

ACTION RESEARCH FOR SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHERS — IT'S NOT JUST TEACHER RESEARCH

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1. Introduction

Although "action research" has a long history, it is a term which has only quite recently become known and used in ESL. It is apparently, therefore, something "new", and predictably has already become a buzzword within the field of second language studies. There are good reasons for being sceptical of anything the ESL field takes up and finds fashionable, and this has already led to the suspicion in some quarters that action research implies a new research methodology which will lead to work of poor quality or undesirable in other ways (a position acknowledged, though not argued for, by Brumfit & Mitchell, 1989; Usher & Bryant, 1989; and Winter, 1989). It is the purpose of the present paper to clarify the nature of action research, and thereby dispel this suspicion. Accordingly, I first outline the history of action research, and distinguish between two kinds of action research, both of considerable importance and utility to the SL field. I then discuss the rhetorical manifestations of action research, which are part of the source of the suspicions concerning quality, and argue that, while the forms of action research reports are different from those of orthodox research, they are of interest and potential benefit to both the regular SL teacher and the profession as a whole.

2. Definitions; two basic conceptions; history

There are varying understandings of the term action research (Chesler, 1990). At the very least, it carries a general implication that teachers will be involved in a research activity. An important difference between action research and other research done by teachers is that in the latter instance, teachers might

well be doing research on issues and questions which are those considered most important by the established community of scholars in the relevant field, i.e., theory-driven research. However, in action research it is accepted that research questions should emerge from a teacher's own immediate concerns and problems.

Having made this distinction, let us recognize a core area for action research—teachers doing research on their own teaching and the learning of their own students. Nunan (1990, p. 63) cites Kemmis and McTaggart (1982): Action research is

trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning.

Van Lier (1988) cites Cohen and Manion (1985, p. 174), who define action research as

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

These definitions subsume at least two distinguishable trends. The first is an older, relatively conservative line, which finds action research equivalent to research done by a "teacher-researcher". The second is a newer, more progressive line where the term *action research* is used to refer to aspects of critical educational practice, that is, education and educational research which is committed to emancipating individuals from the domination of unexamined assumptions embodied in the status quo (cf. Ericson, 1986, p. 208). The older line is nominally value-free (but in practice is not)—the newer line is explicitly value-laden. Both kinds are important, but whether ESL understands or appreciates them equally is questionable (see Section 3).

I have said that action research is not truly new.¹ This really applies to

¹ Olson (1990, p. 8) states, "The term *action research* is usually credited to John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1945 (Corey, 1953; Wallace, 1987; Wann, 1953)". Others refer to the work of Lewin (1946) as the *locus classicus*. Action research has been an established tradition in rural, agricultural, and community development, particularly in the third world, and in the development of workplace democracy, particularly in Scandinavia (Elden, 1979; Karlsen, 1991).

the older conception just mentioned. Thus defined, action research seems no more than a description of what good teachers might be expected to do in the course of their teaching and thinking, and thus while praiseworthy, seems hardly innovative. Whether such activities have in fact been a standard part of teaching is questionable, however. Olson (1990) refers to U.S. teachers engaging in curriculum design and related classroom research during the first two decades of this century (e.g., Lowry, 1908) but this appears to have been exceptional. During the post-war period, with extensive federal funding, U.S. educational research followed the practice of industry and adopted an "R&D" model (Carr & Kemmis, 1982), which accepted that researchers would research, teachers would teach, and the two would only meet on curriculum projects, in which the researchers would tell the teachers what to do. This was certainly the case for example in the Hawaii English Project (Brandon, 1982; Rodgers & Richards, n.d.), which ran through the 1970s. A contrasting but equally unsatisfactory situation is claimed to have been the case in Britain during this period; according to Elliott (1987, p. 162),

in the United Kingdom during the late 1960s and early 1970s... curricula were being misused by teachers, who adapted them to match their traditional pedagogy... [T]he problem was exacerbated by the prevailing ideology of teacher autonomy, which gave developers little control over the use of their products.

