

## ACTION RESEARCH\*

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Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has, over the last few decades, steadily shifted towards more theoretical rather than practical goals (see, e.g., the thematic issue of *Applied Linguistics*, 1993, Vol 14, 3). Although research for the sake of creating new or better theories is clearly a valid and important pursuit, we must never forget that it is equally important to do research on practical activities and for practical purposes, such as the improvement of aspects of language teaching and learning. Otherwise, our field will be divided, to borrow the words of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, between

"those who reflect without practising and those who practise without reflecting" (Robbins 1991:82).

Action research is a type of research which assumes that the practitioners themselves are often the best people to carry out research on their own practices, perhaps at times with help from academics who have some relevant expertise to offer (the latter is often called *collaborative research*, in which academics and teachers are equal partners; see further below). The term Action Research was coined in the 1940's by the German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946). He was concerned with the investigation and solution of pressing problems in the real world, and one of his famous statements is that

"research is too important to be left for publication in books, but should be put directly into the service of problems needing urgent solutions.

There are a number of different definitions of Action Research, partly because the purposes for doing the research can be quite varied. In a recent overview, Crookes divides these purposes into two basic types:

- "a) straightforward teacher research
- b) critical ("radical") action research" (Crookes 1993:130)

In this paper I will not systematically distinguish between action research and other kinds of teacher research, assuming that the teacher's questions will determine the methodology, and that often views and purposes will change along the way. For both kinds, a standard classic definition (see Cohen & Manion 1985:174; van Lier 1988:67) will suffice:

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"Action Research is small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention."

In most cases, there is some problem or phenomenon in our teaching practice which puzzles or worries us and, like a strange animal in front of us on the path which we want to prod with a stick, we want to examine it in order to get a better understanding of it, and thus facilitate our progress.

In many ways, every good teacher already does action research every day, as part of his or her ordinary teaching activities. After all, we are continually evaluating our actions (techniques, activities, etc.) in terms of their effectiveness, and changing those actions which we perceive to be unsatisfactory. However, a close examination of action research, its history and its practices, can suggest a number of ways in which teachers can get significant advantages from a more systematic in-depth application of the concept in its various guises.

Furthermore, many advocates of action research suggest that such research can be used to transform the actual situation of teachers and learners, in ways similar to those recommended by the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1972) and his followers, and in line with Crookes's second type mentioned above. An example might be that a group of teachers might feel that their attempts at teaching more communicatively are thwarted by an institutional testing system which emphasizes isolated bits of grammatical knowledge. In a such a case critical action research might examine ways in which institutional pressures could be changed, or test and curriculum reconciled. Such critical action research is of course a form of political action, one which may be perceived as being of a subversive nature. Critical action research thus examines, questions, and seeks to transform existing realities, rather than just trying to solve problems within the margins defined by the status quo. As McNiff notes: "Politics will intrude," and she cautions the action researcher

"... that opposition will come the way of the action researcher who goes public. People are usually afraid of change and will often resist it by whatever means they have available. Action research needs teachers of courage." (1988:72)

### *The teacher as researcher*

As I mentioned above, in a sense every teacher is a researcher already, but there is no harm in stressing the point, since many of us at times fall into unexamined routines, or rush headlong from one lesson into another, collapsing into the first available easy chair at the end of a long, exhausting day. Clearly, if action research is going to make us even more exhausted than we already are, then it will not be a very popular or successful activity. It has to enrich our professional lives, improve the success rate of our students, contribute to our understanding of language learning, and so on. If it cannot reduce our exhaustion, at least it ought to make it more bearable by reducing frustration, lack of direction, and boredom.

