

INTEGRATION OF AN ACTION RESEARCH COURSE INTO THE ELT PROGRAMS: WHY AND HOW?

Semin KAZAZOĞLU

Oya TUNABOYLU

1. Introduction

The head spinning momentum of the present century has been changing many things along the way. Taken for granted educational paradigms, student profiles, their needs, and pedagogical knowledge bases required for teachers have received due share from this change. More than ever teachers have to test and refresh their teaching skills. In order to better serve their students whose profiles have enormously changed over the years teachers are expected to be alert to the problems which are likely to emerge on daily basis. The problems they face in the classroom today are multifaceted. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to state and analyze mainstream problems in everyday classrooms. However, it is evident that today's teacher is not at ease dealing with the digital natives who are characterized by limited attention span, tech-savy attitude, and their usual state of screen-attachedness.

That being said, today's classrooms exert more pressure on the part of teachers. Penny Ur (2012) once described the teaching as an isolated profession. That is, once teachers get in the classroom and close the door, they have only students to interact with. In these isolated microcosms teachers need to tackle with the problems alone. Another somewhat unique concept is provided by Kumaravadivelu (2001, pp. 537-538), concentrating on the professional development and education of teachers in his famous 3P circle (particularity, practicality, and possibility) to define the post-methods teaching context. He proposed that each classroom is unique with its own characteristics and accordingly has its own ecology. Simply put, no two classrooms are the same with its students, resources, physical attributes, and teaching-related problems.

Today's teachers obviously need to have a handy toolkit to deal with contextual challenges. Action research (AR) comes to fore as one major tool to help teachers with solving problems in their, 'particular' contexts. Being one type of professional development tools, AR has promising potential to deal with classroom problems. The underlying rationale for this premise is that when teachers become 'researchers' of the problems they face in their classrooms, they will be able respond to these problems, thereby morphing into more efficient teachers. As Kumaravadivelu (2001) stated, in the post-methods era teachers are expected to build up their own teaching theories based on their experiences rather than being consumers of ready-made theories.

2. Action Research: Rationale, Characteristics and Benefits

Traditionally, studies on teacher learning underline four types of conceptualizations. Teacher learning as skill learning regards the process as the development of a variety of skills, and competencies. According to this type of teacher learning, teaching is a process which can be broken down into discrete skills that are likely to be mastered one by one. Typical activities

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which adopt this philosophy in teacher training include presenting and modeling the skills for teacher trainees. Another conceptualization considers teaching as a complex cognitive process. Accordingly, it is believed that teachers' beliefs and thinking mindset shape their learning and teaching practices. It pinpoints that "teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (Borg 2003, p.81). Some activities utilized in teacher training programs that adopt this philosophy are journal writing, self-monitoring and so on. The third conceptualization in teacher training regards teacher learning as personal construction. As the name suggests, this educational philosophy operates on the premise that knowledge is not transferred to the recipient, yet it is constructed. In teacher education programs which operate on this philosophy some activities offered to teacher trainees tap on self-awareness through journal writing or self-monitoring.

The last paradigm in teacher learning regards the process as reflective practice. Within this conceptualization it is assumed that teachers learn from their own experiences through focused reflection. In order to initiate the learning process a critical stance that needs to be developed by teacher is a must. Critical examination of experiences requires collecting information on one's own teaching (Richards & Lockhart 1994; Schon, 1983; Wallace, 1991). It is clear that developing a critical outlook toward day-to-day teaching practices might benefit teachers tremendously.

Action research is the procedure of examining a problem using the school environment to better understand and enhance the quality of educational process (Mills, 2011). As such, teachers have the opportunity to deal with students' learning problems in depth. Professional development lies in the practitioners' use of action research constantly. In preparation and professional development, action research is crucial for teachers and future educators (Holter & Frabutt, 2012). Traditionally, teacher education programs incorporate action research activities on a national and international scale, specifically in Australia and the US (Hine, 2013).

