

# Classroom Research and Language Teachers

Prepared by...

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Action research is a practical approach to professional inquiry in any social situation. Action research in education declined in the sixties and reappeared in the seventies and became linked with the idea of **'teacher as researcher'** advocated by Stenhouse (1975). The aim of the research now moved from the 'technical', goal-oriented, end of achieving a practice that 'worked', to a more general 'practical' aim of understanding what made the practice what it was. But with this different perspective, a number of different conceptions of the purpose and nature of the process appeared, obscuring a clear definition. Applied to classroom, action research is an approach to improving education through change by encouraging teachers to be aware of their own practice, to be critical of that practice, and to be prepared to change it. Therefore, action research in classroom can be creative, contextualised, realistic, flexible, and rigorous (Macintyre, 2000). As its name suggests, action research concerns actors – those people carrying out their professional actions from day to day - and its purpose is to understand and to improve those actions. It is about trying to understand professional action from the inside; as a result, it is research that is carried out by practitioners on their own practice, not (as in other forms of research), done by someone on somebody else's practice. Action research in education is grounded in the working lives of teachers, as they experience them. The purpose of this workshop is to provide a practical idea for teachers of all levels who are interested in/have had a plan to carry out research with their own students.

## Classroom Research and Language Teachers

**Explore your classroom practice, e.g. your teaching or classroom management, and then:**

1. Think of one thing you are not satisfied with.
  - a) Why aren't you satisfied with it?
  - b) Do you think you could do anything to change or improve it? If so, what are they? If not, give the reason(s) why you couldn't.

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2. Think of one thing you are satisfied with but you still want to change or improve it.

- a) Why are you satisfied with it?
- b) Why do you still want to change or improve it?
- c) What do you think you could do to change or improve it?

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## **Sample definitions of Action Research:**

According to Carr and Kemmis (1986), action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants (e.g. teachers, students) in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations (and institutions) in which these practices are carried out.

Macintyre (2000) has defined action research as “an investigation, where, as a result of self-appraisal of current practice, the researcher focuses on a ‘problem’ or a topic or an issue which needs to be explained, and on the basis of information (people who will be involved and context) , plans, implements, and then evaluates an action then draw conclusions on the basis of findings.”

Coats (2005) has defined action research as “any research into practice undertaken by those involved in that practice, with an aim to change and improve it. It is, therefore, a process of enquiry by you as practitioner into the effectiveness of your own teaching and your students’ learning.”

Although there are many characterisations of the process of action research, there can be seen to be certain common elements within them. These common elements can be thought of as constituting a ‘bottom line’ in any definition of action research:

- Action research is about teachers striving to understand and to improve their practice. At the ‘bottom line’, this operates at a personal level. It may lead on to collaboration and a critique of the situation in which the practice is carried out, but this does not have to be a fundamental aim.
- Action research proceeds through a process of planning, action, observation and reflection upon action. This can be thought of as an action-reflection ‘cycle’.
- Action research involves the gathering of evidence about practice.
- Action research involves teachers trying to see the effects of planned change in their practice.
- Action research strives to be systematic and rigorous.
- Analysis and knowledge formation in action research belong to the practitioner.

Applied to classroom, action research is an approach to improving education through change by encouraging teachers to be aware of their own practice, to be critical of that practice, and to be prepared to change it. Therefore, action research in classroom can be creative, contextualised, realistic, flexible, and rigorous (Macintyre, 2000)

From the perspective of action research, the best way to think about practice is the way you carry out your professional actions. This is, of course, what you do, but it is also why you think you should be doing things the way you do. You will hear of the 'theory-practice divide'; action research as an approach cuts across this divide, encouraging a practitioner to consider both aspects as part of a single whole.

The aim of an action researcher is to bring about development in his or her practice by analysing existing practice and identifying elements for change. The process is founded on the gathering of evidence on which to make informed rather than intuitive judgements and decisions. Perhaps the most important aspect of action research is that the process enhances teachers' professional development through the fostering of their capability as professional knowledge makers, rather than simply as professional knowledge users.