Action research, by systematizing, documenting, and thus legitimizing our investigative activities as teachers, can make our work more purposeful, interesting,

and valuable, and as such it tends to have an energizing and revitalizing effect. This is how a survey of teacher-researchers puts it:

"Experienced teacher-researchers stated that their research brought them many personal and professional benefits, including increased collegiality, a sense of empowerment, and increased self-esteem. Teacher-researchers viewed themselves as being more open to change, more reflective, and better informed than they had been when they began their research. They now saw themselves as experts in their field who were better problem solvers and more effective teachers with fresher attitudes toward education. They also saw strong connections between theory and practice." (Bennett 1993:69)

In addition to this empowerment aspect (or perhaps partly because of it), teacher research is essential to educational improvement, according to the influential British curriculum innovator Lawrence Stenhouse:

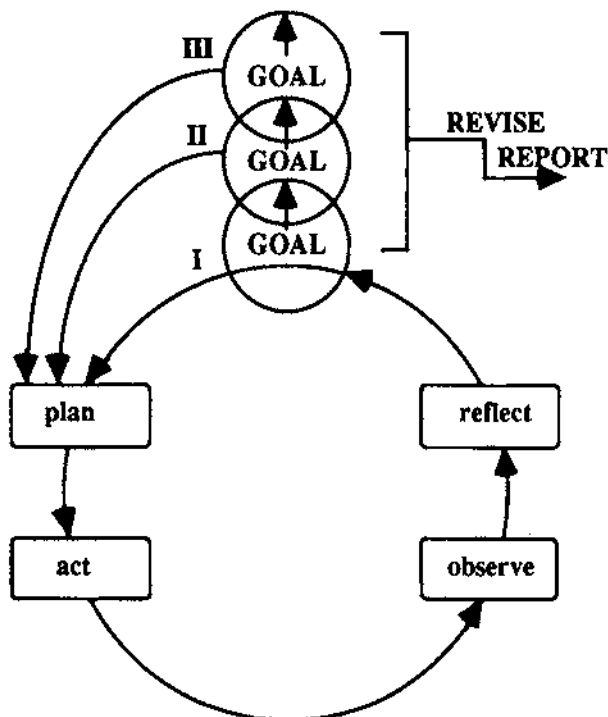
"For in the end it is difficult to see how teaching can be improved or how curricular proposals can be evaluated without self-monitoring on the part of teachers. A research tradition which is accessible to teachers and which feeds teaching must be created if education is to be significantly improved." (1975:165)

### *Some practical considerations and examples*

When putting some form of action research into practice, perhaps the most important thing to bear in mind that it is unlikely to work if carried out by one single teacher working alone. It is essentially a collaborative effort involving observation and conversation. It is difficult to observe your own lessons systematically, and it is even more difficult to have a conversation with yourself about how things are going. *L'idée vient en parlant*, as von Kleist said long ago (quoted in Pöppel 1988:172), and in addition, it is hard to keep some momentum going on your own. And when the important moment of reporting arrives, it is easier to get a presentation or paper together in a pair or group than on your own.

There are many different ways in which collaboration can be structured. Above I mentioned collaboration between teachers and academic researchers. A good example of such collaboration is Freeman (1992), which shows that academic researchers need not just take data from the classroom setting and then disappear to analyze and publish the results (the 'Blitzkrieg' approach, see Rist 1980), but that collaborative research can enrich all parties involved equally. Another way to collaborate is within a network or group of teachers working towards a common goal, as exemplified in the work of teachers involved in the LINC (Language In the National Curriculum) project, coordinated by Ronald Carter. Teachers participating in this project exchanged views through inservice courses, meetings, newsletters, and so on, and engaged in classroom projects designed to teach Knowledge About Language (KAL) in innovative ways. A number of such classroom projects are reported in Bain, Fitzgerald, and Taylor 1992.

An important consideration in action research is the actual conduct of the research. Action research is traditionally depicted as a spiral consisting of cycles of several steps, as shown in the following diagram:



**CYCLES OF ACTION RESEARCH**

However, as anyone doing action research will soon find out, reality is a whole lot messier than that, and in practice the various stages will blend in with one another, or perhaps gradually advance all together like strands in a rope we are twining. Further, practical constraints will often determine when and how intensively activities like observing and reflecting can be conducted. Rather than seeing planning, action, observation, and reflection happen in neat succession in a cycle, they will tend to occur whenever they are possible within the practical constraints of the work setting and other demands on your time. The important thing to remember is that all the ingredients must occur in a balanced and carefully monitored way. If one strand breaks, our rope will snap.