Some interest in action research continued during the 1950s and 1960s in mainstream education (Corey, 1953; Wann, 1953), and it was probably at this time that it first became a possibility in SL work (Lane, 1962), but examples of actual practice seem to have been rare until recently, when there has been renewed interest and a greater amount of such research. This has emerged earliest in the U.K., Europe, and Australia, and only very lately in the U.S. (cf. Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Sanford, 1981). Though not new, then, this kind of action research is at least re-newed, and is in itself desirable, in that the more people, there are doing research on relevant matters, particularly when they are ESL teachers, the better.

3. Action research of the first kind

The straightforward teacher-researcher aspect of action research seems quite attractive to educational establishments. The U.S. Department of Education has solicited research of this sort, and believes that "the development of a local capacity for inquiry and problem-solving" is highly desirable in improving state education (Olson, 1990, p. 1). Considerable efforts have been expended on encouraging "teacher-researcher" and "university-school" partnerships (e.g., Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988). Teacher-researchers are figures praised in many research articles who "model professional behavior through seizing authority for their subject matter and activities" (Bullock, 1987, p. 23). Fostering connections between universities (as research institutions) and schools, and also integrating the functions of teacher and researcher by ensuring that teachers do research or collaborate actively with researchers is expected to contribute greatly to the improvement of the teaching profession and the utilization of research. It is this teacher-research version of action research which has surfaced in the literature of SL research and pedagogy (e.g., Florio & Walsh, 1981; Gephard, Gaitan, & Oprandy, 1987; Long, 1989; Nunan, 1989a, 1989b, 1990).

There is no major methodological distinction to be made between "regular" research, and the more conservative line in action research. All the normal tools of social science or educational research can be brought to bear, to the extent that the teacher doing action research is familiar with them or wishes to use them. In practice, techniques which lend themselves to use in small-scale investigations, and those which can capitalize upon the investigator's familiarity and participation in the situation investigated are particularly appropriate (Winter, 1989)². There must be some problem or question which acts as the impetus to the work, and then after that, various regular steps can be taken: observation of one's students or one's own teaching, some form of

² Winter (1989) states that action research implies the rejection of positivist conceptions of research. This is no great imposition since most current social science is indeed post-positivist, in the sense of interpretive at least (Newsome, in press; Ratcliffe, 1983; Rorty, 1979; Taylor, 1980). But a key point in this rejection is the acceptance of locally-valid understandings of educational practice (obtained through, e.g. case studies) as being as desirable as, and more likely to be obtained than, broadly applicable generalizations.

data collection relevant to the research question, possibly (to take an ethnographic perspective) the revision or development of the initial research question; finally followed by some attempt to utilize the data to answer the question and thereby solve the problem. (As Nunan, 1990, p. 62, notes, "teachers need to be able to conceptualise their practice in theoretical terms ... and they need to have skills in data collection and analysis".)

4. Action research of the second kind

I turn now to the more radical conception of action research, which is particularly associated with the work of Carr (e.g., Carr & Kemmis, 1986) and Whitehead (e.g., Whitehead & Lomax, 1987), and which as far as I can see has not been represented in ESL discussions of this topic.³ Before attempting to define it, I will explain why it is important and needed.

Research into social institutions, such as schools, has been heavily influenced by the "Received View" in philosophy of science (now discredited), which among other things presented science as value-free and objective. Consequently, most of the scientific community has seen values as not something worthy of investigation. In the context of educational research, the result has been to perceive schools as

neutral, non-political places that go about the business of educating children as well as they can. We assume they are eager for new practices that will enable them to do better. (Sirotnik & Oates, 1986, p. 5)

There has been little investigation of the values that schools actually embody, and there has been a general attempt to use research simply to enable schools better to achieve their unquestioned goals.