Kurt Levin put forward the idea of action research for the first time as he thought that experimental methods are not sufficient for many cases. Accordingly, he provided a method that was based on people's real world experiences (Hien, 1998). However, there is a relative lack of available research into how teachers develop as researchers (Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016). Action research is viewed as a type of professional development that is characterized by research. In align with reflective teacher conceptualization, AR requires a systematic inquiry into classroom problems. Also known as 'practitioner research', AR is simply conducted to take an action. In the hindsight though are two important stages before initiating AR; exploratory AR and exploratory practice (Hanks & Dikilitaş, 2018). Dikilitaş (2020) lists the following with regards to AR's characteristics;

Reflective: The whole process includes critical and deep thinking process

Systematic: The process adopts an exploration of problems through a research pattern

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Exploratory: Teachers are expected to explore issues at hand

Developmental: Both learners and teachers benefit for sake of sound classroom pedagogy

Critical: Thanks to AR teachers develop a critical look over their practices

Empowering: Teachers feel fulfilled as they would better understand the classroom ecology

Transformative: AR is expected to give birth to new understandings and practices

Liberating: Teachers who conduct AR will be able to generate their own knowledge of teaching rather than relying on ready-made theories.

As it is clear from the above list, AR is a powerful tool for teachers. As for the nature of AR, Ur (2012) suggests action research to be conducted by teachers because of its benefits for both personal development and professional knowledge. Furthermore, she suggests the results to be shared with other teachers at school and public conferences. Action researches boost collaboration and creativity among teachers. Accordingly, “an examination of similar topics may lead to stimulate new thinking and lead to significant innovation or further research” (Ur, 2012, p. 296). Similarly, Brown (2001) noted that “seeing one’s actions through another’s eyes is an indispensable tool for class research as well as a potentially enlightening experience for both observer and observe” (p. 431). Furthermore, an action research does not have to be based on complicated statistics or long, detailed observation or experiments. Here, we should keep in mind that action research differs in its scope and aim with the other research paradigms. Within this frame, the findings are not expected to be generalized to contexts other than the immediate research site. Generalization of the results is not the target intention. On the contrary, action research is bound to be explained with its own circumstances. Either way, the results should be accurate, disciplined and objective.

Today, it is crucial to sustain teacher engagement in research to reach at a critical reflection through the lens of experts. With regards to this point Guerriero (2017) stated that “across OECD countries teachers are expected to be informed about pedagogical research in order to teach the 21st century skills” (p. 290) required in increasingly diverse classrooms. Because of its individualized focus, action research is becoming an effective tool for educational change in schools. The fact that teacher action research is small-scale, contextualized, localized, and intended to identify, create, or track improvements to practice is among its most advantageous features (Burns, 2011; Wallace, 1998).

2.1. Action research models

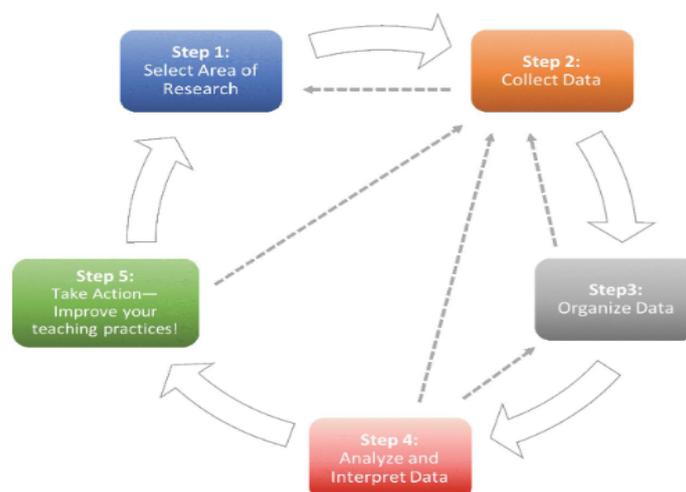


Figure 1. The Action Research Cycle. Adapted from Mills (2007, p. 17).

1. *Stringer's Model:*

This method's fundamental tenet is to help individuals deepen their comprehension of their circumstances and, as a result, find solutions to the issues they face. A clear set of social ideals is always used to implement community-based action research. According to Stringer (2007), the look, think, act framework of the fundamental action research routines enables people to start their inquiries simply and add more detail to their procedures as the complexity of the topics grows. Stringer et al. (2009, p. 12) maintain that each phase of education incorporates the cyclical Look Think Act steps of action research, offering precisely specified procedures that improve both teacher instruction and student learning.

