

Review Essay:

Perspectives on Action Research

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Abstract

The emerging concept of “action research” in ELT offers a number of different perspectives of what teacher research is, should be, and might be. Three popular “teacher as researcher” resources provide an array of concepts in action research, the following discussion points out some of the distinctions and variations offered.

Collaborative Action Research for English Language Teachers

Anne Burns

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Pp. xi + 259

Doing Teacher Research

Donald Freeman

Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1998.

Pp. x + 258

Action Research for Language Teachers

Michael Wallace

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Pp. xii + 273

Many have wrestled with the difficult concept of “action research” (AR). Anne Burns’ *Collaborative Action Research for English Language Teachers* offers a delightful introduction to this term of art in a quote from a teacher-researcher: “it is difficult to grasp or explain the concept until one is in the process of doing it” (p.20). Such a statement is quite symbolic of both the nature of the problem, and the nature of Burns’ approach to dealing with it. Each of the books listed above focuses on teachers doing research in their classrooms, these will be examined through a comparative framework of conceptual and “book organization” issues.

Comparing Book Themes and Organization

Burns presents the most readable and complete text of these three. As Hoelker (2000, p. 90) observes, “Burns provides a clear idea of what AR is, how to do it, and why...”. Burns’ model for AR and the book’s examples are very focussed, which may provide fewer clues for teachers in other circumstances. Novice researchers jumping into classroom-based investigations will find this book an invaluable read.

Though Donald Freeman’s *Doing Teacher Reference* uses the phrase “action research” only twice, we find that the greater part of his emphasis is similar to Burns’ (who cites this book favorably). It is clear that these authors are not merely discussing old-formula quantitative or qualitative studies based on data derived from a classroom environment (classroom research or classroom-based research). No, the focus is not on **Where** the research is done, nor **Who** does it, but **What** is done, and **Why**. Instead of merely substituting one place or actor for another, we examine teachers’ **actions** as they investigate their own classrooms. Freeman posits that “the doer [teacher] and the doing [research] combine to mutually redefine each other” (p.5). It should be observed, however, for Freeman action research is but a subset of teacher-research, AR being “largely an individual practice that serves them [teachers] in better understanding their own teaching practice” (p.153). His theory-oriented text generally addresses the larger framework of teacher research.

How to do action research is the unequivocal focus of Michael Wallace’s *Action Research for Language Teachers*. Rather than theoretical frameworks, Wallace provides a step by step guide for implementation. This would also be a useful companion to a more traditional treatise in a Master’s degree course on research methods. The detail in Wallace can be discouraging to a “cover-to-cover” reader.

Burns provides something near to a “how to” book in many respects, not only presenting a theoretical foundation for AR but providing two helpful chapters on how to collect data (“observational techniques” and “non-observational techniques”) as well as a user-friendly discussion of data analysis and research dissemination. Not to the detail of Wallace, it is a helpful entry into the field, in keeping with her stated aspiration of the book:

to provide an accessible overview of theoretical perspectives on action research and especially, to provide a practical introduction from the teacher’s, rather than the researcher’s, point of view

(p.2).

She provides numerous examples from her work with teachers in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program, using those teachers’ own “voices” (generally, notes from reports or diaries). As she points out, the purpose of the book is not to focus on Australia, “but to sketch out the issues and possibilities for collaborating in teacher research in any context” (p.3).

Freeman's book is structured quite differently. Part of the TeacherSource series, this volume feels constrained by the Frameworks/Teachers' Voices/Investigations design. Frameworks are quite theoretical, though not heavily referenced, and Investigations are self-study projects/questions for the reader. The Teachers' Voices sections may be short quotes or, interestingly, two chapters written by a novice teacher-researcher about his projects and what he learned from them (these include Frameworks, perhaps written by the novice). This design, which works well in other books in the series, does not blend these approaches smoothly. Neither will the book make novice researchers feel comfortable about their projects, rather it feels like a reader-friendly textbook. Five case studies of action research projects by schoolteachers in Australia are provided in an appendix, rather than blended into the text. There are extensive appendices providing additional readings/tasks for the reader.

Wallace uses published action research, from journals (particularly *ELT Journal*) and texts, at the end of chapters to exemplify his points. These exemplar articles are particularly effective in defining Wallace's perspective of the outcomes of action research. On the other hand, as the book is so detailed in the minutiae of research, after the initial chapters it really becomes more of a desktop reference than a primer. The glossary is helpful, the subject and author indices make this a valuable reference tool. Wallace notes that no one would use all the research tools provided in any one of the many designs he offers.