This is regrettable, because there is an inherent contradiction between the process of education and the needs of the institutions within which education is supposed to happen. This can be seen in the differing goals of those whose

³ Cf. Gore & Zeichner (1991, p. 123): "what we have most often seen in the U.S. action research literature is a purely individualist version of action research which largely ignores the social conditions of schooling and society".

main purpose in an educational institution is to support and maintain it (the administrators) as opposed to those who deliver education itself (the teachers). (Cf. Crookes, 1990, for discussion of this in an ESL context.) If this were not the case, 100 years of reform efforts in American education would not have been successfully resisted, and classrooms and lessons would not still be almost the same as they were many decades ago (but they are—cf. Goodlad, 1984). The fact of the matter is that to exist, institutions must obtain resources, distribute rewards, and resist encroachment from other competitive institutions in the social sphere (McIntyre, 1981), while at the same time delivering education. The characteristics of a social institution which has preserved itself as long as schools have include self-preservation mechanisms as well as structures which enable it to successfully obtain resources and distribute rewards to those that support it. They also act to preserve it from internal destabilization (which includes the process of change itself) and from external competition. Such mechanisms are often inimical to education which might meet this society's highest goals, and create a "literate, culturally enlightened, critically thinking citizenry" (Sirotnik & Oakes, 1986, p. 4). (Think, for example, of the fact that this society is supposed to be a democracy, yet the primary institution socializing its future citizens is extremely undemocratic, at all levels.) Unless teachers are aware of the contradictions between educational process and institutional structures, and continually investigate the extent to which their purposes are being subverted and their professional values ignored, they may eventually be prevented from actually educating. Teachers' research into the degree to which they are attaining their goals or into the problems they are facing in doing so (that is, action research) is therefore a *sine qua non* for the delivery of education (as opposed to, for example, child-minding, or what Illich calls 'schooling') by schools to their students.

In this line of thought, action research

provides a means by which distorted self-understandings may be overcome by teachers analyzing the way their own practices and understandings are shaped by broader ideological conditions [and] ... by linking reflection to action, offers teachers and others a way of becoming aware of how those aspects of the social order which

frustrate rational change may be overcome. (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, pp. 179-180)

Carr and Kemmis are not satisfied with a conception of action research in which teachers simply identify a problem and solve it—they wish to see the development of a cyclical program of reform, whose results are reflected on and further refined and developed in collaborative investigative communities:

The establishment of a widening circle of self-reflective communities of action researchers ... foreshadows and engenders a different form of social organization. (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, pp. 185)

The techniques involved in this kind of action research will not necessarily be distinguishable from the full range of educational research techniques, but the range of techniques to be chosen from may be narrowed by the social organization involved in doing action research, and its reflective, collaborative, and dialogic nature. In particular, it should be understood that the objective of this kind of action research is locally-valid understandings of problems in teaching and learning, not necessarily findings of maximal generality.⁴ This means that on the one hand, large data bases, techniques for their reduction to manageable patterns, and steps which ensure the replicability of results across many different environments are less needed. On the other hand, techniques which capitalize on the investigators' deep familiarity with the situation are appropriate. In addition, a central concept of critical theory is unconstrained dialogue, which permits rational analysis and conceptual development. This should take place through individual teachers' reflection and communication with their co-investigators, so the concepts used and the forms by which results are communicated must reflect this.⁵ Action

⁴ Thus, in a SL context, the topics investigated are likely to involve the social and political conditions facilitating or preventing SLA—matters concerning motivation, class composition, the role of non-standard languages, etc.—rather than the less context-dependent matter of sequences of acquisition order in syntax, or the role of planning and monitoring in SL learning.