2. *Mill's Model:*

According to Mill (2011)'s, this model is "research done by teachers and for teachers and students, not research done on them," (p. 9) and as a result, it is dynamic and flexible and can be customized for many situations and objectives. A sense of purpose based on a 'problem' or 'area of focus' (identification of an area of focus), observation or monitoring of practice (collection of data), synthesis of information gathered (analysis and interpretation of data), and some type of 'action' that invariably 'spirals' the researcher back into the process repeatedly are all

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evidently shared elements of this action research model (development of an action plan).

3. *Wallace's Model:*

In this model, Wallace (1991) argues for reflective growth and there is a particular emphasis on linguistic instruction. This tactic was essentially a technique for ELT teachers to reflect on whatever they do while instructing. It is done by methodically gathering data from daily practice and analyzing it to make decisions about how teachers should practice in the future.

Wallace (1991) put out a paradigm for teacher education that has a process of professional competency reflection at its center. It entails the gathering and analysis of data pertaining to a certain area of our professional activities. This is a loop process in the sense that it can be carried out repeatedly (by reframing the issue, gathering new information, reconsidering our approach, etc.) until educators have discovered (Wallace, 1998, p. 16).

Depending on the setting in which they are used, each of the models that have been discussed has attained varying degrees of popularity. Wallace (1998)'s action research model for language teachers, however, was designed to support the teacher's ongoing professional development rather than to turn the teacher into a researcher. Whether the procedures can be corroborated by another person, what matters is that they are helpful to the person exercising reflection.

Table 1. The differences between traditional research and action research

Characteristic	Action Research	Traditional Research
Researcher role	The researcher is an educational practitioner	The researcher is someone typically outside of the immediate educational context
Reflection	Subjective reflection about self and how the self affects practice	Objective reflection with emphasis to avoid personal, in research process
Relationship between researcher and participant	Participants are seen as equals with a voice in the process	The relationship between researcher and participants is typically hierarchical, with the researcher as the authority
Decision making	Collaborative, democratic decision making among collaborators	The researcher is the decision maker
Impact	Studies local issue within a specific context	Studies educational issues that affect the practice of a larger group
Interpretation	Findings interpreted within the local context	Interested in making generalizable findings
Dissemination	Dissemination is local to colleagues or other interested community stakeholders	Dissemination can be local but is also broad to include publications in journals and presentations at national conferences
Timing of the study	Cyclical within a process of continuous improvement as students and circumstances change	One-shot deal that has a beginning and an end

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In conventional research, the researcher is often someone with expertise in a particular educational topic who is not a member of the educational setting where the research is being conducted, such as a university professor. On the other hand, in action research, the researcher is typically a practitioner—someone who is actively involved in education.

Moreover, participants in the action research are treated as collaborators and members of the research team, and the process is democratic and collaborative whereas the traditional research has a hierarchical structure, with the researcher acting as the primary authority. Because action research concentrates on local educational practice issues, it is smaller, and does not incorporate all aspects of high-quality traditional research studies. Besides, in the action research the goal is to alter oneself and one's own practices. In conventional research, reflection frequently focuses on the study procedure and how to influence others' practice.

2.2. Types of action research

Action research can be categorized in two different ways. The first way to categorize action research is according to whether it is system-based or classroom-based. Action research in the classroom is carried out in the classroom to address a problem in the classroom. Action research can also be categorized according to whether it is participatory or practical. The goal of practical action research is to solve a specific problem that arises in the classroom. The principles of action research and critical theory are combined in participatory action research.

2.2.1. Practical Action Research

Practical action research is a planned, systematic inquiry to test out new practices and assess the impact of the new practice in a local setting, much like the generic definition of action research. With an emphasis on altering teacher practices as a specific, classroom issue and consequent student results, it can involve one practitioner or a small collaborative group of practitioners.

2.2.2. Participatory Action Research

Critical action research or critical theory action research are other names for participatory action research, usually referred to as PAR. Kemmis et al. (2014) describe seven features of participatory action research:

1. It is a *social process* whereby the participants seek to understand the social spheres in which they operate to improve the process of teaching and learning.
2. It is *participatory* and *collaborative* where a group of individuals work together as equals in a democratic mind-set to understand how the social sphere affects their educational practice.
3. It is *practical* in that the group examines real practices such as what people do, how they interact, what they mean and value, and how they interpret their world at the present time.

