Action Research in English Language Teaching: Contributions and Recent Developments

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Abstract

Action research, as part of a more general movement toward "teacher research," has become increasingly prevalent in the field of English language teaching (ELT) over the last two decades. It can be considered as a form of professional learning for language teachers which takes a socioconstructivist approach in which teachers are seen as agentive actors within their own social contexts. After providing an account of the conceptual features of action research and a brief overview of its origins, this chapter considers how it relates to other forms of research in ELT. It outlines the development of action research within the field of English language teaching. It then considers what various studies have shown about the impact of conducting action research on teachers. The chapter also considers some of the more recent initiatives that have contributed to the spread of this form of research in the field of English language teaching.

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Introduction

Although the concept of action research extends to many fields, such as health care (Koshy et al. 2011), business and management (Coghlan and Shani 2016), organizational and human development (Maurer and Githens 2010), and social work (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001), the focus in this chapter is on educational action research and more specifically on action research in English language teaching. In the field of English language education, action research is sometimes seen as part of a more general movement toward teacher research, where a variety of different approaches and terminology may be found. Borg (2013), for example, lists the following: action research, practitioner research, collaborative inquiry, critical inquiry, self-study, and teacher research. To these could be added exploratory practice (Allwright and Hanks 2009), reflective practice (Farrell 2018), and exploratory action research (Smith et al. 2014). While each of these adopts somewhat different underlying philosophies, processes, and concepts, they are unified by the central idea of teachers reflecting on their practices and doing research in their own classrooms, teaching contexts, and educational settings.

What Is Action Research?

As the term implies, action research simultaneously incorporates and integrates both action and research. The action component requires some kind of planned intervention, which deliberately puts into place particular strategies, processes, or activities in the research context. Interventions are introduced in response to a perceived issue, puzzle, dilemma, or question that people in the immediate social context wish to understand, improve, change, or mediate in some way in order to create a more positive educational outcome. The issues explored through the intervention might relate to teaching, learning, curriculum/syllabus implementation, or assessment, but aspects of school management or administration are also a potential focus for action research investigations. Areas for action cover a wide range of possibilities, including classroom management, materials or technology, particular language skills (e.g., reading), student behavior, or motivation (cf Wallace 1998, p. 19). From their analysis of 100 classroom studies, Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2008, pp. 15–48) identified eight areas the teachers they consulted were "passionate" about:

1. Helping an individual child
2. Improving and enriching curriculum
3. Developing content knowledge

4. Improving or experimenting with teaching strategies and techniques
5. Exploring the relationship between beliefs and classroom practice
6. Exploring the intersection of personal and professional identities
7. Advocating social justice
8. Understanding the teaching and learning context

Action may be undertaken individually, by partners, in groups, or across wider institutional or organizational clusters. Working collectively has the obvious advantage of being able to collaborate with others at different stages to share and discuss ideas or findings, plan new actions, talk through various data collection methods, compare results, and establish communities of practice (see Burns 1999).

The research aspect of action research involves systematically collecting data about the progress or applicability of the actions, analyzing what they reveal, reflecting on the implications of the data, and, as relevant, developing alternative plans or actions based on reflection and analysis. Table 1 outlines the various focuses, purposes, and outcomes in different approaches to action research.

Table 1 Focus and purpose of different approaches to action research

	Individual	Collaborative	Institutional	Organizational
Focus	Single classroom	Multi-classroom	Whole department or school	Whole district or organization
Purpose	Investigate personal classroom issues	Investigate complementary or common classroom issues	Investigate common school-wide issues	Investigate organizational issues, factors, structures
Type of support needed	Colleague/mentor Assistance with data collection, organization, or analysis	Substitute teachers Release time Administrative support	Institutional involvement and commitment Effective in-school communication Administrative leadership	Organizational involvement and commitment Effective cross-organizational communication Cross-district partnerships
Potential outcomes	Changes in practice Continuing personal reflection on teaching	Improvements in curriculum or syllabus design and implementation Greater collaboration in professional development	Evaluation of school restructure/change Curriculum/program evaluation School policy re-evaluation	Improved allocation of resources Educational policy evaluation Improved knowledge of new curriculum implementation Improved cross-district professional development opportunities

