CHAPTER 60

ACTION RESEARCH:

Contributions and Future Directions in ELT

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ABSTRACT

Action research focuses simultaneously on *action* and *research.* The action aspect requires some kind of planned intervention, deliberately putting into place concrete strategies, processes, or activities in the research context. Interventions in practice are usually in response to a perceived problem, puzzle, or question that people in the social context wish to improve or change in some way. These problems might relate to teaching, learning, curriculum or syllabus implementation, but school management or administration are also a possible focus. This chapter describes the origins of action research, its relationships to other forms of empirical research, its reach and development, its central characteristics, and the current debates that surround it. It also considers the scope of action research in the applied linguistics field and concludes by looking at future directions.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1940s, the term *action research* and the associated terms *action science*, *action learning*, *practitioner research,* and *participatory research* have been used to identify a particular philosophical stance towards research inquiry. Although action research extends to many fields, including the health care professions (e.g., Kember, 2001; Nichols, 1997), business and management (Somekh & Thaler, 1997), organizational and human development (Biott, 1996), higher education (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992), vocational education and training and social work (Hutchison & Bryson, 1997), and community activism (Knijnik, 1997), my focus is on educational action research, specifically in the ELT field.

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

As the term implies, action research focuses simultaneously on *action* and *research*. The action aspect requires some kind of planned intervention, deliberately putting into place concrete strategies, processes, or activities in the research context. Interventions in practice are in response to a perceived problem, puzzle, or question that people in the social context wish to improve or change in some way. These problems might relate to teaching, learning, curriculum, or syllabus implementation,

but school management or administration are also a possible focus. Areas for action cover a wide range of possibilities, as Wallace (1998, p. 19) suggests:

1. classroom management
2. appropriate materials
3. particular teaching areas (e.g., reading, oral skills)
4. student behavior, achievement, or motivation
5. personal management issues (e.g., time management, relationships with colleagues/higher management)

Action may be taken individually, in groups, or across wider institutional or organizational clusters. Working collectively has the obvious advantage of enabling others to be brought in at different stages, sharing and discussing ideas or findings, planning new actions, talking about data collection methods, and comparing results.

The research component of action research means systematically collecting data about the planned actions, analyzing what they reveal, reflecting on the implications of the data, and developing alternative plans and actions based on data analysis. Improvement and involvement are twin pillars underpinning action research. Table 1 outlines the various focuses, purposes, and outcomes in different approaches to action research.

The research process is less predictable than in most other research approaches, as it is characterized by a spiral of cycles that minimally involve planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, although like other forms of research the reality is likely to be much messier than this description suggests. The best-known model of action research is one devised by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988a), who refer to four "moments", evolving in a self-reflective spiral or loop that is reiterated according to the scope 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" towards 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 & McTaggart, 1988a, pp. 11-14)

Table 1. Focus and Purpose of Different Approaches to Action Research

	Individual	Collaborative	Institutional	Organizational
Focus	Single classroom	Multiclassroom	Whole department or school	Whole district or organization
Purpose	Investigate personal classroom issues	Investigate complementary or common classroom issues	Investigate common schoolwide 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 reevaluation	Improved allocation of resources Educational policy evaluation Improved knowledge of new curriculum implementation Improved cross-district professional development opportunities

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 of their actions. McPherson (1997) provides a good example of how the focus and purpose of action research might change with successive iterative cycles. McPherson worked with learners enrolled in Australian adult immigrant classes. The account below is summarized from 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 center] 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 of their experiences of the part of the world they had just left [former Yugoslavia]…. I suddenly realized 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 McPherson (1997) illustrates, data collection procedures are principally, but not universally *qualitative* in nature. Burns (1999) categorizes the most commonly used methods as observational and non-observational:

Table 2. Observational and Non-observational Methods for Action Research

Observational	Non-observational
Examples: • brief notes or recorded comments made by the teacher while the class is in progress • audio or video-recordings of classroom interaction • observation by self or colleague on particular aspects of classroom action • transcripts of classroom interactions between teacher and students or students and students • maps, layouts, or sociograms of the classroom that trace the interactions between students and teacher • photographs of the physical context	Examples: • questionnaires and surveys • interviews • class discussions/focus groups • diaries, journals, and logs kept by teacher or learners • classroom documents, such as materials used, samples of student writing, or tests

To summarize the essential concepts and principles of action research:

1. Action research is localized and commonly 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.
2. 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.
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

A number of writers (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988b; McNiff, 1988; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992) argue that action research originated with Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist who applied theories of group dynamics and human relations training to his investigations of social problems in 1940s America (e.g., Lewin, 1947). Although Collier (1945) may have been the first to use the actual term (see McTaggart, 1991), 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 for including practitioners from the target research communities in the work of professional researchers. His student, Alfred Marrow (1969), referred to him as "a practical theorist".

