
CHAPTER 29

Action Research in Second Language Teacher Education

Anne Burns

INTRODUCTION

Until the late 1980s, action research (AR) had relatively little impact on second language teacher education. Its emergence as a vehicle for professional development paralleled growing interest in learner-centered curriculum design (Nunan 1989; Johnson 1989) and classroom-based research (Allwright 1988; van Lier 1988; see also McKay, Chapter 28). The notion of the teacher as a self-reflective, inquiring, and critically motivated practitioner (e.g., Zeichner and Liston 1996; see also Burton, Chapter 30) also accelerated interest in AR in ELT environments, as did the advocacy of the concept of the “teacher as researcher” (Allwright and Bailey 1991; Nunan 1989).

The shifts in goals and models of teacher education from the teacher as “operative” to the teacher as creative “problem solver” and decision maker (Roberts 1998) and the advent of constructivist perspectives (Williams and Burden 1997) in teacher education have created a productive framework for the adoption of AR into second language teacher education. Underlying these perspectives is the view that teachers “will make their own sense of the ideas and theories with which they are presented in ways that are personal to them . . . each individual constructs his or her own reality” (Williams and Burden 1997: 2).

In this chapter, I first provide brief definitions and explanations of the major concepts and processes of AR and offer comparisons of AR with other research paradigms. I then consider the scope and impact of action research in English as a second language teacher education settings. This discussion is followed by an analysis of the range of ways and settings in which AR is integrated into teacher education. I conclude by raising issues relating to the further development of AR in language teacher education.

SCOPE AND DEFINITIONS

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research is the combination and interaction of two modes of activity – *action* and *research*. The *action* is located within the ongoing social processes of particular

societal contexts, whether they be classrooms, schools, or whole organizations, and typically involves developments and interventions into those processes to bring about improvement and change. The *research* is located within the systematic observation and analysis of the developments and changes that eventuate in order to identify the underlying rationale for the action and to make further changes as required based on findings and outcomes. The driving purpose for the AR process is to bridge the gap between the ideal (the most effective ways of doing things) and the real (the actual ways of doing things) in the social situation.

The AR process itself has been characterized as a spiral or cycle of movements between action and research (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Burns 1999). As the researcher plans and undertakes actions to enhance the current situation, she also deliberately observes and documents what happens as a result of these actions. Often, the results of changes are unpredictable and reveal new or unexpected avenues for further action, which is then observed and documented further. Although more complex and extended descriptions of the steps in AR have been proposed (e.g., Burns 1999; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000; Hopkins 1993; McNiff 1988), the most widely known model is that of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 10):

- develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening
- act to implement the plan
- observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs
- reflect on these effects as the basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of stages.

Teachers new to research sometimes struggle to perceive how AR is positioned in relation to more familiar and better established research approaches. As Cohen and Manion (1994: 186) point out, the terms *action* and *research* “when conjoined in this way lie as uneasy bedfellows.” There is insufficient space to describe these relationships in detail here (but see Burns 2005: 59–60); however, as a way of briefly outlining the relationships, Table 1 identifies some of the main distinctions among basic, applied and action research.

OVERVIEW

ACTION RESEARCH IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

Action research on the part of language teachers has been seen as a way to bridge the gulf between researchers and teachers (e.g., Brindley 1990; Edge 2001) and to encourage teachers to adopt an investigative stance toward their own classroom practices (e.g., Gebhard 2005; Nunan 1989). Taking these concepts further, several writers (e.g., Burns 1999; Crookes 1993; Roberts 1993) advocate a collaborative approach (see also Johnston, Chapter 24, on collaborative teacher development) where research is done by combinations of researchers and teachers (also with the possible involvement of students, parents, and administrators) as a more effective and mutually supportive way to achieve desired outcomes. AR has also been perceived as a form of professionalization that fits well within a “developmental,” or transformative, model of teacher education (e.g., Wallace 1991, 1998; Richards and Farrell 2005; see also Freeman, Chapter 1).

