

Action Research: An Appropriate Research Paradigm for Practitioners

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Abstract

In the recent years action research (AR) has become increasingly popular in second language teaching sphere. It has been established as an appropriate research paradigm for educational, professional, managerial and organizational development. Action research (AR) is collaborative, critical and self-critical inquiry by practitioners (e.g. teachers, managers) into a major problem or issue or concern in their own practice. It is an important way to extend the teaching skills and develop more understanding as teachers, of our classrooms and students. In this paper the focus is firstly identifying some of the key concepts in AR, defining AR and principles and procedures of Action research and focusing on the pedagogical issues.

Key words: Action research, principle, procedure, pedagogical issues

Introduction

Action research has a complex history because it is not a single academic discipline but an approach to research that has emerged over time from a broad range of fields. Action research challenges the claims of a positivistic view of knowledge which holds that in order to be credible, research must remain objective and value-free. Somekh (1993) viewed action research as a flexible methodology, not merely in terms of being eclectic in research methods, but more fundamentally in needing to adapt to the social and political situation in which it is employed. As university academics we work in a fast-changing environment, which puts competing pressures on us including the need to be excellent at teaching, research and administration. Action Research aims to solve a particular teaching-learning problem that has been identified. It is a reflective process that improves the teaching practice and the curriculum. In order to do action research it is necessary to carry out a rigorous study in which the problem has to be clearly specified. An action plan has to be described and carried out, and finally an evaluation has to be contemplated to show if the decisions taken were the adequate ones.

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The work of Kurt Lewin (1946), who researched extensively on social issues, is often described as a major landmark in the development of action research as a methodology. Lewin's work was followed by that of Stephen Corey and others in the USA, who applied this methodology for researching into educational issues.

In this paper “**Action Research: An Appropriate Research Paradigm for Practitioners**”, the focus is firstly on identifying some of the key concepts in AR, defining AR and principles and procedures of Action research and focusing on the pedagogical issues.

Definitely AR is not just a simple question of following a fixed pattern to solve a straightforward technical problem in an individual classroom. The aims of AR are various. It may be means, end, theory, teacher, institute and society oriented. Language teachers all around the world want to be effective teachers who provide the best learning opportunities for their students. Action research (AR) can be a very valuable way to extend our teaching skills.

Meyer (2000) maintains that action research's strength lies in its focus on generating solutions to practical problems and its ability to empower practitioners, by getting them to engage with research and the subsequent development or implementation activities. Therefore Action research is used to refer to ways of investigating professional experience which link practice and the analysis of practice into a single productive and continuously developing sequence, and which link researchers and research participants into a single community of interested colleagues.

Action Research and Its Types

Hopkins (2002) maintains that action research combines a substantive act with a research procedure, and that it is action disciplined by enquiry and a personal attempt at understanding, while engaged in a process of improvement and reform.

Action research, as defined by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001), is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing

concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

As per the definition given by Grundy and Kemmis (1988): “Action research is research into practice, by practitioners, for practitioners... In action research, all actors involved in the research process are equal participants, and must be involved in every stage of the research... The kind of involvement required is collaborative involvement. It requires a special kind of communication...which has been described as ‘symmetrical communication’ ...which allows all participants to be partners of communication on equal terms... Collaborative participation in theoretical, practical and political discourse is thus a hallmark of action research and the action researcher”. It is related to the ideas of ‘reflective practice’ and ‘the teacher as researcher ‘and involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts.

For action research to take its deserved place in professional inquiry its proponents need to address the question of its academic acceptance, status and credibility—an accolade traditionally awarded according to scientific rigor. Burns (1999) explains it as a self-reflective, systematic and critical approach to enquiry by participants who are at the same time members of the research community. The aim is to identify problematic situations or issues considered by the participants to be worthy of investigation in order to bring about critically informed changes in practice. Action research is underpinned by democratic principles in that ownership of change is invested in those who conduct the research. The *action* part of AR is to get involved in a premeditated way in the problematic situation to bring improvements in practice. These are ones based on information (datum) that an action researcher collects systematically. Consequently, the changes made in the teaching condition arise from concrete information and not on assumptions.

