

## **English Teachers' Actions in Action Research: Developing a Template for Classroom Purposes**

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### **Abstract**

Action research (AR) has become increasingly common in applied linguistics studies as an empirical method that may be extended to other research studies and higher education. Action research consists of taking action and analyzing how it affects student learning. Though there are two components namely 'action' and 'research' at the heart of action research, classroom teachers often prioritize action over research. The goal of 'action' in action research is to bring about positive change, and improvement in the participants' social situation. Through self-reflection, analysis, methodical planning, and execution, action research fosters classroom transformation through improving teaching-learning practices. Action research is a qualitative, disciplined method of inquiry carried out by and for individuals who are carrying out the action. Action research is primarily used to support the "actor" in enhancing and/or modifying his or her activities. This paper discusses the fundamental philosophical presuppositions, paradigms, history, and theoretical bases of action research. The paper also describes the primary methodologies and techniques and tools used in action research. In addition, the paper presents an action research template which can be used by English teachers for classroom purposes.

**Keywords:** Action research design, cyclical, planning, observation, action research template, reflection

### **Introduction**

The action research design (ARD) is debatable, appears to contradict itself, and is likely still in the early stages of development (Burns, 2005). The goal of this design is to combine the seemingly opposing concepts of action and research. The aim of action research design is to give teachers control over their research as they often value action over study. The typical route for teachers to get involved in research is through a field outside of education, including applied linguistics, the study of second languages, or testing. There is nothing wrong with this, but the

question still stands as to who would investigate the topics and problems that are not dealt with by those disciplines yet are still of interest to instructors. One solution to the problem is action research design (ARD).

According to Field (1997), "The term 'action research' was adopted to describe a small-scale investigation undertaken by a class teacher" (p. 192). Action research is described as aiming "at solving specific problems within a program, organization, or community" by Patton (1990, p.157). Action Research Design (ARD) is the small-scale inquiry by teachers on particular classroom issues for the aim of curriculum renewal and/or professional development (Field, 1997; LoCastro, 1994; Markee, 1996; Nunan, 1993 & Patton, 1990). Gay, Mills and Airasian (2017, p. 508) argue that "Action research in education is any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching-learning environment that involves gathering information about the ways in which their particular schools operate, the teachers teach, and the students learn." The purpose of gathering this data is to acquire understanding, cultivate reflective practice, modify the school environment (and educational methods generally), improve student results, and enhance the lives of everyone engaged. "Action research designs are systematic procedures done by teachers (or other individuals in an educational setting) to gather information about, and subsequently improve, the ways their particular educational setting operates, their teaching, and their student learning" (Mills, 2011 as cited in Creswell, 2016, p. 577 ). Cohen and Manion (1994, 186 as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013, p. 345) describe action research as "a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention."

The 'action' component of action research (AR) is anchored in real-world application, whereas the research component is concentrated on developing, advancing, and refining theory. There are two major components in action research; action and research. Together, these two elements function, one supplying information and assistance to the other. In the field of English language teaching (EIT), this constructivist method to research often entails processes of cooperation, discourse, and action among the participants in the surrounding social system. As stated by Reason and Bradbury (2001, p. 2), "action research is about working towards practical outcomes and also about creating new forms of understanding, since action research without understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless." Reason and Bradbury (2001, p. 2) describe the essential components of action research as:

Since action research starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living knowledge, in many ways the process of inquiry is as important as the specific outcomes. Good action research emerges over time in an evolutionary and developmental process, as individuals develop skills of inquiry and as communities of inquiry develop within communities of practice.

Action research, according to Wallace (1998), is "basically a way of reflecting on your teaching... by systematically collecting data on your everyday practice and analyzing it in order to come to some decisions about what your future practice should be" (p. 4). According to this perspective, action research is a type of inquiry carried out by instructors and is more oriented

to instructor is more focused on the growth of the instructor and the learners than it is on the formation of theories, though it may be utilized for the latter. Action researchers have usefully identified various elements in the action research process, despite the fact that Chaudron (2000) states that action research does not "imply any particular theory or consistent methodology of research" (p. 4).