The action research process is less predictable than in more "traditional" quantitative or qualitative approaches, as the direction and purpose of the investigation may change dramatically as it is carried out. Action research is characterized by a spiral of cycles that minimally involve planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, although like other forms of research, the reality of the experience is likely to be much "messier" than this sequence suggests (see Burns 2010). Perhaps the best known model of educational action research is the one proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988a). They refer to four "moments" that evolve in a self-reflective spiral or loop that is reiterated several times according to the scope and direction of the research:

- Plan – prospective to action, forward looking, and critically informed in terms of (a) the recognition of real constraints and (b) the potential for more effective action
- Action – deliberate and controlled, but critically informed in that it recognizes practice as ideas in action mediated by the material, social, and political "struggle" toward improvement
- Observation – responsive, but also forward looking in that it documents the critically informed action, its effects, and its context of situation, using "open-eyed" and "open-minded" observation plans, categories, and measurements
- Reflection – evaluative and descriptive, in that it makes sense of the processes, problems, issues, and constraints of action and develops perspectives and comprehension of the issues and circumstances in which it arises (Based on Kemmis and McTaggart 1988a, pp. 11–14)

The concepts of improvement and involvement are twin pillars that underpin action research. The critically informed, improvement-oriented components of this model take participants much further than they would normally go in daily teaching in reflecting on the effects and implications of their actions. McPherson (1997) provides a good example of how the focus and purpose of action research might change as a researcher pursues improvement through each successive iterative cycle. McPherson worked with learners recently arrived in Australia who were enrolled in adult immigrant English classes. The account below is summarized from various parts of her article (pp. 26–30):

> My group was diverse in all the ways that make adult immigrant classes so interesting to teach. Ages ranged from 22–58 with equal number of males and females. They came from 15 different countries and spoke 17 different languages. Most had come to Australia because their country of origin was now unsafe for them. . . My concern was with the wide variation in the levels of spoken and written English. . .I was uncertain how to manage the class and I felt my planning was very 'hit and miss'. . .I decided to read the literature on managing mixed-ability groups and to talk to teachers in [my centre] and in community organisations and primary school education about strategies they used. . .
>
> As a result I decided to focus on developing materials and activities at different levels and to observe the response of the learners to these materials. I documented these observations [using a journal and drawing up diagrams of classroom interaction] and began to realise how

much I tended to 'control' their learning by dispersing materials at 'appropriate' levels. When I allowed the students to take control, they worked with the [materials] in different ways which they found personally effective. . .

However, at this point I became concerned about another aspect of the class. I observed that the students would not cooperate to undertake joint activities. They were also starting to express exasperation, boredom, irritation and once, near hostility, as I brought to the classroom lessons and activities [about personal experiences] I thought were interesting and relevant, but which they were not prepared to participate in. . . I decided on a strategy of individual consultation. I spoke to each student about what they were learning, how they were learning and how they could develop their skills. I documented their comments and followed with activities designed to enhance their requested learning areas. I also documented comments on their reactions to my classroom activities. . .

I began to see emerging patterns and to uncover the reasons for the rejected activities. Student comments and reactions indicated that discussions that revolved around cultural or social difference were not acceptable. . .On a class excursion, I learned that the students were aware of deep ethnic, religious and political differences because or their experiences of the part of the world they had just left [former Yugoslavia]. . .I suddenly realised how difficult it had been for them to maintain the veneer of courtesy and civility when I was introducing activities which demanded that they expose and discuss the differences they were attempting to ignore!

As the account by McPherson (1997) suggests, various types of data collection are used in action research. Action research is not exclusively either qualitative or quantitative in its methodological approaches, and a researcher may draw on both forms of data to address the issues being researched and compare them to triangulate the evidence. Burns (2010) categorizes the most commonly used methods across a qualitative-quantitative spectrum as observational and non-observational (Table 2).

To summarize some of the essential concepts and principles of action research:

1. Action research involves a combination of action and research that means collecting data systematically about actions, ideas, and practices as they occur naturally in daily life.
2. Action research is localized and typically small-scale. It investigates problems of direct relevance to the researchers in their social contexts, that is, it is based on specific issues of practice.

Table 2 Observational and nonobservational methods for action research

Observational	Non-observational
Brief notes or recorded comments made by the teacher while the class is in progress	Questionnaires and surveys
Audio or video-recordings of classroom interaction	Interviews
Observation by self or colleague on particular aspects of classroom action	Class discussions/focus groups
Transcripts of classroom interactions between teacher and students or students and students	Diaries, journals, and logs kept by teacher or learners
Maps, layouts, or sociograms of the classroom that trace the interactions between students and teacher	Classroom documents, such as materials used, samples of student writing, or tests
Photographs of the physical context	

3. Action research is a reflective process aimed at changes and improvements in practice. Changes come from systematically and (self)-critically evaluating the evidence from the data.
4. Action research is participatory, as the actor is also the researcher and the research is done most effectively through collaboration with others.