During the 1950s, Stephen Corey led the growing interest in the U.S. 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. Indeed, Corey's own arguments retained a strong flavor of 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, 2005, for further discussion).

Action research received a new lease on life in the late 1960s and 1970s, as interest in curriculum theory (Schwab, 1969) and the teacher-researcher movement (Stenhouse, 1971) grew. In Britain, the work of Lawrence Stenhouse and others in the Humanities Curriculum Project (1967-1972) 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 towards a *practical* model of action research (Grundy, 1982). Significant developments that followed were the Ford Teaching Project (1972-1975) directed by Stenhouse's colleagues, John Elliott and Clem Adelman, and the establishment of the *Classroom Action Research Network* (CARN).

Critical or *emancipatory* models emanate largely from the work of Stephen Kemmis and his colleagues at Deakin University in Australia (Kemmis & 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 participants. Table 3 summarizes the broad differences.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACTION RESEARCH IN ELT

In the applied linguistics field in the 1980s, action research was barely discussed. This is not to say that it was unrecognized or that calls for teacher involvement in research were not being made. In the early 1980s, Breen and Candlin's (1980) proposals that curriculum evaluation should be an integral aspect of classroom teaching and learning foreshadowed shifts towards an action research orientation, while calls for more active participation of teachers in classroom-centered research were increasing (e.g. Allwright, 1988; Long, 1983). Towards 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).

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

Note:. From Masters, J. (2000), *The History of Action Research* (p. 7) Retrieved October 5, 2002, from http://www.fhs.usyd.edu/arer/003.htm.

Nunan's publication, *Understanding Language Classrooms* (1989a), 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). This book was quickly followed by another, *Language teaching methodology* (1991), where Nunan outlined methodological proposals for language teaching that departed from similar publications by including transcribed data from real classrooms. His purpose was "not to provide instances of exemplary practice, that is to show what *should be* done, but to demonstrate what actually *is* done in language classrooms" (p. xiv).

Work by others such as Peck (1988), Allwright and Bailey (1991), and Brindley (1990) was equally significant in opening up the concept of an active and reflective role for teacher educators and researchers. As Edge points out, this paradigm shift in our way of thinking about teacher education (Richards, 1987; Richards, 1990; Wallace, 1991) no longer seems controversial. However, at the time it stood in stark contrast to the applied science model, where research and practice were regarded as separate and teachers were expected to implement their practice based on findings from current research. Contemporary trends in teacher education and language teaching have reversed our perspectives from a uniquely "theory-applied-to-practice" approach towards a more "theory-derived-from-practice" approach (cf. Graves, 1996; Nunan & Lamb, 1996; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Richards & Nunan, 1990). Specific treatments of action research within this paradigm shift have emerged in publications such as Wallace (1998), Burns (1999), and Edge (2001). Publications illustrating action research generally fall into two major categories. The first is the "how-to" type that outline ways of doing action research. These publications are usually written by academics, and may include illustrative examples of research done by teachers (e.g. Burns, 1997; Burns, 1999; Christison & Bassano, 1995; Freeman, 1998; Wallace, 1998). The second type, which are still relatively small in number, are action research case studies written by teachers, either working individually (e.g., Brousseau, 1996; Dutertre, 2000; Edge, 2001; Gersten & Tlusty, 1998) or in collaborative groups (e.g., McPherson, 1997; the accounts in Burns & Hood, 1995, and Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2001; Mathew, 2000; Tinker Sachs, 2002).

ACTION RESEARCH WITHIN ELT RESEARCH

In a plenary session at the New York TESOL Convention, Bailey (1999) referred to action research as *the road less traveled*, highlighting its status as an approach that is still relatively unrecognized (in both senses of the word) in the ELT field. The question of how action research is positioned in relation to the range of approaches adopted in research is one that confronts those new to action research. Action research is sometimes represented as a "third way" in research. Nunan (1992), for example, having outlined the traditional major paradigms of quantitative and qualitative research, devotes a separate discussion to action research. Bailey, Omaggio-Hadley, Magnan, and Swaffar (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). Brindley (1991)

discusses *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. 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. It is worth noting also that the philosophical values and methods adopted in action research can be linked to a whole tradition of contextualized or ecological research reflected in the work of social psychologists such as Vygotsky, Bronfonbrenner, Cole, and Wertsch (van Lier, personal communication, 25 January, 2002).