### **Theoretical Basis**

Action research was developed to transform the "outside-in" relationship between practitioners and researchers in education to an "inside-out" perspective. Action research entails gathering and analysing data pertaining to a certain area of our professional practice. This is carried out so that we can consider what we have learned and put it to use in our professional actions.

There are two theoretical bases for action research. One encourages researcher-practitioners to study classroom practices by posing questions related to discrete methodological issues in the hopes of finding practical solutions to challenges in classroom teaching. The other views action research as critical inquiry and invites researcher-practitioners to investigate the social, cultural, and political contexts of schools in pursuit of more democratic schools and society.

Teachers may provide a wealth of experience and background information to the research process, providing a distinctive viewpoint on the dynamics of second language acquisition and instruction (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Additionally, according to Crookes (1993), instructors may feel that the results of other researchers' studies do not appropriately connect to or apply to their particular teaching contexts. When considering research designed and conducted by teachers, Johnson (1992) remarked that "if what is missing from the research on classroom language learning is the voices of teachers themselves, then the movement provides ways for teachers' voices to be heard and valued" (p. 216). One kind of teacher-initiated research is action research. In a helpful overview of the term's history, Crookes (1993) notes that "in action research, it is accepted that research questions should emerge from a teacher's own immediate concerns and problems" (p. 130). Action research is typically carried out by practitioners to address an immediate classroom problem or need, as opposed to the majority of second language classroom research, which is carried out by parties outside the classroom for theory construction and testing (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). Like other research, action research often begins with a question or problem, involves data collection, is followed by data analysis and interpretation, and may even result in a solution to the study problem. Action research enhances professionalism which is one of the central components of teacher education and English teacher development. Pandey (2020b, p.85) argues that "Professionalism encompasses professional learning which causes changes in professional knowledge, beliefs, behaviour and actions. It is a process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and increase their knowledge base, skills and intelligence."

### **Philosophical Bases**

Action research differs philosophically and practically from positivist experimental methodologies that seek generalizable, objective information devoid of logical meaning.

Although positivist techniques have long dominated the educational and other areas, they have come under criticism for not being easily adaptable to the real-world problems faced by the professional groups they purport to serve. Action research seeks to produce locally relevant knowledge that is grounded in inquiry into the real world and promotes wise change. In comparison to other types of study, it gives a path into systematic inquiry and possibilities that are typically more useful to practitioners.

Since its introduction by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, action research has grown to be acknowledged as an alternative empirical methodology that aims to discover and delve into the participants' current problems and interests. Because of its potential to increase practitioner engagement in research, provide a vehicle for school-based professional development, and produce contextualized and situated theories of teaching and learning, it emerged primarily in the field of ELT in the late 1980s and has grown in influence.

The transition to learner-centered curriculum movement, which gave the teacher a more prominent role as a primary player in the decision-making processes of the classroom, had a significant impact on AR. Another reason AR has gained traction is that it is a part of a larger movement in teacher education and professional development towards teacher learning, which has been influenced by theoretical advancements and research in teacher cognition, reflective teaching, the knowledge base of teaching, and the socio-cultural turn in language. This movement paralleled growing interest in classroom-based research to shed light on how learning and teaching operated in language classrooms. Additionally, AR is in line with the broader shift in interest in exploratory, qualitative, and ethnographic research methods that occurred in the area of applied linguistics starting in the early 1980s.

## **The Objectives**

Solving the problem is always at the heart of the action research design. As a result of the importance of the teacher's role, the term "solving problems" refers to ARD's focus on "solving specific problems within a program, organization, or community" (Patton, 1990, p. 157). The paper begins by examining various factors that have contributed to the expansion and significance of action research. The paper introduces action research design with a discussion of the theoretical and philosophical bases of the design. It then presents the forms of action research, primary techniques and tools used in the action research process. Moreover, it offers a concise analysis of important considerations regarding the execution of action research, and an action research template which can be used for classroom purposes. Following this discussion, a brief overview of the limitations of action research is provided, and the paper concludes with an examination of the practical application of action research.