Wallace, as do most authors, includes reflection in teaching as an integral component of action research, he identifies action research as a form of "structured reflection" in the field of professional development (p.15). Freeman's design, however, considers reflective teaching as fairly distinct from action research. He finds that research differs from reflective teaching "in its necessary commitment to discipline, or explicit method used in gathering and analyzing data" as well as the ability to publicize that commitment (p. 187). Thus, action research may be reflective, but must be disciplined, whereas reflective teaching does not require explicit and "publishable" methods.

Unlike the others, Burns insists that collaboration is an integral part of action research. This assertion is somewhat surprising, seeing that of the seven varying definitions of AR she provides from other published sources, only three include the terms collaboration or cooperative (pp. 29-30). While she does indicate that teacher-researchers are not precluded from working alone, it is her perspective that a cornerstone of AR is sharing, and using other practicing teachers as "sounding boards." Wallace and Freeman observe that collaboration is an option, with a number of potential benefits. All three authors discuss the benefits of including the student as potential (co-)researcher (and possible collaborator) with the teacher.

Freeman's book contains neither an index nor a glossary, which is further indication that this book was not intended as a desktop reference for a teacher engaging in an action research project. Wallace provides a helpful glossary, but

neither Wallace's subject and author indices nor Burns' compiled subject/author index are as extensive as could be wished. Burns' bibliography is far more extensive than either Wallace or Freeman, though the references included in Wallace's exemplar articles are not included in his bibliography.

So, what is a good definition of action research? Wallace presents several definitions with minor variations (pp. 1, 4, 15, 255), and also sets forth a few requirements separately, but when merged they present a cogent whole:

Action research is a problem-based method of professional self-development undertaken by an individual or small group which involves *systematic collection and analysis* of data related to a teacher's everyday practice.

I have emphasized *systematic collection and analysis* in the above definition to reflect Wallace's repeated assertions on this point, which are entirely consistent with Freeman.

Components of Action Research Compared

Our three authors each recognize that the action research process begins with a willingness to engage an issue in the classroom. Beyond this point, there is considerable disagreement. Figure 1 displays how these perspectives fit together.

Freeman uses **Inquiry** to represent "speculating about why something is as it is, why it happens or works".... "a state of being engaged in what is going on in the classroom" (p.34). On the other hand, for the collaborative study encouraged by Burns, **Exploring** is "where teachers 'feel their way' into the research question," "identifying and agreeing upon a general idea or issue of interest" (p.36). Wallace uses a series of "Personal Review" sections to aid readers in identifying **Topics of interest**. The next step for Wallace is **Identifying a specific topic**.

Identifying is the next step in Burns' process. This includes preliminary observations and fact-finding that enables the researchers to clearly define their research focus. Wallace suggests that the researchers **Ask Questions**, to narrow the focus of the investigation, identify term of the study, outcomes (publication?), resources available, and the purpose for study. Freeman calls for **Research-able Questions**, those that are able to be answered, even though they may change somewhat during the course of the investigation. The editors of this *PAC Journal* have selected **Identifying a problem** as the first discernable step in the action research process, whether triggered by watching a colleague's, class, attending a conference session, reading a book, or merely considering that something in a classroom is less than optimal.

Figure 1
Components of Action Research Compared

BURNS	FREEMAN	WALLACE	PAC Editors
Exploring	Inquiry	Topic of Interest (query) Identify a specific problem Consider the problem	Identifying a problem
Identifying	Question (Researchable)	Ask Questions — Narrow the focus	Making a Plan (including a literature survey)
Planning			
Collecting Data	Data Collection	* ACTION RESEARCH *	Taking Action (including data collection and preliminary evaluation)
Analyzing/Reflecting	Data Analysis Preliminary in-progress analysis affects continuing data collection	Data collection and Analysis	
Hypothesizing			
Intervening			
Observing (and Reflecting & back to collect data?)			Evaluating the effect
Reporting to the team	Understandings	Application to Professional Action	Communicating about AR
Writing	Publishing (test findings)		
Presenting			

For the three authors **Planning** is the next step. Wallace incorporates this in the Ask questions phase, Burns (and the *PAC Journal* editors) distinguish this phase, Burns noting that “the plan is aimed at trialing a particular course of action and collecting data on the outcomes of the action” (p.37). Wallace stresses the use of time-management planning in this area. As is consistent with a refereed publication, the *PAC Journal* editors call for a survey of relevant literature at this point. Burns suggests that “referring to the literature should be a matter of choice” (p.192); and Wallace downplays its significance for busy classroom teachers, noting only that it may be of use for those planning to publish in a journal.

Wallace provides only the words “**ACTION RESEARCH**” for the next step [capitalization in original]. One must surmise that he means application of the plan of action.

