Action Research in endangered language communities

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Overview action research (AR) to be a promising approach of language revitalization

Examine some activities of the Port Language Revitalization Project using AR

Presentation table

1. Background
2. What is “action research”?
3. Examine activities of Port Language Revitalization Project
4. Future issues

1. Background
Background (1)

• All the languages in the Ryukyu Islands are at risk of disappearing (Mosely 2010)

• Increase in comprehensive grammar research and grammar sketches

• Next step must be to apply that knowledge to language revitalization

Background (2)

• Language revitalization activities conducted outside of formal research as social outreach

• Documentation of activities usually insufficiently rich for future researchers to examine

• Need to share empirical knowledge, theoretical and methodological frameworks

Background (3)

• Researchers have started to share researcher’s experiences with language revitalization

  • Poster session at the 104th conference of the Dialectological Circle of Japan (May, 2017)

  • Workshop at the 32nd conference of the Phonetic Society of Japan (September, 2018)

Is a language revitalization research??

and so on...
2. What is action research?

**What is Action Research?**

- Aim to solve actual problems in real society and promotes social change
- Was started by Lewin (1946) and applied to various disciplines: socio psychology, education, health care, and nursing.

**Why Action Research?**

1. **Highly conscious** that researchers are informed by their own beliefs (Yamori 2013: 13)
2. Assumes researchers and research subjects mutually affect each other, and regards them both as participants in the study (Stringer 2013: 14)
3. Seeks effective solutions which works in specific situation and localized settings rather than universal contexts (Densin & Lincoln 1994)

**Why Action Research?**

- Language revitalization has a **concrete purpose** of maintaining or revitalizing a language
- Not researchers but local people **should play a main role** in order to achieve this purpose
- Need to find **effective solutions** which works in the specific community
“Although many similarities can be found in the causes of language loss, this does not mean that similar approaches to language revitalization can be taken. There are too many differences in the political, social, and economic situations facing”

(Grenoble and Whaley 2006: 4)

The role of a researcher in AR

• Facilitator who acts as a catalyst to assist stakeholders (local people) to define their problems and to monitor and support their activity as they work toward effective resolution of the issues (Stringer 2014: 20)

• Researchers are not experts who do research on people but one of the participants who have resources and support others to do their activities

3. The Port Language Revitalization Project

• Motivate local people to get interested in traditional languages
• Empower them to produce and continue their own activities in the future
The Port Language Revitalization Project

• Share the process of creating materials
• Discuss how to actively use them with local people

Workshops of creating picture books

Picture Book Project (1)

• Created a picture book in Ryukyu-Okinoerabu Island
• Tracked how activities spread after that

Picture Book Project (2)

• `Michanu Fui" “The Voice of the Land”`

Picture Book Project (3)

• Started with a manuscript originally written in standard Japanese

Author participated in projects:
(1) Collaborative Research by NINJAL, (2) Public seminars by linguists

• She rediscovered the value of her native language and realized the importance of documenting it

→ She translated the manuscript into Ryukyu-Okinoerabu Language
Picture book project (4)

- At over 120 pages, became the largest text in Okinoerabu Language
- We planned to create a picture book to encourage parents generations (re)learn the Okinoerabu-Language

**Passive speaker**
- Can not speak the Okinoerabu Language
- Understand 70%-80% of it

![Degree of intelligibility of Okinoerabu Language by people from different generations](Yokoyama (2017))

Picture book project (4)

- We started to collaborate with other experts including an illustrator, book designers, and other researchers
- Published a picture book package includes a picture book, CD and explanation for Okinoerabu Language

Expansion after creating the picture book (1)

**School (but not school-setting) Project**
- Donated 40 picture books to an elementary school
- Discussed with the headmaster and the top of the PTA about using the book
- “Summer Homework” project to create language materials in each family

Expansion after creating the picture book (2)

- Four families joined our projects and created language materials
Expansion after creating the picture book (3)

• Workshop at NINJAL

Their own ongoing activities

• Four families has hold regular meetings and study Okinoerabu Language and traditional songs, work on social activities

• They gathered attention and have started to talk about their projects in their own words at local conventions

Some difficulties

• Coordination with local organizations
  □ Failed to respond to personnel changes in local organizations
  □ Failed to share information with a person who should know it
  □ Caused some confusion and troubles

• We did not understand the structure of local organization and decision-making processes and so failed to identify stakeholders correctly

Some difficulties

Setting the stage for AR (Stringer 2003: 79)

• Identify stakeholding groups or people
  □ Determine the formal structure of relevant organizations
  □ Identify and communicate with people in positions of influence and authority

• Ask local participants about the people who researchers should talk with about the issues and can have an effect on it (“snowballing method”)

Moving forward...

4. Summary and future issues

Summary

• Action research can be a promising approach to language revitalization.
• Researchers can act as a facilitator to assist local people to resolve problems.
• Need to understand the social mechanisms in the local community, foster understanding among all the stakeholders and proceed with projects as carefully as possible.

Future issues

• Document the whole process of projects and their effects including failures and difficulties
  • Future practitioners can examine them
  • Can get predictive knowledge and useful information from it
References

• Yokoyama, Aiko. 2017. Intergenerational transmission of Kunigami Dialect, Okinoerabu, Ryukyu. 106th annual meeting at Dialectological Circle of Japan. 18th May, 2017.

Thank you for listening!
“Shittai Mihedirodoo”

Supported by

Hakuho Foundation
11th Hakuho Research Grant for Child Education

DNP Foundation for Cultural Promotion
Grant for Research on Graphic Culture

Univer Foundation
Towards a healthy society and wellbeing

JSPS Grant-in-aid KAKEN
Wakate-B #16K16824
Grant-in-Aid for JSPS Fellows 17J04617

NINJAL Project
“Description and documentation of endangered languages in Japan” (PI: Nobuko Kibe)

Sumitomo Life
10th Sumisei Woman Researcher Encouragement Prize