## **Forms of Action Research**

Although AR has gained wider acceptance in ELT, the bulk of published studies have tended to focus on technical-practical (or problem-solving) kinds of research that offer workable answers to specific classroom problems. Crookes (1993) drew attention to the paucity of studies adopting critical-emancipatory (or problematization) views, directing the work of more critical strands of AR. These movements are based on a line of political study that aims to

drastically alter current educational practices and policies. Although there is some indication that this area of study is starting to take shape, there are currently few AR studies that relate problems of power, identity, inclusion, and equality and that include a wide range of stakeholders besides teachers and students.

### **Techniques and Tools**

Action researchers often use qualitative methods used in naturalistic exploratory research. Essentially, there are two ways to collect data: by watching and documenting what people do, and by asking them for their thoughts and ideas. It is worthless to try to grasp what participants believe about components of language acquisition by watching them do a specific activity, for example. Techniques, like other types of research, should be firmly matched to the key topic or subject. However, the methods discussed here do not indicate that AR data cannot be quantified using percentages, ranks, ratings, and other metrics. However, applying the statistical computations typical of quantitative techniques is unusual in AR.

### **Steps and Processes in Action Research**

AR is distinguished by dynamic mobility, flexibility, interchangeability, and repetition in contrast to research methodologies that adhere to more predictable, well-established protocols. However, there are recognizable broad research stages. Despite the huge variety of (contested) models in educational AR, Zuber-Skerritt (1990) estimates that there are at least thirty), common representations include spirals or cycles of (i) planning, (ii) action, (iii) observation, and (iv) reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Because the spirals are intertwined, fluid, and repeated throughout the study, an AR researcher should be ready for unexpected changes and repetitions throughout the process. The primary elements of ARD, according to Nunan (1992, p. 18), are questions that are followed by data and interpretation, which are then carried out by teachers in their particular contexts. The steps in the action research cycle stated by Nunan (1992) are 1) Initiation, 2) Preliminary investigation, 3) Hypothesis, 4) Intervention, 5) Evaluation, 6) Dissemination and 7) Follow up. There isn't yet agreement on the number of stages, the sequence in which they should be completed, or even what the steps themselves should be in an action research design. For instance, Belleli (1993) mentions just six phases, but Burns (1999) cites eleven. However, there is general agreement that all ARD phases should be viewed as suggestive rather than prescriptive, reflective rather than final, open-ended rather than fixed, and recursive. Recursive refers to the ability for a step to be repeated and improved. Markee (1996) lists six characteristics of ARD: 1) ARD is conducted by insiders; 2) ARD uses any type of data (qualitative or quantitative); 3) ARD is intended to change teacher behavior and attitudes; 4) ARD has no expectation of generalizability; 5) ARD seeks to improve classroom practice; and 6) ARD seeks to develop teacher theory. According to (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2017, p. 456), "The basic steps in the action research process are identifying an area of focus, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and action planning." The four-step process has been termed the dialectic action research which is illustrated in the following figure.

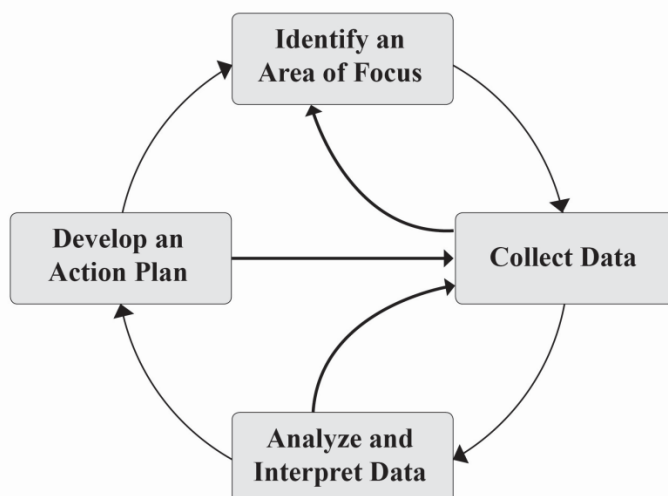


Figure 1: The four- step in action research (Mills, 2011 as cited in Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2017, p. 456)

It provides teacher researchers with a practical guide and illustrates how to proceed with inquiries. It is a model for research done by teachers and for teachers and students, not research done on them, and as such is a dynamic and responsive model that can be adapted to different contexts and purposes. It was designed to provide teacher researchers with “provocative and constructive ways” of thinking about their work. Techniques used in action research may be seen in terms of the dialectic action research spiral.

