On the Capacity of Action Research in Language Classrooms

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The capacity of Action Research (AR) in the fields of applied linguistics and language teaching has been praised by some commentators and criticized by others. While AR has been featured in several publications on research methods for applied linguistics, several perceived drawbacks of this approach have hindered its more widespread application and implementation. In order to promote the viability of AR, this paper highlights several benefits and reviews criticisms of both conceptual and practical limitations of this type of research. The paper then suggests practical solutions for overcoming these hurdles so that more teacher-researchers are able to undertake AR projects in their language classrooms. Examples from AR studies conducted by the author serve to exemplify ways in which these solutions can be applied in practice. The paper argues that AR is achievable for any teacher interested in improving their language classrooms and their professional teaching practices.

応用言語学及び言語教育の分野におけるアクションリサーチの適用可能性については賛否両論がある。アクションリサーチは、応用言語学の研究手法として学術論文で取りあげられている一方で、通念的に考えられている問題点のために、より広範な実用と応用が妨げられている。アクションリサーチの活用を促進するために本論文では、この研究手法の利点を述べるとともに、手法に関する概念的、実用的批判に関して考察を行う。また、より多くの教師兼研究者が語学の授業の中でアクションリサーチを行うことができるよう、批判に挙げられる問題点に対する実践的な解決策を提案する。更に、筆者が行ったアクションリサーチの研究に基づく具体例を用いて、ここに提示される解決策が実際に適用可能であることを示す。本研究を通して、授業の改善や教育の質の向上を目指す教師にとって、アクションリサーチが実践可能であることを主張する。

The role of Action Research (AR) in the field of applied linguistics and language teaching continues to gain recognition and stature. Within the last decade or so, AR is featured in publications by Burns (2009, 2010a, 2010b), McNiff and Whitehead (2000), and Nunan and Bailey (2009), and also receives attention in works such as Dörnyei (2007), Heigham and Croker (2009), Mackey and Gass (2005), and McKay (2009). However, AR has also been criticized in the literature for theoretical and practical limitations. While it may not always be seen to have the prestige of more recognized research paradigms at present (e.g., Burns, 1999; Nunan, 1992), AR has the potential to make significant impacts on language teaching and research as it promotes understanding and enhancement of institutional or classroom situations, and of learning and teaching practices. The purpose of this paper is to review criticisms of AR and suggest solutions for overcoming those issues in order to promote and facilitate the growing interest in AR in applied linguistics and language teaching.

What is AR?

The concept of AR has been in existence for more than a century (Burns, 1999) and is a systematic approach for researching situations and reflecting on data in order to improve existing circumstances. The benchmark AR cycle was introduced by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) and consists of the following stages:

- Plan: Identify an area that is in need of examination and plan an intervention aiming to improve that area.
- Act: Implement an intervention (e.g., a new teaching technique, new materials, etc.).
- Observe: Collect data related to the intervention (e.g., through questionnaires, samples of student work, class observation, etc.).
- Reflect: Review and reflect on data, draw conclusions, and plan subsequent revisions to the intervention.

Many descriptions of AR include the following essential characteristics, as identified by several authors, such as Carr and Kemmis (1986), Nunan (1992), Wallace (1998), and Burns (1999, 2010a):

- AR is teacher-initiated.
- AR is small-scale and localised.
- AR seeks to improve situations for teachers and students.
- AR involves systematic data collection.
- AR measures change over time.
- AR is ongoing.

According to Burns (1999): "[AR] applies a systematic process of investigating practical issues or concerns which arise within a particular social context" (p. 31). While minor differences may exist among the various definitions put forth by these experts, the core aspects remain consistent.

Benefits of AR

There are a number of reasons AR should be recognized as an important current and future orientation for emphasizing the *applied* in applied linguistics. That is, AR locates research in real language learning and teaching situations rather than more contrived and controlled settings. Through AR, teaching techniques can be trialed, learning outcomes assessed, and modifications to classroom practices made. AR also promotes an expanded role for teachers in their own classrooms and is open to a variety of research methods, allowing teacher-researchers to choose data collection tools based on contextual situations, research objectives, and available resources.

Bettering situations for teachers and students

One of the appealing aspects of AR is its capacity to improve situations. In the literature, these improvements are described in two ways, both occurring at the AR Planning Stage: one view focuses on problem solving (e.g., Bell, 1999; Freeman, 1998) while the other centers on improving practice (e.g., Burns, 2010a; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Despite differences in the terminology of these two perspectives, both lead to the bettering of classroom situations.

The problem solving aspect, discussed by Bell (1999) and Freeman (1998), implies that an initial problem exists, is subsequently identified, and calls for initiation of AR. Through AR, the problem is acted upon, results

are systematically examined, and finally reflected upon. The aims of AR often involve some degree of modification to the situation with the intention of positive change, though perspectives may differ on whether a change is indeed for the better. This view of AR is quite straightforward and tangibly assessable. It is, in general, what many people do when faced with problems in any situation: act, and assess that action in order to determine if or to what degree a problem has been eliminated.