Historical and Philosophical Evolution of Action Research

Although Collier (1945), who worked with North American Indian communities, may have been the first to actually use the term "action research" (McTaggart 1991), it was Kurt Lewin who elaborated and developed its conceptual framework (see Kemmis and McTaggart 1988b). Lewin was a social psychologist who applied theories of group dynamics and human relations training to his investigations of social problems in America in the 1940s (e.g., Lewin 1947). Both Collier and Lewin aligned with principles of democratic collaboration with those involved in the social situation in which they worked. Lewin's notable contribution was his construction of a theoretical model, consisting of action cycles of analysis, fact-finding, conceptualization, planning, implementation, and evaluation (Lewin 1947). He also argued that practitioners from the target research communities should be included as co-researchers working with professional researchers. His student and colleague, Alfred Marrow (1969), referred to him in the title of his book as a "practical theorist."

During the 1950s, Stephen Corey led the growing interest in the USA in cooperative action research (Verduin 1967), where teachers and schools worked with external researchers. By the late 1950s, however, action research was increasingly criticized for its lack of rigor and generalizability and was falling into disrepute. Indeed, Corey's own arguments toward action research retained a strong flavor of adherence to the conventional scientific research paradigms of the time. The concepts of action research in this period have been characterized as essentially "technical" and individualistic (see Burns 2011, for further discussion).

Action research received a new lease of life in the late 1960s and 1970s, as interest in curriculum theory (Schwab 1969) and its linkages to a teacher-researcher movement (Stenhouse 1971) grew. In Britain, the work of Lawrence Stenhouse and others in the Humanities Curriculum Project (1967–72) emphasized that curriculum theory, research, and evaluation could not be separated from teaching. Rather than focusing on how research could improve curricula, Stenhouse was interested in how teachers as researchers interacted with the curriculum. Thus, Stenhouse's work tended toward a "practical" model of action research (Grundy 1987). Significant developments that followed were the Ford Teaching Project (1972–75) directed by Stenhouse's colleagues, John Elliott and Clem Adelman, and the establishment of the Classroom Action Research Network (CARN), which continues to this day.

Critical or emancipatory models of educational action research emanated largely from the work of Stephen Kemmis and his colleagues at Deakin University in Australia (Kemmis and McTaggart 1982). Critical action research "promotes a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change" (Grundy 1987, p. 154). Critical action research theorists question what they see as the passive foundations of technical and practical models. Critical action research is embedded in notions of the empowerment of practitioners as participants in the research enterprise, the struggle for more democratic forms of education, and the reform of education from the insider perspective. It is to this critical approach that participatory action research is most essentially related (see Auerbach 1994).

These three broad approaches to action research differ, not so much in their methodologies but in the underlying assumptions of the protagonists. Table 3 summarizes the broad differences.

Here it is worth noting also that the philosophical values and methods adopted in action research can be linked to a wider tradition of contextualized or ecological research reflected in the work of social psychologists such as Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner, Cole, and Wertsch and educationalists such as Dewey (van Lier 2011).

Table 3 Approaches to action research

	Technical AR	Practical AR	Critical AR
Philosophical base	Natural sciences	Hermeneutics	Critical theory
Nature of reality	Measurable	Multiple, holistic, constructed	Interrelated with social and political power structures
Nature of problem	Predefined (problem posing)	Defined in context (problem solving)	Defined in context in relation to emerging values (problematizing)
Status of knowledge	Separate, deductive	Inductive, theory producing	Inductive, theory producing, emancipatory, participatory
Nature of understanding	Events explained in terms of real causes and simultaneous effects	Events described in terms of interaction between the external context and individual thinking	Events understood in terms of political, economic, and social constraints to improved conditions
Purpose of research	Discover "laws" of underlying reality	Discover the meanings people make of actions	Understand what impedes more democratic and equal practices
Change outcomes	Change is value free and short-lived	Change is value bounded and dependent on individuals involved	Change is value relative and leads to ongoing emancipation

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The Development of Action Research in ELT

In the 1980s, action research was barely discussed in the field of ELT and applied linguistics. This is not to say that it was completely unrecognized or that calls for teacher involvement in research were not being made. For example, Breen and Candlin's (1980) proposals that curriculum evaluation should be an integral aspect of classroom teaching and learning foreshadowed shifts toward an action research orientation, while calls for more active participation of teachers in classroom-centered research were increasing (e.g., Allwright 1988; Long 1983). Toward the end of the 1980s, van Lier (1988) was arguing for "ethnographic monitoring" of classroom curriculum processes and, like others, was pointing out that action research had "not so far received much serious attention as a distinct style of research in language teaching" (p. 67).