A teacher who is philosophical, reflective and dedicated to developing as thinking professional, AR is an appealing way to look more closely at classroom issues or to investigate into teaching dilemmas. *Technical* action research aims to improve effectiveness of educational or managerial practice. The practitioners are co-opted and depend greatly on the researcher as a facilitator. *Practical* action research, in addition to effectiveness, aims at the practitioners’ understanding and professional development. The researcher’s role is Socratic and to encourage

practical deliberation and self reflection on the part of the practitioners. Action research is *emancipatory* when it aims not only at technical and practical improvement and the participants' better understanding, along with transformation and change within the existing boundaries and conditions, but also at changing the system itself or those conditions which impede desired improvement in the system/organization. As stated in Table 1.1

Table 1.1 *Types of action research and their main characteristics (Zuber-Skerritt 1992:12)*

S.No	Type of action research	Aims	Facilitator's Role	Relationship between facilitator and participants
1	Technical	Effectiveness/ efficiency of educational practice Professional development	Outside 'expert'	Co-option (of practitioners who depend on facilitator)
2.	Practical	As (1) above Practitioners' understanding Transformation of their consciousness	Socratic role, encouraging participation and self-reflection	Cooperation (process consultancy)
3.	Emancipatory	As (2) above Participants' emancipation from the dictates of tradition, self-deception, coercion Their critique of bureaucratic systematization Transformation of the organization and of the educational system	Process moderator (responsibility shared equally by participants)	Collaboration

Principles of Action Research

Action research is a name given to a particular way of researching your own learning. Action research is seen as a way of investigating professional experience which links practice and the analysis of practice into a single, continuously developing sequence. According to Zuber-Skerritt (1996) the principles which are central to the action research process are:

1 **Reflexive Critique** is the process of becoming aware of our own perceptual biases. In the first principle, the thesis of reflexivity insists upon modest claims: making judgments depends on examples from various personal experiences, not on samples of universally agreed categories. These examples will be analyzed, but no analysis will be complete, because inquiry is in the form of questioning claims, rather than making claims. The result of inquiry will thus take the form of a dialogue between writers and readers concerning possible interpretations of

experience, rather than a single interpretation thrust upon a passive reader by a writer expressing certainty. This process of questioning claims provides a dimension of validity. Showing, how a statement is grounded in reflexive, interpretative judgments, rather than external facts. The principle of reflective critique ensures people reflect on issues and processes and make explicit the interpretations, biases, assumptions and concerns upon which judgments are made. In this way, practical accounts can give rise to theoretical considerations.

2 **Dialectic Critique** is a way of understanding the relationships between the elements that make up various phenomena in our context. In the second principle dialectics is a general theory of the nature of reality and of the process of understanding reality. Dialectics proposes that, in order to understand a phenomenon, we treat it as a set of relations between elements which are different and in some sense opposed, yet at the same time interdependent. It is this instability which gives it an inherent tendency to change. Consequently, of the infinite ways in which a phenomenon could be broken down for analysis, the more significant ways are in terms of the internal relationships between constituent elements whose instability creates the likelihood of change. The key elements to focus attention on are those constituent elements that are unstable, or in opposition to one another. These are the ones that are most likely to create changes.

3. **Collaboration** is intended to mean that everyone's view is taken as a contribution to understanding the situation. In the third principle Collaboration is intended to mean that everyone's point of view will be taken as a contribution to resources for understanding the situation, and no one's point of view will be taken as the final understanding of what all the other points of view really mean. The interpretative categories are to be treated as data alongside the ideas collected. Also, the analysis will not only seek to assemble resources from the differences between viewpoints, but also from the conflicts and contradictions within viewpoints. At the same time, a process of deconstructing the various contributions so that it can be used as resources for new categories and interpretations

4. **Risking Disturbance** is an understanding of our own taken-for granted processes and willingness to submit them to critique. In the fourth principle, the process is not merely one of

exposure to possible refutation, but of exploring possibilities for transformation. The researchers' anticipations of the sequence of events through which the fieldwork will pass, and also the decisions as to the question at issue, and what is and is not relevant.