At a deeper level, AR has the capacity to improve practice. This more sophisticated motivation for AR is not merely focused on solving problems, but allows practitioners to seek constant professional development. Teachers can identify areas of their teaching or their students' learning that they may want to improve, and these areas need not be classified as "problems." AR can take place even in the absence of a problem. Burns (2010a) describes this process as "problematising [which means] taking an area you feel could be done better, subjecting it to questioning, and then developing new ideas and alternatives" (p. 2). It is more of an abstraction of practice to the theoretical level (A. Burns, personal communication, June 21, 2010). In other words, the theory emerges from the data and practice. This concept is also an extension of qualitative research that may generate theories from data but not expressly improve situations.

Another key feature of the AR sequence is its continuous nature. That is, the reflection phase can be used to inform a subsequent plan and intervention. The cycle may continue as long as researchers seek to improve practice. As Bell (1999) puts it, "the task is not finished when the project ends" (p. 8). Likewise, Burns (1999; 2010a) and Freeman (1998) acknowledge that there is no definitive endpoint for AR. The potential for this ongoing momentum should be seen as a distinctive characteristic of AR.

Expanding roles for teachers

Over the years, the role of AR has shifted into what may now be termed its social-participatory generation (Burns, 2011). This label implies the involvement of those with extensive knowledge of and regular contact in local situations.

It allows for and urges widespread participation, as opposed to specialist involvement. By engaging in AR, teachers can exert control of the directions of their classrooms and their own professional development. Since AR is aimed at improving situations, it seems logical that educators who want to improve themselves, their students, their classrooms, or all three, will take steps to implement AR investigations.

Teachers can be empowered to take action in order to positively change current situations. As Burns (2010b) puts it: "[AR] is deliberately interventionist, aimed at disturbing and unsettling the status quo" (p. 87). In other words, when an educator encounters a situation in need of improvement, they have a course of action they themselves can initiate. Burns (2010a) points out that through AR teachers can establish themselves professionally, as well as have an influence in educational decision-making. Additionally, possibilities exist for teachers to improve their teaching methods due to increased contextual understanding of their teaching environments. Such potential for professional improvement may not manifest itself immediately or tangibly, although strengthened contextual competence can continue to be an asset after an AR investigation is completed.

By employing AR approaches, teachers are able to incorporate research into their workplace routines. This marks a continuing shift in the traditional role of teacher in that teachers are able to intervene, address issues, and inform practice (Burns, 2009). Freeman (1998) discusses the emerging role of the teacher-researcher as well. He points out that AR practitioners operate in dual roles and "work at the hyphen [of teacher-researcher]" (p. 8) to first better inform themselves and then to improve their teaching.

Triangulation

A third advantage of AR involves triangulation, which is defined as the "gathering [of] data from a number of different sources so that the research findings or insights can be tested out against each other" (Burns, 1999, p. 25). Various types of triangulation have been put forward, such as triangulation of time, investigators, theories, and participants (Denzin, 1978; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 2000), all of which can be included in AR in diverse

combinations. With AR, data collection methods from both qualitative and quantitative traditions can be used for the purposes of producing accurate situational representations and increasing the robustness of studies (e.g., Denzin, 1978; Dörnyei, 2007). While more traditional research paradigms may operate in ways explicitly disconnected and segregated from each other, AR allows integration and triangulation of research methods for better understanding of results.

Limitations of AR

This section addresses three major criticisms of AR that have been identified in research methodology literature: conceptual level concerns, practical issues, and reputational matters.

Conceptual level concerns

The first criticism involves theoretical models of AR. One argument is that the conceptual objectives and parameters of AR have been classified as being limited and shortsighted in scope (Allwright, 2005). AR is sometimes thought to be an approach that targets isolated problems; however, some writers (e.g., Allwright, 2003) believe a research model that includes more global relevance may be preferable. That is, a research approach that potentially informs a wider audience through generalizable findings in addition to providing localized improvements may be ideal.

Furthermore, when illustrated in the literature, many AR sequences appear to be perfectly linear; stages seem to follow each other in smooth patterns in prescribed sequences. These patterns may be difficult to replicate in real-world situations, as AR stages do not always proceed in such a flawless linear fashion. In fact, the clean-cut AR stages outlined in the literature may go askew during a project (McNiff & Whitehead, 2000). Therefore, some descriptions of AR may be misleading to an extent, as practical application of AR models may be more complicated than some frameworks appear in the literature.

Practical issues

Questions have also been raised regarding whether teachers have the time, incentives, and abilities to conduct AR (Allwright, 2005; Dörnyei, 2007). Indeed, the argument can be made that any form of research may fall outside of the typical duties a teacher is employed to perform at their institution. In addition, while some teachers may be in positions to conduct AR, they may lack sufficient research skills, at least initially. Dörnyei (2007) contends that it is "often unrealistic to expect teachers to have the expertise to conduct rigorous research" (p. 191). This line of thinking would delegate research to those classified as "researchers," and leave teaching to teachers.

Reputation of AR

Though knowledge of and appreciation for AR are steadily developing, it remains a method less reputable than other research paradigms (Nunan, 1992). More than a decade ago, Burns (1999) pointed out that AR "suffers from a lack of prestige compared with more established forms of language education research" (p. 25). However, with current interests in professional teacher training and postgraduate education, attitudes towards AR may be beginning to change. Several recent works on language research methodology feature AR, all verification of its gaining momentum (e.g., Burns, 2010a; Nunan & Bailey, 2009).