### Action Research Template

Due to the fact that action research design almost usually results from a particular problem or issue in a teacher's professional practice, ARD entails the gathering and analysis of data on a problem in teaching for the purposes of discovery, reflection, and application to teaching (Wallace, 1998, p. 15). The following template serves as an example of action research design which can be used for classroom purposes.

**A classroom problem.** English Teachers should stay updated on developments in both their subject area and the teaching of foreign languages. Pandey (2020a, p.118) states that “They need to continue learning to keep up-to-date with the constant development in the field of education. This type of learning is often referred to as professional development as it aims to enhance their professional competence and efficiency”. Action research is teacher research that enhances teachers’ personal competence. English teachers encounter multiple problems in the classrooms. One of the problems English teachers often face is stated below:

**Situation.** You are a secondary level English teacher. You notice that your students are not paying attention to you when you explain things about English to them. They talk to each other, they look at the cell phones, they yawn, they sleep, they look through books for other courses, and/or they just look bored. You also observe that some of them are working on assignments for other classes.

**Tasks.** Consider the following questions. What do you think is going on? What do you want to be different? How are you going to intervene to achieve your desired outcome? Use the Action Research Template to organize your thoughts and record the required information.



Write a one-page, single-spaced summary of your analysis, proposed actions and rationale. **Action research template.** The table below presents some components of action research which can be used in the classroom. The table presents the components namely; problem, background details, objectives, question(s), rationale, method, timeline, data collection, discussion of findings, analysis and conclusions. The students are required to complete the sections provided.

Table 1

*Action research template*

Name		
Steps	Information	Brainstorming questions
1. Problem		1. Describe the problem/issue. Sample questions: What is the issue? What problem/challenge are you now facing?
2. Background Details		2. Discuss the history of the problem. Sample questions: Why do you believe that is taking place? What do you think the cause is? Is it a new issue? Has it happened before? Has it been re-occurring? Over time, has it changed? Why does it disturb you?/ Why does it cause you concern?
3. Objective		3. Discuss about an intervention technique you want to explore. Sample questions to consider: What can you do, in your opinion, to make things better?
4. Question(s)		4. Formulate a research question based on the problem you identified and the intervention you will try to resolve it.
5. Rationale (theory) for choice of intervention		5. Explain why you chose this intervention. Sample question: Why do you believe this would be beneficial?
6. Method		6. How did you choose your sample (of 5–6 students)? Discuss what you will tell them. Describe exactly what you will do and what you will ask your students to do. Sample questions: What are you going to do?/ How will you proceed? What task will you assign to your students?
7. Timeline		7. Create a schedule for putting your approach into action. Sample question: When will you implement your strategy?

8. Data Collection		8. Describe what you'll be watching/observing as you put your plan into action, as well as how you'll arrange and collect the data. Sample questions: How will you keep track of what happens and what you observe? How are you going to arrange the data?
9. Findings		9. Describe two potential outcomes: a good one where your strategy succeeds in solving the problem and a bad one where it failed. Sample questions: What do you anticipate would occur if the plan is successful? If it fails, what will you notice?
10. Analysis		10. Discuss the behaviors that will either confirm or disprove the efficacy of your intervention. Sample question: How will you know if your intervention succeeded, or not?
11. Conclusions		11. Discuss the next steps in light of your two probable outcomes. Sample question: Based on what happens, what will you do next in your classroom?