Action research is a practical approach to professional inquiry in any social situation. The examples in this component relate to education and are therefore of particular relevance to teachers or lecturers engaged in their daily contact with children or students. But professional practice need not be teaching: it may be management or administration in a school or college, or it may be in an unrelated area, such as medicine or the social services. The context for professional inquiry might change, but the principles and processes involved in action research are the same, regardless of the nature of the practice.

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Carr and Kemmis (1986) describe action research as being about:

- *the improvement of practice;*
- *the improvement of the understanding of practice;*
- *the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place.*

Educational research through action research does not produce understanding that has universal truth; it is about a particular teacher (practitioner) in the here and now understanding what he or she can do to ensure his or her values and intentions are realised in his or her teaching situation. If his or her deliberations produce an understanding which helps him and her, then he or she can offer it to others to try. In this sense, action research can produce generalisations about practice, but such generalisations are only part of a wider search for understanding. They are not directly applicable beyond the contingencies of his or her practice. Hamilton (1981) encapsulated this when he reflected that 'to generalise is to render a public

account of the past, present or future in a form that can be 'tested' through further action and inquiry'.

Based on Waters-Adams (2006), the reality of practice in a social situation means that it is impossible to separate the three areas Carr and Kemmis mention. Focus on one may give insights into the others, for it is frequently impossible to improve teaching without understanding the dynamics of the situation in which that teaching is carried out. Children, students, classrooms and colleges all vary, as do the management structures, schemes of work, course programmes and assessment procedures which impose structure on them. Practice is not easily packaged.

*Action research can thus be used to:*

- *understand one's own practice;*
- *understand how to make one's practice better;*
- *understand how to accommodate outside change in one's practice;*
- *understand how to change the outside in order to make one's practice better.*

### **How does action research work?**

At its heart, action research involves the careful monitoring of planned change in practice. A decision is taken that a particular action may either yield improvements or provide information as to the nature of the teaching situation. The action is thus used as a research tool. Both elements of action and research are of equal prominence in the approach. It can be thought of as:

**research on action**  
by using  
**action as a tool for research**  
with the process being driven by a dialogue between the elements of:  
**action and the intentions behind action**  
or  
**practice and the values behind practice.**

Emphasising the individual nature of action research, Whitehead (1985, p. 98) puts forward a simple representation of how the process feels:

1. I experience a problem when some of my educational values are negated in my practice;
2. I imagine a solution to my problem;
3. I act in the direction of the solution;
4. I evaluate the outcomes of my actions;
5. I modify my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations.

### **Examples of educational values (Parr, 1985):**

1. Students and teachers are equal in human terms.
2. The educational environment should reflect value 1.
3. My own classroom practice should reflect value 1.
4. I should enable the students to take more responsibility for their own learning.
5. Students should become more aware of the learning process and the part they are expected to play in it.
6. Students should be equal participants in the learning process.
7. Learning should be a meaningful and enjoyable experience.
8. Students and teachers should be equal participants in the classroom.

### **Action research 'cycle' and how to start**

At the simplest level, therefore, action research involves a spiral or cycle of four interrelated stages, i.e. planning, action, observing and reflection (Coats, 2005). Further, action research is collaborative in two senses: 1) many action research activities are best carried out with colleagues; and 2) action research always involves the participants, at least in knowing what is being explored and why. Action research is more likely to be qualitative rather than quantitative with the emphasis on language rather than numbers. It is reflective involving reflection on both process and the outcomes.

### **Example of the action research cycle: (McNiff, 1988, pp. 27-28)**

**What is my problem?** I am not very happy with the textbook we are using but it is the only one available.

**Planning:** What can I do about it? I cannot change the book: should I change my method of using it? Perhaps I should try paired work.

**Acting:** I show the students how to ask and answer questions of each other to make otherwise boring material relevant to themselves [personalise the lesson]. We try out this technique in class.