Research type	Philosophical Assumptions	Purpose	Main methods	Outcomes	Criteria for judgement
Basic	Universal truths generalizable across time and space are achieved through scientific enquiry.	To establish relationships among phenomena, test theory, and generate new knowledge.	Quantitative approaches, hypothesis testing, control of variables, rigorous sampling.	Development of theory.	Objectivity, verification of theory, generalizability, rigor and reliability of research methods, published through refereed, scholarly journals.
Applied	Societal phenomena can be scientifically studied and understood.	To generate understanding of human behavior and problems for the purpose of intervention.	Qualitative and quantitative approaches, data collection directed toward ensuring reliability and validity.	Development of generalizable theoretical knowledge that can be applied to the social situation.	Objectivity, rigour and scientific insights for application to social situations, published through specialized, refereed, applied journals.
Action research	People within social situations can solve problems through self-study and intervention.	To develop solutions to problems identified within one's own social environment.	Mainly qualitative, interpretive, cases studied reflectively through cyclical observational and nonobservational means.	Development of action to effect change and improvement, and deeper understanding in one's own social situation.	Subjectivity, feasibility, trustworthiness, and resonance of research outcomes with those in the same or similar social situation.

Source: Burns, A. (2005). Action research: An evolving paradigm? *Language Teaching*, 38(2), 61.

Table 1 Major characteristics of basic, applied, and action research

Among the ways that AR has been oriented towards various purposes of teacher education in the second language teaching field are the following:

- To address and find solutions to particular problems in a specific teaching or learning situation (Edge 2001; Hadley 2003)
- To underpin and investigate curriculum innovation and to understand the processes that occur as part of educational change (Lotherington 2002; Mathew 1997)
- To provide a vehicle for reducing gaps between academic research findings and practical classroom applications (Mcleod 2003; Sayer 2005)
- To facilitate the professional development of reflective teachers (Coles and Quirke 2001; Kitchen and Jeurissen 2004)
- To acquaint teachers with research skills and to enhance their knowledge of conducting research (Burns and Hood 1995; Crookes and Chandler 2001)
- To enhance the development of teachers' personal practical theories (Golombek 1998)

(Adapted from Burns 2005: 62)

There is still very limited evidence to indicate the extent of actual AR practice in teacher education. Borg (2006) contends that in many contexts internationally the conditions for teacher research are inhospitable and that in reality AR is well developed mainly in contexts such as Australia and North America where teachers are well supported professionally. Drawing from her survey research with 228 teachers in 10 countries internationally (China, Colombia, Greece, Japan, Morocco, Poland, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Tunisia), Rainey (2000) found that “a staggering” 75.5 percent had never heard of AR. However of the teachers who claimed to have heard of it, 75.9 percent also claimed that they had conducted some form of AR individually in their classrooms, although mainly as professional development rather than to learn about research. She argued that two key features stood out from her investigation – the need for adequate research training to conduct AR and the need for support and extension of AR beyond the individual classroom. These conclusions raise the issue of factors typically reported as impeding teacher research; lack of time, and resources, limitations imposed by school structures and employment contracts, problems gaining consent / support from school administrators, skills in acquiring the discourses of research and research writing, limitations on sources of advice, criticism from colleagues, and self-doubt (McKernan 1993).

Nonetheless there is some evidence from both researchers and teachers that AR is generally well received as an effective form of professional development by teachers who conduct it. Wadsworth (1998: 4) claims that the impact of AR includes assisting teachers to become:

- more *conscious of “problematizing”* an existing action or practice and more conscious of who is problematizing it and why we are problematizing it;
- more *explicit about “naming” the problem*, and more self-conscious about raising an unanswered question and focusing an effort to answer it;
- more *planned and deliberate* about commencing a process of inquiry and involving others who could or should be involved in that inquiry;
- more *systematic and rigorous* in our efforts to get answers;
- more *carefully documenting and recording action* and what people think about it and in more detail and in ways which are accessible to other relevant parties;
- more *intensive and comprehensive* in our study, waiting much longer before we “jump” to a conclusion;
- more *self-sceptical* in checking our hunches;
- attempting to develop *deeper understanding and more useful and more powerful theory* about the matters we are researching in order to produce new knowledge which can inform improved action or practice; and
- *changing our actions* as part of the research process, and then further researching these changed actions.

Anecdotally, support for these kinds of benefits is also reported by language teachers themselves (e.g., Burns 1999; Edge 2001; Farrell 2006).

CURRENT APPROACHES AND PRACTICES

Currently, the adoption of AR in second language teacher education programs can be seen as falling into three major categories: (a) required components in formal undergraduate or postgraduate courses; (b) collaborative teacher-researcher projects within educational

organizations / programs; (c) individual projects by classroom teachers / teacher educators. Of these, the first and third appear to be the most prevalent.

