



Action research: A way to explore and understand your classroom

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1. Burning questions!

Write down a 'burning question you have about action research (something you are unclear about, puzzled by, uncertain about). Share your question with some other participants.

2. What is action research?

What does action research mean to you? How would you define it?
What do you already know about it?
Have you tried it out? On your own? With others?

3. Steps and processes in action research (Appendix 1)

4. Finding a focus for your action research

Finding a focus is important for any research. In AR it relates to *development* and *understanding* about an issue in your social context (classroom, school). Select from the questions below to develop a research focus. Discuss your ideas in your group. (See Appendix 2 for more ideas.)

1. What teaching/learning dilemma, problem, gap or puzzle do you have in mind?
2. What topic(s) or area(s) are you interested in investigating?
3. How/why did you identify these topics?
4. Why are they of interest or importance to you?
5. What do you want to know about this topic?
6. How will it extend your teaching or your students' learning?
7. What are you likely to learn/understand more about by focusing on this topic?

5. Collecting your data

Because AR is systematic, it involves finding evidence to support your investigation. It's important for action researchers to (a) be aware of the range of options available (b) to choose the most appropriate options.

Observational methods involve documenting behaviours and interactions.e.g.:

- *field notes*: observation notes made during or after a class (e.g. effectiveness of whole group or paired tasks, use of classroom materials, behaviour of different groups of students or individuals)
- *diaries/journals*: more personal responses to classroom events, including evaluations or reactions and reflective comments (student diaries are also an invaluable source of data)
- *'jottings'*: a stream-of-consciousness record of classroom events or happenings, which map what is happening as an aid to memory
- *video and audio-recordings*: records of actual classroom interactions and behaviours
- *transcripts*: written versions of classroom interactions from video or audio-recordings
- *photographs/diagrams*: visual records that recreate classroom layout, the physical context and students' location in the classroom

Non-observational methods involve exploring people's perspectives, beliefs or attitudes, e.g.

- *questionnaires*: sets of closed, ranked option or open-ended written questions used to gather responses to research issues (can be non face-to-face)
- *interviews*: face-to-face structured, semi-structured or unstructured interactions between researcher and students which gather data about the research issue (for example, students' opinions or reactions to new teaching techniques, reflections on their own progress and so on)
- *discussions*: face-to-face, open-ended interactions with groups or sub-groups of students on issues related to the research topic
- *life/career history*: an account of students' previous life and learning experiences told from the perspective of the individuals involved and built up in more detail over a period of time
- *letters*: personal accounts of learning experiences related to the research issue written from current to future students
- *written texts*: samples of students' work collected in a portfolio or over a series of drafts to trace progress/responses to tasks.
- *documents*: curriculum and instructional materials, policy documents, lesson plans.
(Based on Burns, 1999, 2010).

6. Communicating your research

Stenhouse (1975) argued that good research needs to be "made public". It is important for action research to be shared with other teachers and researchers. Suggest some ways in which research can be made public (a) orally and (b) in writing.

<i>Oral presentations</i>	<i>Written presentations</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to colleagues at work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ on a school website

References and readings

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Appendix 1: Steps and processes in action research

- Plan - develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening
- Act - act to implement the plan
- Observe - observe the effects of the action in its context
- Reflect - reflect on these effects for further planning, and further action [etc.] through a cycle of research.(Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988:10)

Appendix 2: Identifying a Topic

1. Keep a diary (or brief notes) of teaching, teacher education, or administrative activities for a time that is convenient to you (e.g. a week, a month). Then, review your diary. What questions or issues are there for: teaching, learning, program management, administration? Who do they focus on: yourself; your colleagues; your learners; other administrators?
2. Think for 5 minutes about areas that have puzzled you for some time. Make a list. Select the one you find most interesting. Write it down in the centre of a page and circle it. For the next 5 minutes only write down anywhere on the page any ideas that relate to the central one. Include questions, concerns, hypothetical statements, personal hunches and images. Reflect on these and then use coloured markers to connect any similar concepts. Are there patterns in relation to certain areas, e.g. topic/problem, age, gender, type of subject, type of educational location, type of interaction, materials, tasks, texts, etc.
3. Select an article to read. List any questions suggested by the researcher for further research. What questions are not suggested? Which of these questions appeal to you? Make a note of them for future reference.
4. Brainstorm some responses to the following “starter” statements:
 - *I don't know enough about how students/colleagues...*
 - *My student/colleagues don't seem to... What can I learn about this?*
 - *I'd like to find out more about the way students...*
5. Observe a typical social situation in your workplace, e.g. a classroom, staff room, teacher training session, course you teach, library. If possible observe over a period (e.g. one week) rather than one session. What research questions emerge as a result of your observations? Use 2 above to reflect further.
6. Survey your colleagues on what they consider the “hot issues” or key unanswered questions in language teaching and learning. Do their impressions match withurs?
7. Look through the contents pages in recent journals (e.g. *TESOL Quarterly*, *Modern Language Journal*, *System*, *ELT Journal*) What are some of the ‘hot’ issues?
8. Look at some of the research agendas that have been drawn up by the professional associations and the research questions that they identify. For example, you can find the 2014 TESOL Research Agenda at:

http://www.tesol.org/docs/default-source/pdf/2014_tesol-research-agenda.pdf?sfvrsn=2

(adapted from Anne Burns & Geoff Brindley, Macquarie University, 2002).