5. **Creating Plural Structures**, involves developing various accounts and critiques, rather than a single authoritative interpretation. The fifth principle a plural text needs a structural principle which exists separate from the author's argument, since the author's argument will be only one of various voices in the text. They are linear, presenting a chronology of events or a sequence of cause and effect. But our dialectical, reflexive, questioning, collaborative form of inquiry will create a plural structure, consisting of various accounts and various critiques of those accounts and ending, not with conclusions intended to be convincing, but with questions and possibilities intended to be relevant in various ways for different readers. Data and interpretation will be related as follows. The text will include a plurality of accounts, and also a commentary on each account. To be a reflexive critique, however, the commentaries must address their own contradictions, their own reflexive status. They will therefore contain questions, as well as interpretative statements.

6. **Theory and Practice internalized** is seeing theory and practice as two interdependent yet complementary phases of the change process. The sixth principle the issue concerns the crucial relationship between theory and practice, between research and action. Theory and practice are not two distinct entities, but two different and yet interdependent and complementary phases of the change process. The role of theoretical reflection with respect to practical action is not to introduce new and different concepts, nor to present authoritative conclusions. Instead, the purpose of reflection is to question the reflective bases upon which the practical actions have been carried out, to offer a reflexive and dialectical critique whose effect is to recall to mind those possibilities that practice has chosen on this occasion to ignore. Hence Theory and practice need each other, and thus comprise mutually indispensable phases of a unified change process

Steps in Action Research

Research is about generating knowledge. Action research creates knowledge based on enquiries conducted within specific and often practical contexts. As articulated earlier, the

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purpose of action research is to learn through action that then leads on to personal or professional development. Action research is participatory in nature, which led Kemmis and McTaggart (1998) to describe it as *participatory research*. AR typically involves four broad phases in a cycle of research. The first cycle may become a continuing, or *iterative*, spiral of cycles which recur until the action researcher has achieved a satisfactory outcome.

1. Planning: In this phase you identify a problem or issue and develop a plan of action in order to bring about improvements in a specific area of the research context. This is a forward-looking phase where you consider: i) what kind of investigation is possible within the realities and constraints of your teaching situation; and ii) what potential improvements you think are possible.

2. Action: The plan is a carefully considered one which involves some deliberate interventions into your teaching situation that you put into action over an agreed period of time. The interventions are ‘critically informed’ as you question your assumptions about the current situation and plan new and alternative ways of doing things.

3. Observation: This phase involves you in observing systematically the effects of the action and documenting the context, actions and opinions of those involved. It is a data collection phase where you use ‘open-eyed’ and ‘open-minded’ tools to collect information about what is happening.

4. Reflection: At this point, you reflect on, evaluate and describe the effects of the action in order to make sense of what has happened and to understand the issue you have explored more clearly. You may decide to do further cycles of AR to improve the situation even more, or to share the ‘story’ of your research with others as part of your ongoing professional development.

This model of AR has often been illustrated through the diagram in Figure 1.1 to show its iterative or recursive nature. Kemmis’s model of the action research process (see Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982, and several revised editions since) shows a self-reflective spiral of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and re-planning as the basis for understanding how to take action to improve an educational situation (see Figure 1.1).

Fig 1.1

The self-reflective spiral in action research

The diagram shows the principles in action, the movement from one critical phase to another, and the way in which progress may be made through systematic steps. Nevertheless, Kemmis and McTaggart’s model is probably the best known. It’s a kind of ‘classic’ and it appears often in the literature on AR. Despite the criticisms, it is a useful model as it summarizes very succinctly the essential phases of the AR process.

