

8.5 Action research

It is difficult to decide how to present 'action research': on the one hand, in an ideal world it ought to be a viable research area with a powerful impact. On the other hand, although it is undoubtedly a noble idea, it just does not seem to work in practice, regardless of continuous efforts to keep it going ever since the notion was first introduced by social psychologist Kurt Levin in the mid-1940s. (For an informative historical overview, see Burns 2005.) Let us examine this enigma.

8.5.1 Definition

'Action research' is a generic term for a family of related methods that share some important common principles. The most important tenet concerns the close link between research and teaching as well as the researcher and the teacher: action research is conducted by or in cooperation with teachers for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of their educational environment and improving the effectiveness of their teaching. Thus, the enhancement of practice and the introduction of change into the social enterprise are central characteristics of action research (Burns 2005).

Traditionally, the teacher-researcher link was taken so seriously in this area that only research done by the teacher him/herself was considered action research proper. However, after it was realized that it is often unrealistic to expect teachers to have the expertise to conduct rigorous research, scholars started to emphasize the collaboration between teachers and researchers. Burns (2005) explains that this collaboration can take several forms, from the researcher owning the project and co-opting a participating teacher to real collaboration where researchers and teachers participate equally in the research agenda.

8.5.2 Problematic issues

There is one big problem with action research: there is too little of it. Published studies of action research in applied linguistics are small in number and as far as my personal experience is concerned, I am still to meet a teacher who has been voluntarily involved in an action research project. So, ironically, even though one of the stated goals of action research has been to 'democratize' research, that is, to oppose a 'professional expert model' and avoid the pitfalls of 'the "top-down technology transfer model" of academic intervention, policy formation and policy implementation' (David 2002: 12), the movement is rather 'top-down' itself with primarily researchers trying to promote it. Interestingly, Bartels (2002) provides some evidence that even applied linguists themselves fail to conduct action research in their own teaching, which suggests the possibility of double standards.

There are at least three reasons for action research not becoming more prominent: teachers usually lack (a) the time, (b) the incentives, and (c) the expertise or professional support to get meaningfully engaged with research. Let us start with the time issue. Language teachers usually have a very high workload and they often complain of not having sufficient time even to prepare for their classes, let alone to do extra research. It is noteworthy that even one of the original promoters of action research, Dick Allwright, started to have serious doubts about the viability of a high-profile project that he had initiated in Brazil:

The classroom-based SLA research project was clearly taking up far too much staff time to be worth pursuing, and it was also requiring staff to learn research skills that were not likely to be helpful in their lives as teachers. So it was heavily parasitic upon their normal working lives, rather than supportive of them ...
(Allwright 2005: 354)

And later Allwright (2005: 355) added, 'Looking at Action Research in action in various parts of the world at that time, it seemed to me it had the same potential to lead to burnout as my academic model of research'. Such a pessimistic view has been echoed by many authors working in other parts of the world (for example, O'Connor and Sharkey 2004); talking about Canadian ESL contexts Rossiter (2001: 40) for example concluded:

The majority of teachers have minimal time for course preparation and reflection and even less opportunity to read the journals or research manuals to which they might have access. Without a clear understanding of the research process and relevant literature, however, aspiring teacher-researchers chance wasting their time and energy on fruitless endeavours.

Although, classroom practitioners tend to be very busy, if not overworked, my experience is that many of them could be motivated to engage in some meaningful exploration activity, even spending some of their free time on it, if there was some institutional *incentive* for it in the form of, for example, official recognition, financial reward, or release time. This, however, hardly ever happens, and even in contexts where teachers are provided with in-service training, this tends to involve lectures or workshops rather than some form of action research.

Finally, as Nunan (2005) summarizes, the average classroom practitioner may not have the research knowledge and skills to conduct an inquiry in a way that would guard it against threats to reliability and validity. The danger is that even if teachers decide to initiate an action research project, the chances are that with little background knowledge and insufficient research expertise they will produce questionable or trivial results. Ideally, they would need the support of a trained supervisor or at least access to some sort of a 'research clinic' but, regrettably, in most contexts these are less-than-realistic wishes.

8.5.3 Concluding words about action research

As I said at the beginning of this section, it is difficult to decide how to pitch the summary of a research movement that is highly commendable but which I do not consider viable for the time being. I fully agree with Burns' (2005: 251) claim that action research 'offers a means for teachers to become agents rather than recipients of knowledge about second language teaching and learning, and thus to contribute toward the building of educational theories of practice'. I can also see why action research can evoke ideology-driven passion, well expressed by Crookes (1993: 137):

So long as research is only presented as something that other people—not teachers—do, and so long as it seems to teachers that research reports must necessarily be written in a language they do not read or speak, we will be accommodating the exploitative pressures of the institutions teachers work in. Action against such pressures can take many forms. The conducting of action research as a means of critical reflection on teaching and on the sociopolitical context in which teachers find themselves has the potential to be a major component in the continuing struggle to improve SL [second language] teaching.

However, it seems to be the case that action research is not fulfilling these hopes because in the current unsupportive teaching climate it is simply not happening extensively enough to have an impact. Allwright has come to terms with this fact and moved on to suggest a more teacher-friendly version of action research, 'exploratory practice'. (See Allwright 2005; Allwright and Bailey 1991.) The purpose of this approach is similar to action research in that it offers ways for teachers to understand classroom events, but instead of rigorous research methods it uses a sequence of reflective pedagogical practices (for example, experimenting with classroom procedures and interpreting the outcomes) to achieve this purpose. As such, it falls outside the remit of this book.

In conclusion, I believe that it is fair to make the following three claims: (a) many, if not most, language teachers would like to gain a more thorough understanding of the teaching and learning process as well as the various classroom events; (b) one main purpose of applied linguistic research is to provide answers to questions that concern these issues; and (c) currently there is a wide gap between teachers and researchers in most countries, which needs to be bridged. As Lightbown (2000: 453) summarizes, it is essential for researchers 'to enter into dialogue with classroom teachers—not only so that teachers can know what researchers are saying, but also so that researchers can hear what teachers are saying'.

The question, then, is how to make the teacher–researcher link viable and active. Simply considering teachers as passive recipients of researcher knowledge has not been successful in the past, but neither has the other extreme, namely trying to get teachers to generate their own knowledge and theories.

The challenge is to find some doable form of teacher–researcher partnership between these two extremes that is embraced (and supported!) by educational managers and which teachers will not consider merely an additional burden on their already busy daily lives. The most obvious place to start would be in pre-service and in-service teacher training courses, and as Burns (2005) and McDonough (2006) summarize, there are indeed some hopeful initiatives in these areas. The action research programme described by McDonough amongst postgraduate Teaching Assistants appears to be particularly useful and viable.

Let me finish the discussion of action research on a positive note with an extract from Richards (2003: 232) that is at the heart of any optimistic beliefs that teachers can be integrated somehow into the research process:

Most ESOL [i.e. EFL/ESL] teachers are natural researchers. We're used to working out the needs of our students, evaluating the effects of particular approaches, spotting things that work or don't work and adjusting our teaching accordingly. Very few teachers approach their work mechanically and nearly all of us reflect on what we do in the classroom.