The three authors appear to agree that **Collecting Data** is the next step, though not what this includes. While in the Wallace chart it appears that Data collection and Analysis are converged, in fact his book has 180 pages of “how to” discussion on the specific steps in collection and analysis, divided into seven chapters based on the type of data to be collected. *PAC Journal* editors distinguish **Taking Action** from data collection and preliminary analysis/evaluation.

The loop affect begins to take affect at this point. During the data collection phase, preliminary data analysis may indicate a need for adjustments in the research question or data collection methodology. Burns suggests that reflection may be triggered by the early returns of analysis, even before action is taken.

Burns now offers three phases that are not specified by the Freeman or Wallace: **Hypothesizing** on why things are happening as they are and what comes next and **Intervening** to carry out or make further adjustments to the AR plan. The others would perhaps identify these as a loop back to planning and taking action phases. In contrast, she observes that all the elements she lists are “not necessarily clearly delineated” (p.35). Clearly, she is more specific about phases of AR than Freeman and Wallace. It is also interesting to note that Nunan (1993) used similar terms, Hypothesis and Plan Intervention, to describe steps occurring in an Australian design where these phases occur prior to and at the time of taking action.

So too, Burns’ **Observing** element, studying the effects of the intervention, could be alternately perceived as a loop back to analyzing. It is also a parallel to Freeman’s **Understandings**, “the new—or existing—information, interpretations, insights and perspectives” accumulating through the research (Freeman, p.36). Freeman indicates that this can include “findings” which he offers “may suggest something more finite and resolved than the teacher-researcher process usually allows” (p.36).

Reporting to the research team is an aspect unique to Burns' collaborative model. This occurs regularly throughout the research period for peer-support, brainstorming, and other issues not directly associated with any time element, and so perhaps should be fixed to any one location. It is also her final phase prior to making the project public.

Wallace concludes his design with **Application to professional action**, which incorporates both changing the teacher's classroom behavior and possibly identifying a (new) problem (possible loop back) as well as publicizing the research or other actions.

Writing the project, which provides an environment for drawing a summation and prepares the study for, and **Presenting**, are the final stages for Burns. These are unified in Freeman's **Publishing**, which both Freeman and Burns identify as a critical element as it both places the researcher in the role of "producer" of knowledge, and allows for critical review, which can lead to further work in the area. Freeman offers the greatest variety of forms of publishing, including dance, photo displays, dramatic representations, and poetic or artistic representations in a list of alternative presentations (p.155).

Conclusion

Three recent texts through mainstream publishers, three very different perspectives on the increasingly popular term "action research." The literature through the decade of the 1990s shows even greater diversity. Burns notes in concluding remarks that "there is no 'one size fits all' pattern in [collaborative] action research" (p.233). Yet while precise methodologies may vary, norms need to be established. As a form of "research" it would seem that the standards generally applicable to research must apply to some extent. Nunan (1993, p.42) argues that to assume AR cannot meet the standards of "real" research is patronizing. His later discussions (1999a, b) on professionalization of teaching observe that research is essential even while recognizing that teachers aren't paid or given time to research.

The number of steps, how they are demarcated, and which come first are far less important than satisfying the conventional concern of "rigor" in "research" (however these terms are defined). Beaumont, Coates, and Jones (2000) show how teachers, given the components of Allwright's (1993) exploratory teaching design in jumbled order, helped develop a meaningful new AR design. However, without some level of literature survey and concern for validity, there is no indication that the efforts of the teacher-researcher are of value to others. This is not to suggest that exploratory teaching as described by Allwright and Bailey (1991) or any other form of "action research" or reflective teaching should not be shared, still less not undertaken,

but that the reports should be labeled appropriately. Perhaps “teaching explorations” or “exploratory reports” would be a more suitable term. Journals such as this *PAC Journal* use peer review to determine whether the action research has met standards for investigatory rigor. The readership of these journals will be based, in some part, on the standards applied. Crookes (1999, p.4) recalls that *TESOL Journal* was created, in part, in response to a feeling that *TESOL Quarterly* wasn’t “explicitly directed toward the classroom teacher.” This *PAC Journal* was founded specifically to encourage and publish Asian-based action research, particularly those of multi-national collaborations.

Along with rigorous investigation, presentation matters. Short case reports (less than 1,000 words) such as those displayed in Freeman or Richards and Lockhart (1996) may undermine the scholarship of the entire teaching community. Burns, Freeman and Wallace all discuss a variety of interactive and virtual presentations beyond writing journal-type articles, yet again we may be concerned with the term “action research.”

There is certainly a place for presentations of non-disciplined reflective classroom explorations in teacher’s workrooms, newsletters, email discussion groups, etc., as well as in conference proceedings and teachers’ workshops. The as-yet-undetermined issue is: Do we want to call all of these “research”?

The Reviewer

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