) can enhance students' speaking competence in ESL context. It also analyses how CLT changes the teachers' roles and practices and fosters learner-centred and communicative language learning.

Overall, the case studies showcase evidence of the effectiveness of using action research in improving ESL learners' productive skills. It can be concluded that action research is a powerful tool for teachers to enhance their teaching practices by promoting reflection, personalized professional development, continuous improvement, empowerment, collaboration, data-driven decision-making, and the development of strong problem-solving skills. It aligns with the principles of lifelong learning and contributes to the ongoing growth and development of educators. Hence, action research must be promoted as an ongoing

professional development endeavour for teachers to enhance their critical reflection, problem-solving, continuous improvement, collaboration, and empowerment.

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