

### 8.3. ACTION RESEARCH

The third major type of classroom research is action research. Although this type of research has received varying definitions and labels (e.g., collaborative research, practitioner research, teacher-initiated research), “one common thread is that participants in a given social situation or classroom are themselves centrally involved in a systematic process of enquiry arising from their own practical concerns” (Burns, 2005, p. 241). That is, action research does not involve an external researcher observing and investigating the classroom primarily (although not exclusively) for the sake of theory development. Rather, action researchers are commonly teachers, investigating various aspects of their classrooms primarily (although not exclusively) to improve their teaching practice and the quality of education delivered to their students (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Crookes, 1993; Wallace, 1998).

As with most other forms of research, action research usually stems from a question or problem. For example, practitioners may be concerned that their students are reluctant to speak in class and decide to gather data to gain more information about this problem. In the example here, this could first involve the teachers in audio- or videotaping their own classes in order to analyze the patterns of interaction. They may also decide to supplement this information with multiple other sources of data, such as discussions with colleagues, questionnaires, and/or diary entries tapping the students’ perspectives. As discussed in chapter 6 on sociolinguistic and pragmatics-based second language research, the process of obtaining data from more than one source (also known as triangulation) benefits many types of research, including action research.

Based on the information obtained from these data, or sometimes before the data are collected, practitioners may form preliminary hypotheses. For example, if they find that lower proficiency students are reluctant to speak in whole-group exercises, they may then devise and implement some form of intervention or treatment to address that problem—such as using pair or small-group work, which the students might view as a less-threatening speaking environment, or employing activities that are more closely related to the students’ interests and goals. Finally, the instructor might evaluate the effects of this practice in order to determine whether or not the students have benefited from it and also to ascertain the learners’ own views about the changes in instructional practice. Obtaining this kind of information may involve another round of data gathering, in which the instructor could reuse one or more of the data collection procedures employed earlier. As can be seen, action research of this form is a cyclic process, and it is one that many teachers engage in as part of their everyday practice.

If the instructors' treatment, changes in practice, or actions are found to be effective, then they can contemplate what else might be done to further support the learning process, also considering whether to disseminate their results to other teachers facing similar situations. If the changes are not found to be effective, then they can start again, considering what other measures might be taken to improve the teaching/learning situation. Box 8.5 illustrates a typical example of action research: The teacher identified a question to investigate and then gathered and analyzed data from his class in order to determine how well the instruction worked.

### Box 8.5: A Study Exemplifying Action Research

Liu, J. (1998). Peer reviews with the instructor: Seeking alternatives in ESL writing. In J. C. Richards (Ed.), *Teaching in action: Case studies from second language classrooms* (pp. 236–240). Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

As a teacher of ESL writing to international graduate students at a large mid-western university, Liu made use of both peer review activities and one-on-one teacher tutorials. He discovered, however, that even though the students enjoyed the former activity, they often felt uncertain as to whether their peers' comments were accurate—an uncertainty that led to a lack of enthusiasm toward the activity. As a solution to this problem, Liu devised a new type of session: a peer review with an instructor who participated as a peer. More specifically, the teacher joined the peer review group, participating in (but not controlling) the discussion, occasionally questioning the comments provided by other members of the group in order to stimulate discussion, and providing written comments. As Liu explains, "My role was not only to offer comments but also to evaluate the other peers' comments so that the student whose paper was being reviewed would feel comfortable and confident in making decisions" (p. 238). To measure the effects of this solution, the teacher administered questionnaires, surveys, and interviews periodically throughout the quarter. He found that the students valued the peer review sessions in which he participated and indicated that the presence of the teacher alleviated their concerns about the inaccuracy of some of their peers' feedback.

Action research, with its concern for situated local contexts, teachers' intuitions, and practical applications, is occasionally criticized for not strictly adhering to the guidelines of experimental studies (e.g., regarding the use of control groups, randomly assigned students). In addition, no agreed-on criteria exist for evaluating the quality of action research studies (Bailey, 1999; Burns, 2005). It is occasionally said, therefore, that the results of action research cannot be generalized and are of limited utility to the wider population

of second language learners beyond the immediate context in which the studies were conducted. However, it should be kept in mind that, even though much action research is “difficult, messy, problematic, and, in some cases, inconclusive” (Nunan, 1993, p. 46), it can provide valuable insights not just in terms of practice (e.g., to teachers who find themselves facing similar problems and concerns in their own classrooms), but even in terms of theory (i.e., theories of how second languages are acquired). Ortega (2005) has pointed out the importance of considering who research is for and who it benefits. As van Lier (1994) has noted, if practice and theory are separated:

SLA would either disappear into the thin air of absurdity, or else fall to the earth with the dull thud of pomposity. SLA is about language learning. All around the world, billions of people are learning language, millions are teaching language, and they do so with effort, intelligence and ingenuity. These activities are the true data of SLA. ... In short, SLA and language pedagogy are interdependent pursuits. (p. 341)

Perhaps in recognition of these points, in recent years, collaborative approaches to research have become increasingly common and valued, with language teachers and researchers working together in teams to investigate various aspects of second language learning.