### **Criticisms and Potential Challenges**

According to Nunan, (1990), ARD "lacks the rigor of true scientific research" (p. 64). He asserts that because other uncontrollable factors may be at play, conclusions drawn from ARD generally need to be used with extreme caution. The second issue instructors with ARD have is framing their issues as researchable topics. Knowing there are issues is one thing; being able to frame an issue as a topic for further inquiry is quite another. A question that can be addressed qualifies as being researchable. Any teacher who uses a research design encounters this issue sooner or later, but it appears that ARD is especially vulnerable because it is marketed as being teacher-friendly. There is little to no consensus on how to share findings, which is a third area of concern. The results of ARD research may not be shared outside of a regional program or organization. In many cases, a comprehensive written study report may not even be expected. Instead, there may be staff meetings, briefings, and verbal communication (Patton, 1990, p.157). Verbal reports, presentations, reports, and articles, which each have both informal and formal aspects might be used to group this vast range of reporting styles.

By no means is AR a widely used or established research approach in the field of applied linguistics (Jarvis, 2002). It has been criticized for inadequate objectivity and rigor, methodological limitations, including a lack of well-established research methods and data



procedures, issues with reliability and validity, a lack of generalizability/replicability, and unclear ethical implications and processes (Dornyei, 2007; Ellis, 2010). This criticism has come most frequently from those who take a positivist stance. Additionally, there are questions about instructors' inadequate research experience, which affects both their ability to conduct research and the applicability of the information that is produced by their research to the topic of study. Commentators have also questioned the existence of AR among instructors and, if so, why so little of their published work is genuinely AR. Numerous studies of teachers' involvement in (action) research (Borg, 2010) have also highlighted challenges faced by teachers themselves, including institutional obstacles, a lack of familiarity with AR, a lack of resources and time, a lack of research training, and a lack of motivation or rewards for conducting research.

### **Practical Applications**

Since Lewin initially advocated a cycle of planning, action, and fact-finding to inspire social change, a number of action research models have been put forth.

The main features of these models, according to Burns (2015, p. 102) are:

Cyclical: A cyclical and recurrent process underlies the gradual advancement of knowledge and transformations in practice;

Open-ended: The beginning of the research and end points are flexible and based on the available time and resources;

Systematic: Reflection and observation yield information that supports subsequent action;

Exploratory: It is impossible to foresee how the study will turn out.

Since these action research models are valuable, it is important to remember that action research is fluid, dynamic, and adaptive to the specifics of the research. It basically uses a set of interconnected procedures that resemble the ones listed below:

explore teaching or learning as they currently occur; identify an area of interest or concern (a puzzle, dilemma, or issue); discuss with colleagues/other participants if possible how the issue might be addressed and involve them in the research; put a plan of action in place and observe how it plays out in the setting of the study; collect data to observe what is happening as the action takes place (for example, student questionnaires, observation reports, journal entries); reflect on what insights or findings are emerging from the observations; plan further strategic actions based on the data to address the issue; re-enter the cycle to deepen understanding, enhance practices, and identify further directions. (Burns, 2015, p. 102)

### **Conclusions**

Insights from dynamic systems and complexity theories are now having an impact on second language acquisition studies. These theories disprove the notion that simple, reductive causal explanations can satisfactorily account for phenomena like language instruction and learning. Complexity theory tries to comprehend and explain dynamic, open-ended systems like the classroom where actions, choices, and behaviors must be unexpected and even chaotic. Action

research supports this trend because it acknowledges: change, social situatedness, social contextualization, variability and flexibility. The idea of change is fundamental. Action research focuses on recording and elucidating change as it occurs for the many stakeholders and participants in the classroom. Social situatedness encompasses that Classrooms are a component of a larger system of institutions, groups, rules, and theories that affect how the classroom functions (Burns, 2015, p. 102).

The goal of action research is to equip teacher researchers with a technique for resolving common issues in schools so they can enhance both student learning and teacher effectiveness. Action research is investigation carried out by educators on their own initiative; it is not imposed upon them. Action research focuses on helping teachers to be lifelong learners in their classrooms and throughout their career. This is mostly done through fostering in them a professional disposition of professionalism. Teachers have the chance to demonstrate for students not just the skills necessary for efficient learning but also interest and passion about learning new things by doing research in their own classrooms and schools.

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