Nunan's publication, *Understanding Language Classrooms* (1989), subtitled *A Guide for Teacher-initiated Action*, offered, for the first time, a practical guide for the language teacher.

> The intention is to provide a serious introduction to classroom research to language professionals who do not have specialist training in research methods… it is aimed specifically at the classroom teacher and teachers in preparation. (p. xiv)

Work by others, such as Allwright and Bailey (1991), Brindley (1990), Edge and Richards (1993), Freeman (1998), Richards and Nunan (1990), and Wallace (1991), continued to open up the concept of an active and reflective role for teacher educators and teachers, which included the notion of teacher as researcher. It represented a "paradigm shift" (Edge 2001) that now no longer seems controversial. However, at the time it stood in stark contrast to the applied science model, where research and practice were largely regarded as separate pursuits. Perspectives within the field were being revised from a predominantly "theory-applied-to-practice" approach toward a more "theory-derived-from-practice" perspective (cf Graves 1996; Richards and Nunan 1990). Specific treatments of action research within this paradigm emerged in Burns (1999), Edge (2001), and Wallace (1998). While Burns (1999) and Wallace (1998) provided "how-to" accounts that outlined ways to conduct action research, Edge (2001) offered descriptions written by teachers of how they had carried out research within their own social settings, stressing in his preface that "[l]ocal understandings are primary, and it is in the articulation of these understandings that actual educational practice can be theorised (the contribution to theory) and improved (the contribution to practice)" (p. 4).

Action Research Within ELT Research

Borg (2013) notes that his research findings showed that teachers' conceptions of research were aligned to "standard" scientific notions of enquiry. The question of how action research is positioned in relation to the range of approaches adopted in research is one that often confronts and confuses those new to action research.

Action research is sometimes represented as a "third way" of doing research. Brindley (1990), for example, outlines basic (concerned with knowledge for its own sake), applied (directed at specific problems), and practitioner (undertaken by participants in the context of their own work) research. Bailey et al. (1991) distinguish action research from experimental studies, those that "emphasize careful isolation of variables functions and target subjects, a high degree of control over external variables and clearly defined research goal" and naturalistic enquiry, where "the general goal of enquiry is to understand the phenomenon under investigation" (pp. 94–95). Cumming (1994) categorizes orientations to TESOL research as descriptive (concerned with the goals of general scientific inquiry), interpretive (concerned with the purpose of interpreting local institutional issues in their cultural contexts), and ideological (concerned with advocating and fostering ideological change within particular contexts and broader domains), which includes participatory action research. Nunan and Bailey (2009), having outlined major paradigms of quantitative (experimental, survey) and qualitative research (case study, ethnography), devote a separate discussion to action research.

Classroom research, teacher research, and action research have all become familiar terms in recent ELT literature. However, since they are often used interchangeably, the distinctions are not necessarily clear. Bailey (2001) comments that "[action research] is sometimes confused with teacher research and classroom research because in our field, action research is often conducted by teachers in language classrooms" (p. 490). Borg (2013, p. 8) claims that teacher research is a "broader term than action research – while action research (when conducted by teachers) will also be teacher research, not all teacher research follows the procedures which define action research."

It could be argued that whereas classroom research denotes the focus of the research and teacher research refers to the people conducting the research, action research refers to a distinctive methodological orientation to research, a "way of working" as Kemmis and McTaggart (1988b, p. 174) describe it. Allwright and Bailey (1991, p. 2) define classroom research as research that is centered on the classroom, as distinct from research that concerns itself with the inputs (curriculum, materials, and so on) or the outputs (test scores). In its narrowest form, it emphasizes the study of classroom interaction. Allwright and Bailey (ibid) take a broader view, defining classroom research as "a cover term for a whole range of research studies on classroom learning and teaching. The obvious unifying factor is that the emphasis is solidly on trying to understand what goes on in the classroom setting" (p. 2).