**Observing:** I join various pairs and listen to their conversations. I record some conversations. I keep my own notes.

**Reflecting:** The activity is lively, but some questions wander from the text. I want to get across the material in the text.

**Planning:** Perhaps I could develop with the students an interview technique, where A asks B questions which will elicit responses based on the material. Will that make it boring again? How can I guard against this? Perhaps I can involve them even more actively.

**Acting:** The students record their own conversations. There are not enough tape recorders to go round, so they work in fours taking it in turns to listen and talk. At the end of two sets of interviews they listen and comment on individual recordings.

**Observing:** They really enjoy this. And they seem to be gleaning information from the text in formulating their own questions and answers.

**Reflecting:** Points to ponder: Am I correct pedagogically in teaching content through the process? I must consult my head of department on this. Should I aim for this sort of learning more often and with other classes? I am worried about practical difficulties (a) possibly too much noise (b) booking all the departmental tape recorders – still not enough. Are these questions perhaps the start of another aspect of my own enquiry?.....

## **DOING ACTION RESEARCH**

### **1 Starting: Some key questions:**

Barrett and Whitehead (1985) ask six questions which should help you start your inquiry:

1. What is your concern?
2. Why are you concerned?
3. What do you think you could do about it?
4. What kind of evidence could you collect to help you make some judgement about what is happening?
5. How would you collect such evidence?
6. How would you check that your judgement about what has happened is reasonable, fair and accurate?

### **What can I investigate through action research?**

Action research can be used to investigate practical, everyday issues:

- ‘Action research investigates everyday problems experienced by teachers’ (Elliott, 1981).
- ‘All you need is a general idea that something might be *improved*’ (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982).
- ‘I experience a problem when some of my educational values are negated in my practice’ (Whitehead 1985).

Starting points might be of the following kinds:

1. I want to get better at my English language teaching...
2. I’m not sure why my students don’t engage in discussion...
3. I have to implement the speaking and listening guidelines, but I’m not sure what is the best way...
4. How can we make staff meetings more productive?....
5. I’ve seen something working well in school X; I wonder if it would work for me?...

It is important to choose an area that you can do something about. Some questions are not amenable to action research like “Is there any relationship between single-parent families and attendance?” or “Does ethnicity affect performance in speaking English?”

Kemmis (1982) advises that you should avoid issues which you can do nothing about. Questions like the relationship between socio-economic and achievement, between ability and tendency to ask questions in class may be interesting but they have tenuous links with action. Stick with issues in which you do something which potential for improvement. Remember that strategic action (Kemmis and McTaggart 1982) that you can employ to try to solve the problem that will give you the insights into the factors affecting your practice



is your way to improve practice and your understanding of apparent and real constraints on change.

In choosing the area in which you prefer to work you must attend to the following criteria (McNiff, 1988):

- How important is the issue to you
- How important is it for your students
- What opportunities there are to explore the area
- Who might be interested in helping
- The manageability of the task

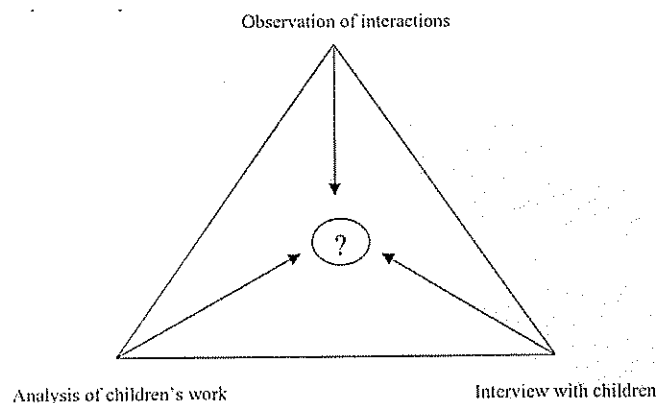
Further, Waters-Adams (2006) suggests golden rules for selecting a topic that:

- Keep it manageable – keep the focus small scale.
- It should be interesting to you – you may need some perseverance to see the inquiry through!
- It should be workable – you are not stumped for ideas, but can identify ways in which you might have a go at addressing your question.
- It is not too disruptive of normal routines. (Important here to think not just of your own, but others' that your actions might affect).