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4. It is *emancipatory*, where the participants seek to unconstrain themselves from aspects of the social spheres that limit their personal development and contribute to injustice.
5. It is *critical* by analytically examining and challenging the practices of the social spheres that constrain their development.
6. It is *reflexive*, using a cyclical process of reflection and action.
7. It is *transformative* as it seeks to change theory and practice by examining how theory and practice relate to each other to develop insight that can change both.

Table 2. The differences between practical and participatory research

Practical Action Research	Participatory Action Research
Small scale, an individual or small group of individuals	Collaborative group of stakeholders
Emphasis on local impact of changing educational practices	Emphasis on transforming the social spheres in which the educational practice operates
Problem is framed as localized, classroom issue	Problem is framed within a larger societal perspective
The goal is to change teaching practices that affect student outcomes	The goal is to emancipate participants from the constraints hindering their development

2.3. The Process of Conducting Action Research

There is a procedure involved in doing action research, whether it be a participatory action research study or a practical action research study. The researcher will cycle through the steps in a different order depending on the type of study being undertaken (proactive practical, responsive practical, or participatory action research). The procedure is circular, thus after the results stage of one cycle is over, the reflection phase of the next cycle starts. This cyclical pattern is shown in Figure 3, along with the next five action research stages:

1. Reflection stage
2. Planning stage
3. Implementation stage
4. Analysis stage
5. Results stage

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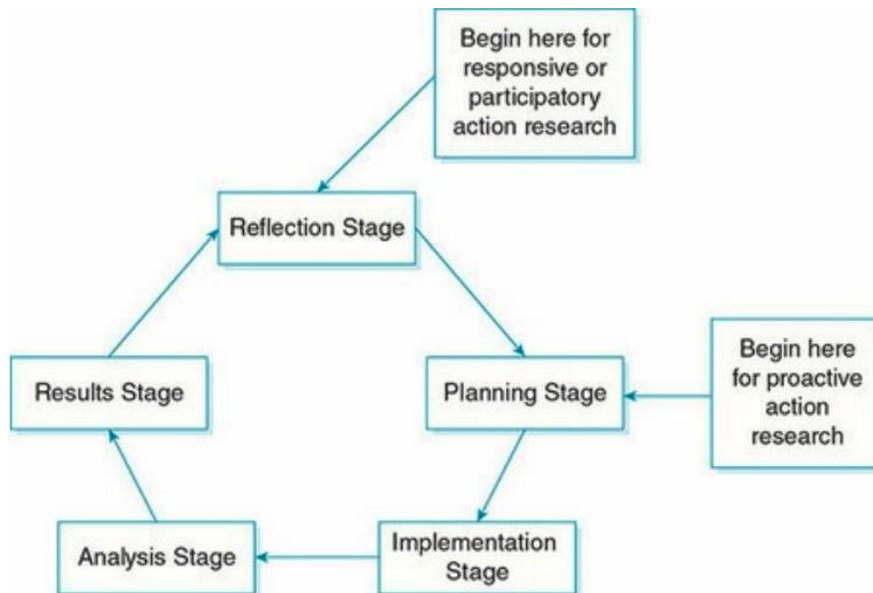


Figure 3. Action Research Is Conducted in a Cyclical Pattern

Depending on the sort of action research being utilized, the cycle will start at a different stage, but the action researcher will cycle through each stage. This process will involve different activities, depending on the practice being implemented.

- Identify, locate, and secure the resources needed to implement the new practice.
- Inform key stakeholders about the change in practice. In some cases, such as with the change in absenteeism practices, there may be need to some lead time before implementing the change.
- If enlisting a team of practitioners, establish the roles of the different team members, ensuring each has an equal voice.
- Identify the research design to be used and outline the steps involved in that design. If the practice involves a group or classroom, decide if you will have a second control group (nonequivalent group experimental design) or not (single-group experimental design). Decide if you will have a pretest or not. Decide how to determine which group or class will receive the new practice and which one will not. If the practice involves one individual or only a few individuals, select a single-case design.
- Decide what you will measure and how you will measure change associated with the new practice (aka dependent variable). Decide if you will collect qualitative data, quantitative data, or both. Develop a data collection procedure and appropriate forms to make collection easy and efficient.