Teacher research, that is, research conducted by teachers, may well center on the classroom but does not necessarily do so. For example, a teacher might identify the effects of out-of-class learning on students' communicative competence (see Cortina-Pérez and Solano-Tenorio 2013 for an example). Classroom research is often conducted by academic researchers whose studies relate to questions of classroom teaching and learning. Many of these studies have been conducted in experimental laboratory settings (e.g., Gass et al. 2011) set up for the testing of theoretical hypotheses, although in the last two decades, a greater number of exploratory and descriptive studies located in natural classroom settings have appeared (e.g., Toohey 1998). Action research, on the other hand, is not confined

to the classroom or to teachers. It is implemented in a wide range of settings and not focused exclusively on educational questions. It involves an iterative process of research rather than a specific type of researcher or research location. All three types of research may adopt a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches to data collection, data analysis, and interpretation depending on the kinds of research issues under investigation.

Impact of Action Research on Teachers

For over two decades, there has been growing evidence, albeit sometimes anecdotal, that action research offers teachers transformative experiences of professional development. Van Lier (1994), for example, citing Bennett (1993, p. 69), noted a range of impacts on teachers:

> Experienced teacher-researchers stated that their research brought them many personal and professional benefits, including increased collegiality, a sense of empowerment, and increased self-esteem. Teacher-researchers viewed themselves as being more open to change, more reflective, and better informed than they had been when they began their research. They now saw themselves as experts in their field who were better problem solvers and more effective teachers with fresher attitudes toward education. They also saw strong connections between theory and practice.

Borg (2013), drawing on some of the more recent literature, indicated that research conducted by teachers develops the capacity for autonomous professional judgments and reduces teachers' feelings of frustration and isolation. It also allows teachers to move out of a submissive position and be curriculum innovators, as well as to become more reflective, critical, and analytical about their teaching behaviors in the classroom. Teachers can also feel less vulnerable to and dependent on external answers to the challenges they face. Doing research can foster connections between teachers and researchers and boost teachers' sense of status.

Teachers' own accounts of their experiences of action research also point to numerous positive outcomes. As an example, Castro Garcés and Martínez Granada (2016, p. 53) note that for them conducting collaborative action research (CAR) meant that:

1. We were able to study together in order to internalize and put into practice the main constructs that supported our research – professional development and CAR.
2. We gained a better understanding of basic concepts and theories related to the teaching of foreign languages as we read and discussed research articles together, met to plan lessons, collected and analyzed data, and talked about our own teaching practices.
3. Writing the journal entries was an opportunity to reflect upon the research process and our attitudes as team members.
4. We could grow professionally in terms of reading and reflecting together as well as sharing positive and negative issues lived in our classes.

5. We moved from having each participant do a piece of work in isolation to planning and working together.
6. The roles we had in the research study were different as well as the level of training; however, it was rewarding to notice that we could learn from each other no matter how much we thought we knew about a topic.

However, skepticism about action research by teachers is long-standing. Commentators from Halsey (1972) onward have pointed to fundamental tensions between action and research and to the differing, and inherently incompatible, interests and orientations of teachers and researchers. Others have questioned whether it is the business of teachers to do research at all, given that they usually have no specialist training (e.g., Jarvis 2002a, b), while the academic status and the rigor of the methodological procedures have also been the subject of debate (e.g., Brumfit and Mitchell 1989). Yet others appear to believe that teachers are not interested or willing to do action research: "I am still to meet a teacher who has been voluntarily involved in it" (Dörnyei 2007, p. 191).

At a more pragmatic level, teachers themselves may well resist calls to become researchers. Action research imposes a double burden of teaching and research, which adds to the already complex lives of teachers. The rewards for doing action research must offset the time and additional efforts involved. As van Lier (1994, p. 33) argued over two decades ago: "if action research is going to make us even more exhausted than we already are, then it will not be a popular or successful activity...It has to enrich our professional life." Some teachers may also question whether the growing insistence by government ministries and other educational bodies that they research their practice is not another way to ensure they become compliant with organizational agendas; as one teacher (cited in Miller 1990, p. 114) observed:

> Well, what I mean is that nothing would please some administrators I know more than to think that we were doing "research" in their terms. That's what scares me about the phrase "teacher-as- researcher"— too packaged. People buy back in to the very system that shuts them down. . . . But I'm still convinced that if enough people do this, we could get to a point of seeing at least a bigger clearing for us.