### **Choosing methods for data collection**

The prime criterion for choosing a particular data gathering method in action research is whether it is anticipated that the method will give useful information about the practice under study. It is sometimes thought that methods used in action research are purely qualitative. This does not have to be true. Although the overall analysis of the data generated by any methods used will be qualitative in nature, numerical or statistical information may be of great value to that analysis. What is most important is that the researcher understands that different research methods illuminate only particular aspects of a situation. None give a whole picture. In seeking evidence of his or her practice, or the effectiveness of a change in practice, a teacher needs to look at it from different perspectives; he or she needs to employ a triangulation of methods. This is a simple principle, involving the careful choice of a range of data gathering techniques, each of which might illuminate a different aspect of the same issue:

The principle of triangulation:



Source: Waters-Adams (2006)

As long as they are aware of the limitations of a particular method, action researchers may thus use any of the following to help them reflect on their concern:

- observation schedules;
- audio and video tape recording;
- structured or semi-structured interviews;
- class records;
- statistical indicators;
- field notes;
- sociometry;
- photography;
- questionnaires etc.

We have already identified that action researchers can use any method of data gathering, as long as they think it will give them useful and reliable evidence of the impact of their action. Some important considerations to bear in mind:

- Does the method give a form of data which relates to my question?
- Is it feasible in the available time?
- Have I made myself aware of its strengths and limitations?
- Will it be an acceptable method for the other people involved?
- Will it disrupt normal routines? (If the data gathering method presents as much change as the planned action, then how will I know what is having an effect?)

### **Ethical considerations**

Any research which involves other people in some way has ethical implications. Action research in education is deeply embedded in the social world of the school or college within which it takes place. Because education is a social action, data gathering and analysis within action research will inevitably impact on the lives of others in those institutions, be they pupils, students or colleagues. Although you may protest that your action research is focused merely on the social world of your own classroom, the open, fluid nature of the research process makes it important that you produce a protocol that will apply to any situation that may arise. In any case, remember that the students in your class are worthy of the same consideration as adults and fellow professionals. The object of the protocol is to ensure individual rights are not infringed and to promote fairness in the interpretation of data.

### **Analysis**

Analysis in action research is the spur to reflection and the planning of new action. Analysis within action research is about possibilities, not certainties. It is not about why things have to be as they are, but rather what possibilities for change lie within a situation. Action within a complex social world is not static; it is dynamic and forever evolving.

In analysing your action research, you need to adopt an approach which can help uncover this dynamic nature. To understand his or her practice, an action researcher should strive to uncover the elements that constitute it; elements which may be in harmony or in contradiction. Action researchers need to look at their practice *dialectically*.

Dialectics represents both a theory of reality itself and a way of understanding it. Within a dialectical perspective, nothing stands alone; there is no such thing as a simple unity. Any phenomenon, be it an object, a person, a practice or a social situation, is only understood by taking account of the sets of relationships which comprise it: the relationship between the elements of which the phenomenon is constituted and the relationship between the phenomenon and the context within which it exists. At the heart of this perspective, therefore, lies a contradiction: a phenomenon is a thing, yet it is also many things. A book is a book, yet it is also made up of words, paper, pages and cover and it gains meaning as a book because it is a book amongst other books of the same kind, within the milieu of ideas which inform them. A class is an entity, yet it is made of a teacher and individual students and it lies within a school and the political structures which govern them.

The word dialectics comes from a Greek root meaning the art of discussion. To understand a phenomenon dialectically involves the exploration of these relationships. The elements are interdependent in that they form the unity of the phenomenon, but individually they are different and thus potentially in opposition. The teacher teaches his or her class in the school, but the students' interests will be different from his/hers and his/her educational values may clash with those of school policy. There are contradictions within the unity of the phenomenon of her teaching. Because of these contradictions, his/her teaching has the continual potential for change. Analysing his/her teaching dialectically will help to highlight those contradictions and suggest from among the great number that can be identified those relationships which might be significant.

