

Action Research: An Appropriate Research Paradigm For Practitioners

^[1]Dr. Sandeep Talluri

^[1]Guest Faculty
Department Of Education
Acharya Nagarjuna University

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.

Keywords: Action research, principle, procedure, pedagogical issues

1. 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.

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.

2. 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.

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.

3. 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.

4. 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 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

References

- [1] Allwright, D. (1993). Integrating "research" and "pedagogy": Appropriate criteria and practical possibilities. In J. Edge, & K. Richards (Eds.), *Teachers develop teachers' research* (pp. 125–135). London: Heinemann.
- [2] Allwright, D. (2005). Developing principles for practitioner research: The case of exploratory practice. *Modern Language Journal*, 89(3), 353–366.
- [3] Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge

- University Press.
- [4] Elliott, J. (1998) *The Curriculum Experiment: Meeting the Challenge of Social Change*. Buckingham, Open University Press.
- [5] Elliott, J. (1991). *Action research for educational change*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.