Despite these reservations, the idea of teachers carrying out action research is perhaps no longer so much in contention or maybe "has come of age" as is argued in Denos et al. (2009, p. ix). Nevertheless, there are many aspects of action research that remain to be more fully understood. Allwright (1997) and Nunan (1997) debated the following issues: What are the standards by which action research is to be judged, and should they be the same as for other forms of research? Should action research conform to existing academic criteria? What ethical considerations need to be brought to bear on research that is highly contextualized in practice? How should action research be reported? What tensions exist between the quality of action research and its sustainability by practitioners? These questions remain current even after two decades. Borg (2013, pp. 228–230) adds further questions including the nature of teacher research engagement, the implications for teacher identity, the attitudes of managers, the design of teacher research support courses, the role in pre-service and in-service teachers' lives of conducting research, and the benefits to them.

On the subject of rigor, validity, and appropriateness, Bailey (1998) suggests that action research should not be judged by the traditional criteria of random selection, generalizability, and replicability, as its central goals are to establish local understandings. A basic criterion for validity will rest on the question: Is what the researcher is claiming on the basis of the data meaningful, believable, and trustworthy (Anderson et al. 1994), and to what extent does this research resonate with my understandings of practice and have meaning in my context? (see Burns 1999). In sum, a major, and continuing, challenge in action research will be "to define and meet standards of appropriate rigor without sacrificing relevance" (Argyris and Schön 1991, p. 85).

Recent Initiatives

Burns (2007, p. 999) concluded that it was only over the previous decade that action research had "become influential in the ELT field," in the sense that it was beginning to pervade the teacher education literature. At the time, however, research activity by teachers and particularly published accounts by them were still extremely limited. Although there were "pockets" of noticeable action research activity in various locations (e.g., Burns 1999 in Australia; Edge and Richards 1993 in the UK; Mathew et al. 2000 in India; the journal *Profile* initiated in 2000 in Colombia; Tinker-Sachs 2002 in Hong Kong, and Wang (2002) in China), there was still limited evidence from teachers internationally of engagement in research.

The last decade, however, has seen several developments which have considerably spurred the teacher research movement, of which action research is a major part. These include a number of key publications that have brought attention to research by teachers and have motivated further interest (e.g., Borg 2013; Burns 2010; the TESOL Language Teacher Research series 2006–2009 edited by Farrell). Other major initiatives have opened up more opportunities for teachers to involve themselves in research programs that provide them with guidance and support and forums for working with other teachers and academic facilitators. These include those funded by Cambridge Assessment English, first in Australia from 2010 (see Burns and Khalifa 2017), and then in the UK from 2014 (Borg 2015) which involve teachers of international students in each of those countries. The British Council has also funded several programs, including in India and Chile (see Smith et al. 2014). The International TESOL Association has offered preconvention workshops for teachers interested in research since 2008. Since around 2013, the professional association, IATEFL, through its Research Special Interest Group has concentrated on strengthening the movement toward teacher research through its daylong preconference events. IATEFL has also sponsored *Teacher Research!* conferences devoted to action research and other forms of investigation by teachers in Turkey since 2015 (see Burns et al. 2017). In 2017, the International Festival of Teacher-research in ELT, initiated by Richard Smith, aimed to unite online (see https://trfestival.wordpress.com/about/) various disparate teacher research activities across the globe. (See Burns in press for more extended discussion of the development of the teacher research movement over the last three decades.)

Conclusion

From this broad overview, it can be seen that although action research developed relatively early in the twentieth century, it is only in the last two or three decades that it has received attention in the field of ELT field. Although action research, and research by teachers more generally, seems to be gaining more widespread popularity, there remain many questions about appropriate standards and forms of action research, ways of supporting teachers to undertake and publish research, ways it can be promoted and sustained for personal and organizational benefits, and what impact action research by teachers has on teaching practice and on student learning. In the meantime, it is clear that there is a broad movement away from decontextualized and abstract forms of knowledge and enquiry in the ELT field, as in other disciplines. There is a shift toward the concept of language professionals as informed agents rather than merely as recipients of external knowledge. As the term action research implies, it appears to be an approach that is well suited to this change and under the right conditions can be deployed to the benefit of learners, teachers, and language education more generally.

Cross-References

- ▶ Qualitative Approaches to Classroom Research on English-Medium Instruction
- ▶ "Research by Design": Forms of Heuristic Research in English Language Teaching

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