

The Role and Place of Action Research in the Teaching Process

by Gordon Moulden

Summary: This article describes how action research can serve as a useful pedagogical tool in the teaching process.

Keywords: action research, pedagogical tool, teaching process

Introduction

There are a number of different approaches to educational research: naturalistic researchers aim to describe settings and/or the people within; experimental researchers apply treatments, such as a technique for teaching pronunciation, and measure their effectiveness on particular learners; survey researchers seek to understand the relationships among different factors related to learning.

These approaches share the goal of seeking to add knowledge to the discipline. Action research, however, is conducted to find a solution to a specific teaching or learning issue. It can be either practical or participatory. While participatory action research has a social justice aim and takes place at the community level, practical action research is classroom-based and seeks to examine specific learning or professional development issues in order to improve instruction and facilitate better learning. (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019). The purpose of this article is to provide a description of the signature characteristics of action research before examining its place and role within the larger teaching process.

Characteristics of Practical Action Research

Action research (practical) has been described as a cyclical process. Burns (2009) views it as one that begins with reflection, as a teacher identifies a problem potentially worthy of investigating; observation, when the teacher researcher seeks to ascertain what is happening in the classroom through observation or the use of a questionnaire or pre-test; intervention, using such means as a teaching modification or instructional material in order to address the problem identified; and finally, analysis, often involving a statistical technique, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Upon completing the analysis, the teacher decides to either adopt

the intervention as-is, modify and attempt it again, or abandon it altogether. Adopting or modifying the intervention would involve a resumption of the cyclical process.

Depending on the issue, an action researcher may use an experimental design to assess the effectiveness of an activity, such as having students each create their own restaurant menu for use in roleplays in order to improve class participation. The teacher could design a post-activity anonymous questionnaire to gauge students' opinions of the activity, then analyze their responses and decide whether or not to employ similar activities more often. An alternative research design for a very small class would be a case-study, in which qualitative data-collection techniques such as observation notes and dialogue journals allow for more in-depth understanding of classroom processes and learners' opinions of these.

Action Research as Part of the Teaching Process

Since practical action research takes place during a course, it is important to understand where it fits in the teaching process. Moulden (2020) introduced the P.I.E.R. model of the teaching process (see Figure 1), which can help us understand how action research can fit into the practice of teaching.

This model presents the view that at a general level, teaching can be defined as "planning for learning". The process generally begins before a course, as a teacher or teaching team articulates course aims and objectives, identifies the materials to be used, and considers the instructional and assessment approach, all based ideally on a clear understanding of their learners' needs. Once the course begins, planning becomes part of a cyclical process in concert with implementing (carrying out instructional and assessment activities), evaluating (analyzing and

P.I.E.R. Model of Teaching

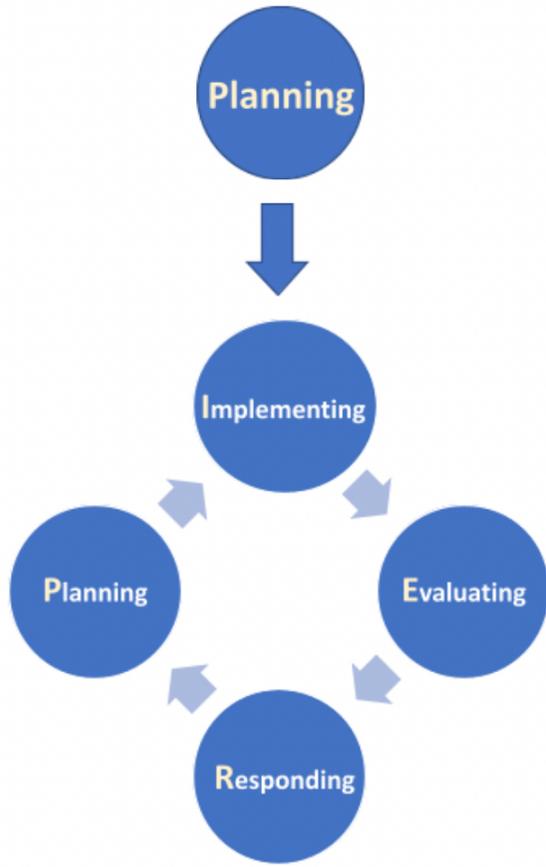


Figure 1: A conceptual model of the cyclical process of planning and implementing a language or content course (Moulden, 2020)

reflecting on the success of instruction), and responding (deciding on what action to take based on results of evaluation).