Gerald Susman (1983) gives a somewhat more elaborate listing. He distinguishes five phases to be conducted within each research cycle (Figure 1.2). Initially, a problem is identified and data is collected for a more detailed diagnosis. This is followed by a collective postulation of several possible solutions, from which a single plan of action emerges and is implemented. Data on the results of the intervention are collected and analyzed, and the findings are interpreted in light of how successful the action has been. At this point, the problem is re-assessed and the process begins another cycle. This process continues until the problem is resolved.

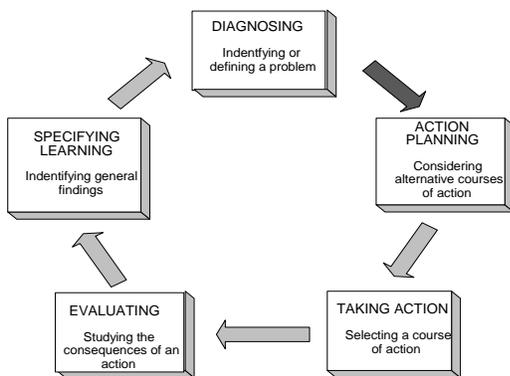


Fig 1.2 Detailed Action Research Model
(adapted from Susman 1983)

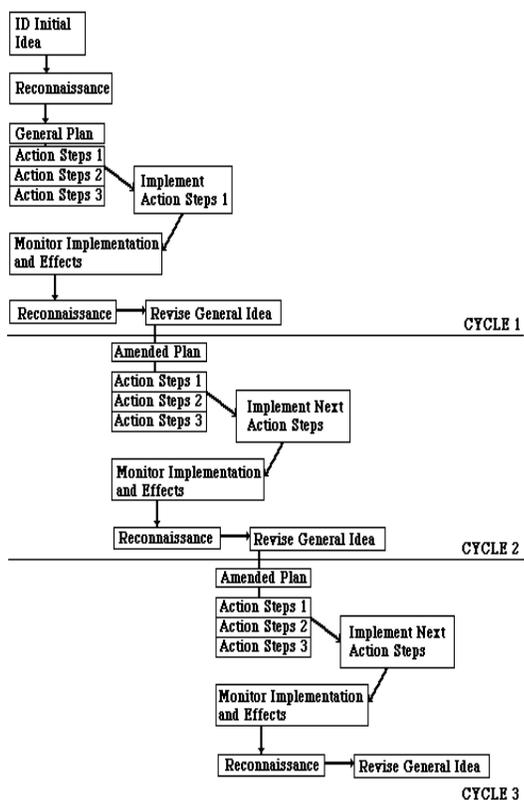


FIG 1.3 Elliot's action research model.

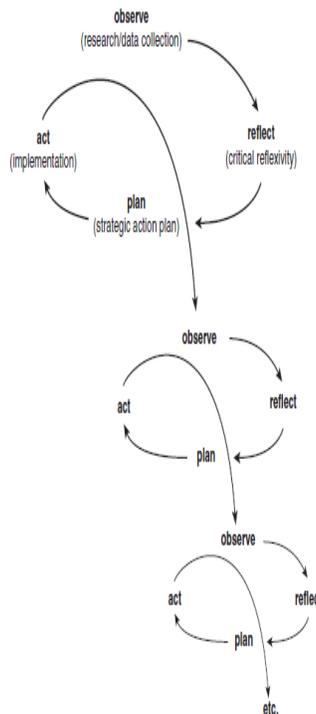


FIG 1.4 O'Leary's cycles of research

The model considered by Elliot (1991), contributes many features to that of Kemmis and McTaggart and is based on Lewin's work of the 1940s. It includes identifying a general idea, investigation or fact-finding, planning, action, evaluation, amending plan and taking second action step, and so on, as can be seen in Figure 1.3. Other models, such as O'Leary's (2004) cycles of action research shown in Figure 1.4, portray action research as a cyclic process which takes shape as knowledge emerges. It is stressed that 'cycles converge towards better situation understanding and improved action implementation; and are based in evaluative practice that alters between action and critical reflection'. O'Leary sees action research as an experiential learning approach, to change, where the goal is to continually refine the methods, data, and interpretation in light of the understanding developed in each earlier cycle.