Progress in action research can be seen to depend on this kind of analysis. In striving to understand his or her teaching, the teacher will need to explore the elements which constitute it. Action, reflection and planning proceed through the teacher identifying the contradictory aspects that may be preventing his/her from achieving what she wants in his/her teaching. The analysis will feed into new (hopefully improved) teaching and it will also feed into an understanding of why her teaching is as it is. Ideas and action are not separate, they are both constitutive elements of the phenomenon of is/her teaching. Action research should promote analysis which determines whether they are in accord with each other or whether there is contradiction between them. A propositional representation of theory and practice, as if they exist as separate unities, fails to reflect this essentially dynamic relationship between the two. Theory is practice, for understanding is one element that makes the teacher's action what it is.

## **Summary**

- *Action research is a practical way for individuals to explore the nature of their practice and to improve it.*
- *Action research encourages practitioners to become knowledge-makers, rather than merely knowledge-users.*
- *Action research uses action as a means of research; planned change is implemented, monitored and analysed.*
- *Action research proceeds in an action-reflection cycle or spiral.*
- *The process can be messy; as research proceeds, wider links are likely to be identified.*
- *Action research is carried out by individuals, but these individuals may work collaboratively.*
- *Action researchers may use a variety of research methods, both qualitative and quantitative.*
- *Action researchers must ensure triangulation in their methods.*

## **LIMITATIONS AND CRITICISMS OF ACTION RESEARCH**

### **Some thoughts:**

#### **1 Lack of time**

Action researchers work in the hurly burly of their own practice. Monitoring closely this practice as they are acting within it demands space and time which, almost by definition, the practice does not give easily. It is therefore difficult to maintain rigour in data gathering and critique.

#### **2 Validity as research**

Action research is carried out by individuals who are interested parties in the research. This fact has led to criticisms of the validity of the research process, with accusations of inevitable researcher bias in data gathering and analysis. The justification for action research counters this criticism by suggesting that it is impossible to access practice without involving the practitioner. Practice is action informed by values and aims which are not fully accessible from the outside. The practitioner may not even be wholly aware of the meaning of his or her values until he or she tries to embody them in her action.

#### **3 Unfamiliarity with research methods**

Action researchers frequently explore what may constitute adequate research methods at the same time as they are researching their practice. This kind of 'on-the-job' training and consequent *ad hoc* planning, has led to accusations of unreliability in data gathering. To some extent, this unreliability is inevitable, but the notion only makes sense in the presence of verifiably reliable data gathering. From this perspective, action research would claim that, flawed or not, the process provides the most reliable access to practice.

Action researchers draw attention to the notion of commitment. An action researcher must be committed to rigorous examination and critique of his or her practice. Action researchers should involve outsiders (for example a critical friend) in the analysis of their data, but it is the degree to which action researchers are committed to this critical analysis of their practice that provides the true measure of reliability in data gathering.

This, however, is a difficult principle. Commitment cannot be measured easily and the process will continue to be criticised because of this. How do we know that an action researcher's analysis is rigorous enough?

#### **4 Action research produces results which are not generalisable**

This is true, but someone else's ideas or conclusions can always be tried out by other persons in their own practice, to see if they work for them. This may be because the classroom contexts are different. However, it is not totally impossible to generalise the results to the similar context to certain extent.

To end the session:

Waters-Adams (2006) has given some thoughts about action research that

“...when I use the term 'action research', I am using it in a very broad sense as a systematic inquiry by practitioners about their own practices. There has been a lot of debate in the literature about what is and is not real action research, about the specifics of the action research spiral, about whether action research must be collaborative or not, about whether it can or should involve outsiders as well as insiders, and so on...a lot of this discourse, although highly informative in an academic sense, is essentially irrelevant to many of those who actually engage in action research...There are many different cultures of action research and it seems to me that an awful lot of time and energy is wasted in arguing over who are the 'real' action researchers and who are the imposters...”