In the first category, teachers typically undertake small-scale projects that result in term papers and class presentations (e.g., Tsui 1996; Jones 2004; Borg 2005), although increasingly action research dissertations are being presented at doctoral level (e.g., Ogane 2004; Rochsantiningasih 2004). The rationale for including AR projects by the teacher educators conducting these courses relates to their perceptions of a need in teacher preparation programs for closer attention to enacting pedagogy, providing for future life-long learning (Crookes and Chandler 2001), raising awareness of the relevance of research for teachers and enhancing research skills (Jones 2004).

The second category typically comes from a view of AR as a way to involve teachers in wide-scale institutional curriculum change and continuing professional renewal. Such programs are likely to emanate from government grants or educational funding provided so that researchers and teachers can work together. In Australia, Brindley (1990) and others set an agenda advocating practitioner research that resulted in the continuing involvement of teachers in AR projects for the Adult Migrant English Program for the following 15 years (e.g., Burns and Hood / de Silva Joyce 1995–2005). The work by Tinker Sachs in Hong Kong (2002) focused on AR with teachers in primary and secondary schools to foster effective practices in the teaching of English and to offset “doubt on the part of school officials about the professionalisation of teachers” (2000: 35). Mathew (1997) describes a large-scale curriculum implementation project in India aimed at introducing a communicative curriculum into high schools. She notes that the teacher-researcher role “was based firmly, albeit contentiously, on the belief that curricular processes cannot be evaluated without self-monitoring on the part of the teacher” (pp. 2–3).

In addition to AR in academic or organizational settings, a third category of AR is by individual teachers and teacher educators. It is likely that much of this type of AR remains localised and unpublished (Crookes, personal communication, 22 January, 2002) and so access to it is limited. Nevertheless, there is now a small but growing body of published work that can be drawn upon by other teachers. Collections of accounts of AR by individual teachers have appeared in recent years. An early example with an AR orientation was Richards (1998). The volume edited by Edge (2001) in the TESOL Case Studies in Practice Series, provides examples from a variety of locations internationally, including Japan, New Zealand, Brazil, Thailand, France, the United Arab Emirates, and New Zealand. Hadley (2003) reports on AR conducted in South East Asian countries, whereas the most recent series focusing on language teacher research (edited by Farrell 2006–09) concentrates on research carried out by language teachers located in different world regions, many of them underpinned by AR methodologies. AR publications are also to be found in a variety of journals, particularly those that focus on language teaching and classroom-based research. *Language Teaching Research*, for example, now includes a regular section entitled, “Practitioner research.” Some recent examples are Gunn (2005) and Li (2006). *Profile*, published in Colombia through the National University of Colombia, was initiated to establish a Latin-American outlet for teacher AR publications.

Bartels (2001) posed the question: “Is action research only for language teachers?” His question was directed at what he saw as a lack of interest in or understanding of AR in research done by teacher educators. This lack of interest was prefigured by Hammadou (1993, cited in Crookes and Chandler 2001) who called for studies on teacher education that would exploit AR methodologies in particular. Indeed, the majority of the (limited number of) publications on AR produced by teacher educators have tended to be of the how-to variety, rather than being reflective of widespread experiences of conducting AR themselves. Bartels (2005) was an attempt to redress this situation by bringing together reports of research on teaching practices in teacher education settings that focused on

knowledge about language (KAL). Chapters by Bigelow and Ranney (2005), Burns and Knox (2005) and Gregory (2005), for example, are accounts of AR-type studies carried out on their own teaching in university-based KAL courses, detailing insights they gained about ways to operate more effectively as teacher educators. Despite this collection, however, AR studies by teacher editors are not widely published.

ISSUES AND DIRECTIONS

As Johnson (Chapter 2) points out, recognition of the importance in teacher education of teacher reflection and inquiry – of which AR is one facet – has legitimized the status of practitioner knowledge. Professional knowledge construction through AR has, however, largely flourished through individualized teacher researcher endeavors. This tendency may be exacerbated by some of the supporting literature on AR in the field of second language teacher education. Crookes (1993) critiques the propensity of this literature to promote a technicist, value-free, version of AR with its focus on classroom “problems” (Gebhard 2005), in preference to more progressive, critical, socially constructed and emancipatory models. His arguments, though now over a decade old, highlight the need for a shift that is still incomplete in the AR “movement” in language teacher education – from the transmissive to the transformational approaches now preferred in current discussions of teacher education. As Roberts (1998: 288) notes, the challenge for teacher educators is to:

highlight the exchange between individual development and its social context; positive relationships and opportunities for critical dialogue; and a consistent link between a person’s work and the landscape in which it takes place.