A third point to bear in mind is that action research is hardly ever short-term, but rather longitudinal. It is a way of working in which every answer raises new questions, and one can thus never quite say, "I've finished." Some time ago I attended a presentation by a group of teachers who had been given a one-year grant to do action research in their schools, involving mutual observations through peer coaching, communicating via E-mail (the schools were not very close to one another), and investigating such things as process writing, listening skills, and so on. The teachers feared that they would not get their grant renewed for another year,

because after only one year they could of course not show any tangible results: they had barely got going. One hopes that, as action research becomes more common, sponsoring agencies (for many of us, "tolerating agencies" might be an apter descriptor) become less short-sighted in their demands for immediate results. Below, I give a brief example of a possible action research project.

1. **Goal:** have more student-initiated classroom interaction.
2. **Plan:** study the literature on autonomous learning and task-based learning, and design some lessons with activities adapted from the literature; ask a friend/colleague to collaborate.
3. **Teach** the lessons. Beforehand, discuss with your collaborator how to observe and what to look for.
4. Ask your collaborator to **observe** the lessons. Also, record them. Afterwards, listen to the tapes, perhaps transcribe some parts.
5. **Discuss** with your collaborator. **Think** about how things went, what it means for the next step. Go back to the literature to **extend** your knowledge. Look at your original goal statement and see if it can be refined.

One of the few practical descriptions so far of action research in TESOL is Nunan (1990), who discusses how he uses it in inservice courses for classroom teachers, beginning with the development of observational skills, and ending with the development of an action research proposal. A number of examples of such teacher-generated proposals are listed by Nunan. Another useful source of ideas for action research is Allwright and Bailey (1991), which includes excellent discussion starters, as well as a series of mini-projects on a series of topics suitable for action research.

Apart from these books, which are especially aimed at TESOL teachers, there are several useful books and collections of studies from general education, including Kemmis and McTaggart 1982; Nixon 1982; Goswami and Stillman 1986; McNiff 1988; Oja and Smulyan 1989; Elliott 1991; McNiff 1992.

### *Conclusion*

I have characterized action research as a way of working in which certain activities occur in cycles: we *plan* some kind of action (based, perhaps on some problem we have defined, or an idea based on reading or research) we *carry it out*, we *observe* the process (preferably with a partner), we *reflect* (and converse, if possible, with our collaborator), and in the light of our reflections we revise the plan and continue with the process.

Although such work looks neat and systematic, and may even sound so if nicely cleaned up in the reporting process, in actual fact the process is not so clearly defined since, like all research (but especially action research, since it is carried out in a real context rather than in lab-like conditions), it tends to be rather messy and unpredictable.

In addition to being messy, I have suggested that action research needs to be collaborative, for several reasons. First, it is hard to observe yourself, you need a cool and detached pair of eyes to describe and analyze your classroom activities.

Secondly, at various stages conversation and collaboration is extremely beneficial, if not necessary.

Action research also needs to be longitudinal, since it cannot be the solving of isolated little problems. In the words of Freire, it is *problem-posing* rather than problem-solving, i. e., the examination and definition of problems are in themselves part of the research.

Ultimately, action research leads to a re-evaluation of our reality and goals as teachers, of the students' needs and aspirations, and of the contextual (social, institutional, political, etc.) constraints and resources that facilitate or inhibit our work. We already think and talk about these things, but by making them the object of systematic and sustained enquiry, we may actually have the chance to become *proactive* rather than remaining *reactive*.

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## RESUM

### La recerca acció.

L'autor d'aquest article presenta la recerca *acció* com a un mitjà útil que tenen els professors de llengua per a reflexionar sobre la seva tasca pedagògica i, d'aquesta manera, millorar-la. Leo van Lier defensa un tipus de recerca que involucri els mateixos actors, els professors, i proposa una sèrie d'estadis que cal tenir en compte a l'hora de fer aquest tipus de recerca a l'aula.

## SUMMARY

In this article, the author presents Action Research as a useful means for language teachers to reflect upon and improve their pedagogic task. Leo van Lier argues in favour of a type of applied research involving the practitioners themselves, i.e. the teachers, and proposes a series of steps to take into consideration in doing this type of research in the classroom.