Overcoming AR obstacles

This section reviews the criticisms leveled at AR from the literature and suggests practical solutions for resolving these issues. To illustrate the feasibility of these suggestions, at times, I refer to one of my current AR projects related to second language listening pedagogy in university English classes in Japan.

Issue 1: Findings from AR lack generalizability

While findings from AR projects are localized and cannot be universally generalized, they can be used to inform other similar teaching contexts. When reading AR project reports, teachers should search for commonalities between the research context and their own teaching environment. When doing and

publishing AR reports, teacher-researchers may wish to emphasize any findings that may help inform fellow teachers or suggest other contexts in which similar AR projects may be beneficial.

Issue 2: Prescribed AR sequences break down in the real world

The linear AR patterns in research methods books are not meant to be static, as real-world teaching and learning situations often require ongoing modification and reaction. For instance, McNiff and Whitehead (2000) point out that there can be "a good deal of creative zig-zagging" (p. 202) when conducting AR. Such circumstances may reflect actual teaching and learning, which are at times affected by myriad factors. Though AR stages are often presented in a simplified, sequential fashion, the structure of AR continues to evolve, and it is not uniform for each AR investigation. The flexibility offered by AR should be embraced because it allows projects to adapt and grow when obstacles arise.

In my project on listening pedagogy, I originally planned a listening strategy instruction intervention using authentic listening materials. However, due to administrative requirements, I needed to use textbook listening material rather than authentic audio and video texts. Rather than abandon the project, I applied the same listening strategy principles to the textbook material and was able to continue the project. Ideas from my original Planning Stage stumbled at the Action Stage; therefore, I needed to revert to the Planning Stage, make adjustments, and continue.

Issue 3: Teachers lack time to conduct AR

If a teacher wants to conduct an AR project but is concerned about time investment, one strategy is to make reasonable choices about the scope of the project. Rather than try to address all four language skills, for example, the teacher may select the one they feel is most in need of attention. Another technique is to stagger data collection; for instance, different types of data can be collected during different semesters, or data collection elements can be added progressively, thereby helping AR practitioners to familiarize themselves with one data collection tool before incorporating another.

For my project, I had initially planned to implement listening strategy instruction across four levels of a university English curriculum, from elementary to advanced. However, that would not have been possible due to the large time commitment. Therefore, I reconsidered and limited the project to only the intermediate level. I also added data collection tools over the course of three semesters. I started with questionnaires and interviews and added classroom observation and test scores to the data in subsequent semesters.

Issue 4: Teachers lack incentives to conduct AR

As mentioned above, teachers can benefit from AR by establishing themselves professionally, increasing their understanding of their own teaching contexts, and improving their teaching ability. Over and above those rather intangible incentives, AR projects have been gaining more recognition in academic publications and appear regularly in journals such as *Educational Action Research*, *English Teachers Forum*, and *Korea TESOL Journal*. In addition, financial incentives including JALT Research Grants (http://jalt.org) and grants from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS; http://www.jsps. go.jp) are available to help facilitate various types of research, including AR.

Issue 5: Teachers lack the research ability to conduct AR

With the growing number of teachers who have earned or are currently studying for post graduate degrees in applied linguistics or language teaching, the research knowledge, skills, and standards of language educators is likely improving. There are also books (e.g., Brown, 1998), data session discussion groups (e.g., Japan Association for Ethnographic and Conversation Analysis, http://emca.jp), and collaborative communities of teachers interested in research (e.g., International Teacher Development Institute, http://itdi.pro) that many teachers utilize to improve their researching ability.

Issue 6: AR is less reputable than other forms of research

AR is receiving more attention in works on research methods for applied linguistics and language teaching. Through triangulation, AR practitioners can come to more trustworthy and well-balanced conclusions through their flexible

use of appropriate data collection tools and analysis procedures. It can be argued that any single research method, such as questionnaires, discourse analysis, or classroom observation, has advantages as well as inherent weaknesses. When individual methods are carefully selected and combined, each method can bring its strengths while simultaneously compensating for the vulnerabilities of other methods. The capacity for careful and robust research designs and procedures, along with the growing visibility of AR in academic journals and at conference presentations, indicates that the reputation of AR may be improving.

Conclusion

AR has been described as "well-suited for teachers conducting classroom research [and is] becoming increasingly prominent in the research methodology literature in our field" (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p. 226). The popularity of AR is growing as understanding of its user-friendly qualities (Wallace, 1998) becomes more widespread. This maturation process continues despite perceived theoretical, practical, and status-related limitations. Although the belief that AR would be valuable in "an ideal world...[but] does not seem to work in practice" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 191) may exist, this paper has offered suggestions for how AR practitioners can overcome such obstacles. It has argued that AR has the potential to make significant impacts on the lives of students, teachers, and the classrooms in which they function, and that AR projects are achievable undertakings for any teacher aiming to improve the status quo.

Acknowledgement

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