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of “communities of practice” (COP) offers a productive route for this kind of shift within AR practices and within teacher education programs more generally (see Singh and Richards, Chapter 20). Learning in the COP view is situated within a process of engagement with others and is therefore a socially constructed rather than an individualized enterprise. In this vein, Wells and Chiang-Wells, (1992) refer to “communities of inquiry” where opportunities are set up for teachers and researchers to construct knowledge about AR collectively over time. Pedagogical knowledge construction thus occurs through dialectic interaction and critical exchange. AR communities of inquiry in teacher education contexts can aim to create opportunities where teachers problematize (rather than problem solve) their practices through collaboration and dialog, and critically engage in the lived contexts, processes, procedures, challenges, and outcomes of their research. Participation in a community of inquiry is likely to have a more productive and lasting impact on practice than individualized learning. Within such approaches, teacher educators should aim to scaffold not only the techniques and practices of AR, but also epistemological and socialization processes that will lead to greater understanding of the knowledge base for second language teaching and learning.

Suggestions for further reading

Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burns, A., & Hood, S. / de Silva Joyce, H. (Eds.). (1992–2005). *Teachers’ Voices Series*. Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.

- Edge, J. (2001). *Action research. Case studies in TESOL practice series*. Alexandria: TESOL.
- Farrell, T. (General Ed.). (2005–09). *Language Teacher Research in . . . Series*. Alexandria: TESOL. *Asia* (Farrell, 2006), *Europe* (Borg, S. 2006), *the Americas* (McGarrell, H. 2007), *the Middle East* (Coombe, C. & Barlow, L. 2007), *Australia and New Zealand* (Burns, A. & Burton, J. 2008), and *Africa* (Makalela, M. & Kurgatbut, P. 2009).
- Freeman, D. (1998). *Doing teacher research. From inquiry to understanding*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- McKay, S. (2006). *Researching second language classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Wallace, M. (1998). *Action research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

References

- Allwright, D. (1988). *Observation in the language classroom*. London: Longman.
- Allwright, D., & Bailey, K. (1991). *Focus on the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bartels, N. (2001). Professional preparation and action research: Only for language teachers? *TESOL Quarterly*, 36 (1), 71–78.
- Bartels, N. (Ed.). (2005). *Applied linguistics in language teacher education*. New York: Springer.
- Bigelow, M. H., & Ranney, S. H. (2005). Pre-service teachers' knowledge about language and its transfer to lesson planning. In N. Bartels (Ed.), *Applied linguistics in language teacher education* (pp. 179–200). New York: Springer.
- Borg, S. (Ed.). (2005). *Classroom research in ELT in Oman*. Muscat: Ministry of Education.
- Borg, S. (2006). Conditions for teacher research. *English Teaching Forum*, 44(4), 22–27.
- Brindley, G. (1990). Towards a research agenda for TESOL. *Prospect: An Australian Journal of TESOL*, 6(1), 7–26.
- Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burns, A. (2005). Action research: An evolving paradigm? *Language Teaching*, 38(2), 57–74.
- Burns, A., & Hood, S. (Eds.). (1995). *Teachers' Voices I: Exploring course design in a changing curriculum*. Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.
- Burns, A., & Hood, S. / de Silva Joyce, H. (Eds.). (1992–2005). *Teachers' Voices Series*. Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.
- Burns, A. & Knox, J. (2005). Realisation(s): Systemic functional linguistics and the language classroom. In N. Bartels, N. (Ed.), *Applied linguistics in language teacher education* (pp. 235–260). New York: Springer.
- Cohen, L., & Manion, L. (1994). *Research methods in education* (4th. ed.). London: Routledge.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2000). *Research methods in education*. London: Routledge.
- Coles, P., & Quirke, P. (2001). Professional development through the action learning gateway. *Thai TESOL Newsletter*, 14, 3, 14–20.