Classroom research, teacher research, and *action research* have become familiar terms in recent applied linguistics literature. However, they are often used interchangeably so that 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).

However, whereas classroom research denotes the focus of the research and teacher research refers to the people conducting the research, action research refers, as we have seen, 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 most narrow form, it emphasizes the study of classroom interaction. Allwright and Bailey 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 compile an autobiographical profile of her learners in order to understand affective factors in their learning (see Muldoon, 1997, for an example). Classroom research is primarily 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 (Breen, 1985) set up for the testing of theoretical hypotheses, although in the last decade 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, 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.

THE NATURE OF ACTION RESEARCH IN ELT

Over the last decade, accounts of action research in the ELT literature have fallen largely into the technical or practical categories. Crookes (1993) argues that action research has primarily been motivated by *the teacher as researcher* concept (cf. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Nunan, 1989a; Strickland, 1988). He characterizes this type of action research as (nominally) value free and conservative. In contrast, the more radically progressive, critical, and emancipatory orientation (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Gore & Zeichner, 1991) "has gone almost without representation in SL discussions of this topic" (Crookes, 1993, p. 133).

Crookes' argument (1993) appears to be confirmed by analysis of the published literature over the last decade. The lack of accounts of critical action research could be attributable to the newness of this concept in the field, little opportunity for teachers in the (marginalized) world of ELT to work collaboratively and find time for reflection, or fear that a critical perspective might upset the prevailing institutional culture. Whatever the reasons, most publications focus on outlining techniques for conducting action research and/or providing individual illustrative case studies (e.g., Bailey & Nunan, 1996; Edge, 2001; Edge & Richards, 1993; Nunan, 1989b; Wallace, 1998). Where collaboration between researchers and teachers exists, it tends to be of the "flying visit" (Breen, Candlin, Dam, & Gabrielsen, 1989, p. 114) variety. Also, despite the arguments that action research provides a voice for teachers, collected accounts written by classroom teachers, who would not also consider themselves academics or teacher educators, do not yet figure very prominently in the ELT literature (but see the papers in Burns & Hood, 1995, 1998; Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2000; Edge, 2001; Richards, 1997). On the other hand, argues Edge (2001, p. 4), there may be limits to the extent ESOL teachers can or should engage in social justice action research. However, undertaking action research will ultimately contribute to a shift in values oriented towards concepts of social justice:

> The most basic idea of empowerment, participation, stakeholding are still news to a lot of people. But every little shift made by a language teacher, for example, from the fragile security of given knowledge to the robust uncertainty of emergent awareness is of a piece with the underpinning values of a sense of social justice that is shared. Or to express this in interpersonal terms, our individual responsibility is not to attempt to impose large-scale change, but to act in our everyday exchanges with others in ways that instantiate the values that we value. (Edge, 2001, p.4)

Edge's last comments echo the sentiments of others, that action research is inevitably a political process. "Politics will intrude," proclaims McNiff (1988, p. 72), arguing that because action research has to do with change, researchers may well find themselves at odds with established practices and policies. Although she does not term it critical action research, Ferguson (1998), for example, describes her growing political awareness of her role as a teacher, as she lobbied for continued funding of her adult ESL class:

> We, as ESL practitioners, can look at our field of work and easily say, "It's hopeless!" The inadequacies in the field are great: in recognition of the need for ESL service for adults, in funding for service delivery, in amount of services available, in employment opportunities for teacher and so on and on. However, we can just as easily say, "It's wide open!" There is so much room for improvement that small actions towards building political visibility can be significant. Any expertise we gain is valuable. Any progress we make is laudable. (p. 13)

CURRENT DEBATES

There is growing evidence, albeit sometimes anecdotal, that action research offers teachers a transformative rather than transmissive experience of professional development. As Bennett (1993, p. 69, cited in van Lier, 1994) notes:

> 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.

Comments such as the following from an Australian teacher support these arguments:

> Collaborative action research is a powerful form of staff development because it is practice to theory rather than theory to practice. Teachers are encouraged to reach their own solutions and conclusions and this is far more attractive and has more impact than being presented with ideals which cannot be attained. (Linda Ross, cited in Burns, 1999, p. 7)

Wadsworth (1998) summarizes the benefits claimed to be offered by action research, saying we become:

- more conscious of "problematizing" an existing action or practice and more conscious of who is problematizing it and why we are problematizting it;
- more explicit about "naming" the problem, and more self-conscious about raising an unanswered question and focusing an effort to answer it;
- more planned and deliberate about commencing a process of inquiry and involving others who could or should be involved in that inquiry;
- more systematic and rigorous in our efforts to get answers;
- more carefully documenting and recording action and what people think about it and in more detail and in ways which are accessible to other relevant parties;
- more intensive and comprehensive in our study, waiting much longer before we "jump" to a conclusion;
- more self-skeptical in checking our hunches;
- attempting to develop deeper understanding and more useful and more powerful theory about the matters we are researching in order to produce new knowledge which can inform improved action or practice; and
- changing our actions as part of the research process, and then further researching these changed actions. (p. 4)

On the other hand, numerous criticisms have been raised. Commentators from Halsey (1972) onwards have pointed to the fundamental tension 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), while the academic status and the rigor of the methodological procedures have also been the subject of debate (e.g., Brumfit & Mitchell, 1989).