⁵ The conditions surrounding such a dialogue must also be supportive. For a critique of action research relevant to this line of argument but prosecuted at a much higher level of abstraction utilizing the pertinent ideas of Habermas (e.g., 1972) and Gadamer (1981) see Usher & Bryant (1989).

research, therefore, must start with the ideas and concepts of teachers, but it must be recognized that these are quite likely to embody the unexamined assumptions of the school culture which play a role in causing many of the problems teachers face (“false consciousness”). Consequently, these must be developed through reflection and enquiry, and

those engaged in this reflective process [must] attempt to “bracket” their experience—that is they attempt to stand outside their experience and attend to it in such a way that they move beyond what appear to be common-sense interpretations of what things mean. In this way they are able to approach setting aside their ordinary assumptions about their situations and attain a heightened consciousness and clarified understanding about the range of meanings that participants attach to school events. (Sirotnik & Oates, 1986, p. 35)

When a cycle of investigation is concluded, the results must be communicated—first, to those who engaged in the research itself, and also to other teachers and interested parties. Since the intent of the report (as well as the reflection and inquiry) is to lead to immediate action, it must be communicated to teachers in a form they can immediately utilize. This leads to a major area where progressive action research may dispute standard research practice in how the findings of investigations are communicated to teachers. Through coexisting with regular research reports, action research reports may influence and benefit teachers’ access to more established report formats.

5. The utilization of research and action research

There is a continuing widespread disposition among teachers generally (not just those in SL education) that conventional research findings (at least as normally presented) are insufficiently relevant to their day-to-day problems (e.g., Beasley & Riordan, 1981, in Nunan, 1989a; Bullock, 1987; Carr & Kemmis, 1982; Eykyn, 1987; McDonough & McDonough, 1990; Miranda, 1988; and cf. Armstrong, 1980; Neubert & Binko, 1987; Sanford, 1981; Tyler, 1988).⁶ In this,

⁶ A similar situation exists in psychology: “When psychologists are requested to rank order the usefulness of informational sources to their practice, research articles and books of

teachers are supported by researchers critical from various standpoints of the body of knowledge generated by educational research thus far (e.g., Armstrong, 1980). There are various reasons for this. (1) It can legitimately be recognized that because of topics addressed or the preliminary nature of many potentially-relevant lines of work, some work in regular education and SL-specific research really is irrelevant, at least in the short run (Lightbown, 1985). (2) Most research reports are specifically not targeted to individuals' day-to-day problems. As Shavelson (1988, p. 5) has observed, if a teacher believes that "education research should directly and immediately apply to a particular issue, problem or decision" that s/he faces, "the probability that any single study or series of studies could possibly meet ... these conditions must be quite close to zero"—unless the teacher takes action him/herself, of course. (3) Teachers have been led to believe that if one knew what the right theory (i.e., body of knowledge) was, one could simply apply it to practice and all problems of practice would be solved. But in fact, practical judgments are always made under conditions of "bounded rationality" (Simon, 1957, 1958; see discussion in Emmet, 1966; Hartnett & Naish, 1976). Under these conditions, "theoretical knowledge is often incomplete and practice situations never fully understood... practice is always *underdetermined* by theory (Usher & Bryant, 1989, p. 74)". "Theory" will be to varying degrees inapplicable in this sense, precisely because of the unknowable dimension of practice on a moment to moment basis.⁷ (4) Many research reports, given in both oral and written form, use unfamiliar concepts and a rhetorical format which serves the purposes of the community of mainstream researchers, rather than of teachers (Kidder, 1991; Mohr, 1987): the major concern of those using this format being to present statements in a reliable form, which also facilitates the replicability empirical research are consistently rated at the bottom of the scale" (Kupfersmid, 1988, p. 635). And from the researcher's perspective, Hadley (1987, p. 101), drawing on his investigations of social institutions, states that there was "very little evidence" that research findings presented in standard journal or book form "engage the minds of those in our target groups or measurably affect ... the policies of those practices of social institutions".

⁷ The failure of professional training in education to validate this gap, to recognize (and perhaps research) the role of the practitioner as a decision-maker under non-eliminable conditions of uncertainty only exacerbates the "gap" between the knowledge base for practice and practice itself.

of studies and their critical assessment.