- Crookes, G. (1993). Action research for second language teachers: Going beyond teacher research. *Applied Linguistics*, 14(2), 130–144.
- Crookes, G., & Chandler, P. (2001). Introducing action research into post-secondary foreign language teacher education. *Foreign Language Annals*, 34(2), 131–40.
- Edge, J. (Ed.). (2001). *Action research*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (Ed.). (2006). *Language teaching research in Asia*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
- Gebhard, J. G. (2005). Awareness of teaching through action research: Examples, benefits and limitations. *JALT Journal*, 27(1), 53–69.
- Golombek, P. (1998). A study of language teachers' personal practical knowledge. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(3), 447–464.
- Gregory, A. E. (2005). What's phonetics got to do with language teaching? Investigating future teachers' use of knowledge about phonetics and phonology. In N. Bartels (Ed.), *Applied linguistics in language teacher education*, (pp. 201–220). New York: Springer.
- Gunn, C. (2005). Prioritizing practitioner research: An example from the field. *Language Teaching Research*, 9(1), 97–112.
- Hadley, G. (Ed.). (2003). *Action research in action*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional English Language Centre.
- Hammadou, J. (1993). Inquiry in language teacher education. In G. Guntermann. (Ed.), *Developing language teachers for a changing world* (pp. 76–104). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.
- Hopkins, D. (1993). *A teacher's guide to classroom research* (2nd. ed.). Buckingham: Open University.
- Johnson, R. K. (1989). *The second language curriculum*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, J. (2004). The many benefits of a research component in English language teacher education: A 'case study'. *Prospect: An Australian Journal of TESOL*, 19(2), 25–38.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (Eds.). (1988). *The action research planner* (3rd. ed.). Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press.
- Kitchen, M., & Jeurissen, M. (2004). Developing a culture of teachers as researchers. *Many Voices*, 22, 16–20.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Li, N. (2006). Researching and experiencing motivation: A plea for 'balanced research'. *Language Teaching Research*, 10(4), 237–456.
- Lotherington, H. (2002). Coordinated action research as a model for PD in bilingual education. *Australian Language Matters*, 10(2), 5.
- Mathew, R. (1997). *CBSE-ELT Curriculum implementation study. Final report*. Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad: Department of Evaluation.
- McKernan, J. (1993). *Curriculum action research* (2nd. ed.). London: Kogan Page.
- McLeod, V. (2003). Interlanguage analysis as a tool for teachers. In J. Burton & C. Clenell. (Eds.), *Interaction and language learning* (pp. 23–34).
- McNiff, J. (1988). *Action research: Principles and practice*. London: Routledge.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Understanding language classrooms: A guide for teacher-initiated action*. New York: Prentice Hall.

- Ogane, E. Y. M. (2004). *Beliefs and practices of Japanese university students towards dialogue journaling and language learning: An ethnographic action research study*. Dissertation Abstracts International, Section A: The Humanities and Social Sciences, 64 (7), 2369–70. Retrieved December 5, 2004, from MLA International Bibliography Database.
- Rainey, I. (2000). Action research and the English as a foreign language practitioner: Time to take stock. *Educational Action Research*, 8(1), 65–91.
- Richards, J. C. (Ed.). (1998). *Teaching in action*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
- Richards, J. C., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2005). *Professional development for language teachers: Strategies for teacher learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roberts, J. R. (1993). Evaluating the impact of teacher research. *System*, 21(1), 1–19.
- Roberts, J. R. (1998). *Language teacher education*. London: Arnold.
- Rochsantiningsih, D. (2004). *Enhancing professional development of Indonesian high school teachers through action research*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Macquarie University, Sydney.
- Sayer, P. (2005). An intensive approach to building conversation skills. *ELT Journal*, 59(1), 14–22.
- Tinker Sachs, G. (2002). *Action research. Fostering and furthering effective practices in the teaching of English*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong.
- Tsui, A. (1996). Reticence and anxiety in second language learning. In K. M. Bailey & D. Nunan. (Eds.), *Voices from the language classroom* (pp. 145–67). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- van Lier, L. (1988). *The classroom and the language learner*. London: Longman.
- Wadsworth, Y. (1998). What is participatory action research? *Action Research International*. retrieved March 13, 2007, from www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html.
- Wallace, M. (1991). *Training foreign language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wallace, M. (1998). *Action research for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wells, G., & Chang-Wells, G. L. (1992). *Constructing knowledge together*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Williams, M., & Burden, R. L. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers: A social constructivist approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zeichner, K. M., & Liston, D. P. (1996). *Reflective teaching. An introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.