Although it is useful to consider different models, following the stages of a particular model too rigidly, could adversely affect the unique opportunity offered by the emerging nature and flexibility that are the characteristic of action research.

Pedagogical Action Research

Pedagogical action research is derived from an ‘issue’ that has arisen in your pedagogical practice as an ‘academic’ Pedagogical action research involves using a reflective lens through which to look at some pedagogical issue or problem and methodically working out a series of steps to take action to deal with that issue. As in all forms of research (pure and applied) the ultimate aim is to publish, but of equal importance is the imperative to change one’s practice. Pedagogical action research like other research requires time, commitment and resources in order to carry it out successfully, but in some university contexts it can be seen to be of little value compared to subject research, so the effort to do it may require more justification, more knowledge and a realistic appraisal of what it can and cannot achieve. Whether we are relatively new to university teaching, or have had many years of experience, the chances are that each of us will have identified some aspect of our students’ learning that we would like to change.

Pedagogical action research, to be properly conducted, needs a long time to achieve its full realization. It cannot be a hurried, superficial, clocked process. Unpredictability is a fundamental component to the practice of action research. To embrace unpredictability means to be open to real-time reconstructions, to restart from the beginning, to reposition priorities, always in the collective, through widely negotiated agreements. Hurrying is a principle that does not work in action research, and if it is present it almost invariably leads to awkwardness in dealing with the collective, giving priority to the product, and making it easier to adopt strategic procedures that will disfigure the research.

A pedagogical action research to take place there must be an association of the research with a collective strategy or proposal for intervention, indicating the research position from the outset with the intervention action, an action that immediately becomes itself object of investigation. We also assume that research and action can be united in a same process, reaffirming the issue of research with action, which gradually also becomes action with research. In developing action research, there is an emphasis on flexibility, on the progressive adjustments to the facts, strengthening the issue of research with action.

If we consider action research as a research on/about action, we can make at least two mistakes:

- We can turn action research into a study to evaluate a procedure adopted, transformations occurred, or even an ongoing process. In this case, the research, regardless of being relevant, cannot be considered as action research, for it has lost its dynamic feature of transmutation after transformations, and therefore has lost its possibility of progressive adjustment, a fundamental factor to the research of/in the praxis;
- Another mistake, quite common among inexperienced researchers, is related to the fact that the researcher investigates his/her own workplace or job. A school principal or a pedagogical coordinator, or even a teacher, carries out the research within their own professional action. The hierarchy of professional roles, of the implicit powers that demand strategic actions and not communicative actions, the ensuing research can hardly be characterized as action research.

Advantages of Action Research

- Research can be set within a specific context or situation;
- Researchers can be participants – they don't have to be *distant* and *detached* from the situation;
- Action research involves continuous evaluation and modifications can be made as the project progresses; there are opportunities for theory to emerge from the research rather than always follow a previously formulated theory;
- The study can lead to open-ended outcomes;
- Through action research, the researcher can bring a story to life.

Conclusion

Whether the reader is a novice or is progressing with an action research project, it would be useful to be aware of how action research has developed as a method for carrying out research over the past few decades. Several ideas in this article that should provide you with starting points for understanding AR are focused. What is meant by the term 'action research', a term that seems to contain a rather odd combination of two different kinds of behavior – action and

research? How these behaviors come together in AR through cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection that problematise issues, which concern us in our teaching situations. It also highlights the fact that action research, structured according to its generating principles, is an eminently pedagogical research, configured as an action that scientificizes the educative practice starting from ethical principles that have in sight the continual formation and emancipation of all subjects of the practice. Therefore Action research can involve problem solving, if the solution to the problem leads to the improvement of practice. Traditional researchers follow structured and linear process in the development and implementation of their projects. This involves identifying the need and rationale, developing a plan and implementing it, and finally, reflecting on its successes or failures and publishing the findings. Those involved in action research projects usually follow alternative processes that are more cyclic and iterative.

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