Winter (1982) and others draw attention to the lack of rigor in interpreting findings and the restricted nature of the data characterizing action research studies. Related to Winter's argument is the point that there is danger of overinvolvement by the researcher, leading to personal bias and subjectivity. Others raise question marks over accountability in experimentation with learner subjects (cf. Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Tinker Sachs, 2000).

The idea of teachers carrying out research is perhaps no longer so much in contention (although see the recent debates in the TESOL Research Interest Section Newsletter; Jarvis, 2002a, 2002b). Nevertheless, there are many aspects of action research that remain to be more fully understood. In a recent *TESOL Quarterly* discussion, Allwright (1997) and Nunan (1997) debated the following issues: What are the standards by which action research is to be judged, and should these 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?

At a more pragmatic level, teachers themselves may well resist the current 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 balance the time and additional efforts involved. Some teachers may also question whether the growing trend of encouragement by government ministries or other educational bodies to do action research is not another way to ensure they become compliant with organizational agendas, (as shown in the following comments by a teacher cited in Miller, 1990):

> 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. (p. 114)

The latter suggestion, that action research offers teachers a grass-roots opportunity that could be undermined, is taken up also by others who argue that the involvement of academic researchers might also take action research out of the hands of teachers (see Burns, 1999). Outside researchers could influence the research agenda, challenging in subtle ways the questions posed, the data collected or the interpretations made. On the other hand, academic researchers can provide an impetus in a climate where teachers' voices are unrepresented in educational decision-making. Tinker Sachs (2000), for example, points to the tensions over these issues that she experienced as an academic facilitator of action research in Hong Kong, a process she describes as "both 'pushing' and 'pulling'" (p. 37).

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 two questions: (a) Is what the researcher is claiming on the basis of the data meaningful, believable, and trustworthy (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Mishler, 1990)? and (b) 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 & Schön, 1991, p. 85).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Current educational philosophies of devolved management, quality improvement, accountability, and outcomes-based assessment emerging in many educational contexts are likely to contribute to the rapid spread of action research as a way of monitoring, evaluating, and improving practice. Because of its flexibility and broad application, it offers numerous implications for areas of the ELT field that are still relatively unexplored.

In terms of institutionwide educational reform, action research provides a way of stimulating overall renewal (Calhoun, 1994; Elliot, 1991; Goswami & Stillman, 1987) and a climate where teachers are enabled to accept rapid change more readily (Burns, 1999; Markee, 1997). School-based curriculum development benefits from teacher involvement that is underpinned by action research (Hopkins, 1993), meaning that change is more likely to be accepted and implemented (Fullan, 1996) as well as to be more rigorously evaluated (Murphy, 1996; Somekh, 1993). Immediate teaching or learning problems can be systematically addressed on an individual (Nunan, 1989a; Wallace, 1998) or collaborative (Burns; Oja & Smulyan, 1989) basis, while more reflective and personally meaningful forms of professional development can be made available to teachers (Richards & Nunan, 1990). In addition, action research holds promise as a major site for building more substantial theories about language teaching and learning, about which the ELT field still knows relatively little. As one teacher researcher recently put it:

> To the extent that any part of our language education work, from classroom teaching to large-scale policy planning, seeks to involve the informed choices of the people concerned, it is difficult to see how this work would not be enhanced by some elements of participatory action research. (Rogers, 2001, p. 55)

CONCLUSIONS

From this broad overview, it can be seen that action research is an approach that has long-term historical and methodological developments. However, only in the last decade has it become influential in the ELT field. At the moment, it enjoys widespread popularity in professional development, but its further impact remains to be seen. There are many questions about appropriate standards and forms of action research that remain to be answered. In the meantime, it is clear that there is a broad movement away from decontextualized and abstract forms of knowledge and enquiry in our field, as in other disciplines. There is a shift towards the concept of professionals as agents, rather than recipients, of knowledge. As the term *action* research implies, it appears to be an approach that is well suited to this movement.

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