Similar to the above procedure, Ur (2012, p. 296) asserts the following steps to be taken while conducting AR:

1. A problem is identified

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2. Relevant data are gathered and recorded
3. Practical action is suggested that might solve the problem
4. A plan of action is designed
5. The plan is implemented
6. Results are monitored and recorded
7. If the original problem has been solved, the researchers may begin work on another; if not, the original problem is redefined and the cycle is repeated.

2.4. Evaluation of Action Research

Table 3. Criteria for Evaluating the Action Research Project

Phases of Action Research	Evaluation Criteria
Identify and reflect on the need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The research addresses an issue of educational practice. • Researchers are engaged in adequate fact-finding activities. • The issue is clearly described/defined. • Information is collected from key stakeholders.
Plan a course of action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The plan of action is clearly described. • The plan of action is linked to the reflection and data are gathered from stakeholders. • Role of the research team is described. • The team accesses the resources it needs.
Implement course of action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of the plan of action is described adequately. • Changes to the plan of action are described. • Time was sufficient to see the desired change.
Analyze data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis is sufficiently described and understandable. • Analysis is connected to the issue to be addressed.
Reflect on results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The researchers reflect on the results. • Plans for future action are described.

Action research differs from traditional research in that it is founded on reflection and ongoing improvement of local classroom practices. It is important to evaluate the action research project itself in order to be reflective and always improve. The stages of action research can be used to the evaluation process. The stages of action research are listed in Table 3, along with certain evaluation standards for each stage. Make sure the researchers are involved in a fact-finding mission to characterize the educational problem from many stakeholder viewpoints and the issue is properly stated while reviewing the phase to reflect and identify the requirement. The course of action must also be specified in detail and connected to the information obtained during the identification phase concerning the problem (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

3. Discussion

Change is the present century's mantra. And today's classrooms require teachers to test out their teaching practices by exerting abundance of pressure on their shoulders. Changing student

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profiles, teaching modalities, materials ask teachers to leave their taken-for-granted tools and get armed with newer ones. In order for today's teachers to tackle with the classroom problems, AR stands as a life-saving tool. In the ELT departments, the research course is taught either as a core or elective course. A closer investigation into the contents of the 'research skills course' offered in the program reveals that this course is primarily designed to teach the students teachers the major research paradigms such as characteristics of qualitative and quantitative research. Based on the potential benefits listed above, the authors argue that AR should be integrated into the ELT curriculum as a required course. Instead of devoting a course to teach general research paradigms, an AR course specifically designed to teach both theoretical and practical aspects needs to be placed in the ELT teacher education programs. Such a course integrated in the 5th or the 6th semester would teach the student teachers how to apply AR in their teaching contexts. With regards to the potential benefits of AR for the teacher trainees, Dikilitaş (2020) states that AR provides curiosity, exploration, critical reflection, evidence collecting, analyzing and interpreting skills.

In order to produce effective English language teachers who are well-versed about the realities, problems and the ways of solutions, it seems that AR is an invaluable tool before us. In other words, the more teachers are engaged with AR in their particular teaching milieu, the greater agency they will have over their teaching.

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To Cite this Chapter:

Kazazoğlu, S. & Tunaboşlu, O. (2022). Integration of an action research course into the ELT programs: Why and how? In A. Önal & K. Büyükkarcı (Eds.), *Essentials of foreign language teacher education*, (pp. 264-275). ISRES Publishing.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Asst. Prof. Dr. Semin KAZAZOĞLU

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0207-720X

semink@yildiz.edu.tr

Yıldız Technical University

Semin KAZAZOĞLU is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics. She currently works in the department of English Language Education at Yıldız Technical University, İstanbul. Her research and publications focus on EFL learners' digital reading skills, EFL teacher development, intercultural communication, and applied linguistics.

INTEGRATION OF AN ACTION RESEARCH COURSE INTO THE ELT PROGRAMS: WHY AND HOW?



Prof. Dr. Oya TUNABOYLU

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9926-7973

oyatunaboylu@sdu.edu.tr

Süleyman Demirel University

Oya Tunaboylu holds BA from Atatürk University, MA and PhD degrees from the Ohio State University in TESOL. She also holds an MA in British Theater from Atatürk University. Professor Tunaboylu served as the director of School of Foreign Languages at Süleyman Demirel University. During her managerial post, the school was granted European Language Label Award twice first in 2009 and 2011 for two innovative language teaching projects. Tunaboylu is interested in multidisciplinary approaches to language teaching practices.