So where does action research fit in such a process? Since it is solution-oriented, the decision to engage in an action-research study is made in response to a problem identified by the teacher(s) during regular post-lesson evaluation. This means, as Table 1 shows, that the decision to carry out an action research study takes place during the responding stage, although the actual research stage (formal analysis of data) would not begin until permission from the program or institutional administrator has been received.

A Sample Study

Let us see how this model works by means of an example: Imagine that an instructor is teaching a Business English Communications course for international students seeking to enter

an MBA program. The instructor's goal is to help students develop presentation skills for their MBA courses and their future places of work. The instructor's P.I.E.R. table would resemble that in Table 2.

To understand how an action-research study might be carried out in such a course, let's imagine a problematic scenario: After the first presentation assignment, the instructor provides feedback to each student, with practical advice for improving their next presentation. However, it is clear during the second presentations that almost none of the students read the feedback or took it seriously, resulting in no noticeable improvement in the second presentations.

As a result, the instructor decides to engage in some action research using self- and peer-assessment forms for the next two presentations. The instructor poses the following research question for the study: "What effect do peer- and self-assessment have on students' performance in oral presentations in an academic speaking class?"

The research cycle for the study would be as follows (Moulden, 2020):

- **Reflection (first cycle):** The issue is poor performance on the initial two presentations.
- **Observation:** Students are not applying teacher feedback to improve their performance.
- **Intervention:** The teacher decides to require peer- and self-assessment of students' third and fourth oral presentations (via worksheets) to evaluate whether one

Planning	preparing the course initially; preparing and revising units, lessons, and activities once the course is underway
Implementing	in the classroom, or online, engaging the students during each individual lesson
Evaluating	formally and/or informally assessing student (and teacher) performance during or after the lesson
Responding	reflecting on evaluation results and determining the next course of action: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue as planned • review material if needed • assign additional homework • make curricular adjustments • explore a solution to a learning problem (Action research)

Table 1: Details of the P.I.E.R. Model in each stage of the teaching process

Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pre-course identification of relevant topics and communicative situations. (cf ACTFL Performance Descriptors in Resource list following this article) • completion of a scope and sequence • selection of instructional materials (e.g., text, video, and other relevant media) • development of assessment activities
Implementing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in the classroom, presenting the material and assigning and viewing student presentations
Evaluating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assessing student presentations using a specific rubric
Responding	reflecting on evaluation results and determining the next course of action: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reviewing feedback with students • critically evaluating student performance on subsequent presentation • continuing feedback method if performance improves • changing feedback method if there is no improvement • implementing a trial feedback method in the form of self- and peer-evaluation forms to assess whether they result in improvement in subsequent presentations (Action research)

Table 2: Application of the P.I.E.R. Model to a sample Action Research study in an English Communications course.

or both of these feedback techniques has a significant effect on performance.

- **Analysis:** This is based on
 - students' scores on their third and fourth presentations, and
 - a short in-class anonymous questionnaire on the effectiveness of the peer and self-assessment sheets.
- **Reflection (second cycle):** Based on the analysis, the instructor decides whether to continue the self- and/or peer-assessment worksheets for subsequent presentations during the course.

The instructor can view the questionnaires and assessment forms at any time. However, ethically speaking, formal analysis must await consent from participants and ethical clearance from the administrator(s) concerned,

as well as completion of the course and submission of grades. Steps would be needed to protect both the confidentiality and anonymity of data, and analysis can only be carried out on the data of those participants who grant consent.

Final Thoughts

Action research is a highly-valuable pedagogical tool that fits naturally into the teaching process of any course. Effective use of this tool not only improves student learning but also promotes the professional development of the teacher involved. Taking the additional step of sharing one's findings at a conference or in a journal serves the professional development needs of our ELT colleagues as well.

Research Resources

Websites

[ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners](#) An excellent source of content and materials for teachers planning and teaching business and other specialized English communications courses.

[Research Methods Knowledge Base](#): This is an excellent general source for educational research with many helpful internal links.

[TESOL Solutions](#): Understanding statistics in TESOL, from the author's blog.

Books

[Becoming Research Literate: Supporting Teacher Research in English Language Teaching](#): A foundational text for those interested in gaining a more in-depth understanding of action research.

[ELT Research in Action: Bridging the Gap between Research and Classroom Practice](#): This is a practical book featuring sample research-action studies on a wide range of topics.

References

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