The desires that teachers have for clarity and relevance have led some non-action researchers to respond by dispensing with the discourse impositions of their peers (i.e., the need for claims stated in a way that they can be checked). Such individuals have a double dose of power. They claim to own truths that teachers do not themselves possess (or at least the results of research) but not to have to show teachers how it was arrived at. (Cf. Shavelson, 1988, p. 9, on the “greater risks” that must be taken to “bring research to bear on the information needs of policymakers and practitioners”.) This sort of response to the understandable pressures from teachers and policy-makers actually undermines the relationship between teachers and research. There are understandable reasons why research is reported the way it is—but since those reasons do not obtain under all circumstances, it is possible to argue for alternative report and knowledge transmission formats, in the following way.

The stronger the claims for generalizability that a study makes and the more damage such claims, if wrong, could do, the greater the demand that should be made for reliability and validity of the study, which in turn can be obtained through requiring full adherence to scientific practice in both the carrying out and reporting of the study. The less such claims, the less need to conform to the values implicit in the (currently) standard rhetoric of science (not a value-free rhetoric: Bazerman, 1987; Nelson, McGill, & McCloskey, 1987; Schuster & Yeo, 1986). As Argyris and Schön (1991, p. 85) say,

from the action researcher’s perspective, the challenge is to define and meet standards of *appropriate* rigor without sacrificing relevance.

Since action research starts with the immediate needs of a teacher or a group of teachers, and is carried out by these individuals with their limited time and resources, their reports (without which their actions cannot be considered research—Ebbutt, 1985; Stern, 1983) should reflect such realities and limitations. They also reflect the expository predispositions of writer and targeted audience: they may be more discursive, subjective, and anecdotal or discursal (by “orthodox” standards). (See, e.g., Ray, 1987; Reason & Rowan,

1981; Whitehead & Lomax, 1987.) As Winter (1989, p. 73-4) states

since our writing emerges from a different set of relationships (collaborative and action-oriented, rather than authoritative and observation-oriented) the format of our writing should also be different. ... certain stylistic features of 'academic' writing could also be seen as inappropriate for action-research reports, i.e., those ... which seem to express the expert role by suggesting a withdrawal from personal involvement, and a sustained abstraction from concrete detail.

It is such teacher-oriented reports⁸, when presented beyond the confines of their intended application or dissemination, which can cause the concern expressed by various authorities cited at the outset of this paper. The reports are, after all, intended for a particular audience: fellow action-researchers involved in the work reported; the researcher him/herself, in that the reporting process is part of the reflection involved in changing practice; and fellow teachers in similar situations (Winter, 1989). An action research report, therefore, should not be read as if unsuccessfully targeted for an academic journal. Its contents should, however, be disseminated. A range of alternatives to the academic journal exist (e.g., conference presentation, local or in-house journal, teacher-center poster), most of which are probably more effective in disseminating the information contained in such a report. Investigations of the utilization of research findings makes it clear that findings only presented in academic journals stands little chance of being utilized. Other means of information dissemination must be adopted, in which the personal element is involved, either in dissemination alone (cf. "linking systems", Rogers, 1986; "teacher research linkers", Billups & Rauth, 1987), or through institutionalizing action-research so as to change school staffs into communities of action-researchers (cf. Bennett & Desforges, 1985).

⁸ See e.g., Goswami & Stillman (1987) and Johnstone (1990) for examples of such reports.

6. Summary

I have tried to outline here the differences between (a) regular research, (b) one kind of action research perhaps better called teacher research, and (c) a second kind of action research which more truly warrants that name. All are important and useful, but it is the progressive or critical wing of action research which is least understood or conducted and which I have highlighted here. It deserves our support for the following reasons: (1) its results are actually as relevant to the immediate needs and problems of teachers as any research can be; (2) it supports the process of teacher reflection, which is vital for educational renewal and professional growth; (3) engaging in action research may facilitate teachers doing other kinds of research and using the results of such research; and (4) because of its basis in critical theory, it faces up to the unquestioned values embodied in educational institutions which regularly threaten to cut the ground from under teachers, deprofessionalizing them and preventing the delivery of true education.

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 don't 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 the sociopolitical context teachers find themselves has the potential to be a major component in the continuing struggle to professionalize ESL teaching.

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