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Action research: an evolving paradigm?

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Action research is a relatively recent phenomenon in the field of English language teaching, having emerged in the literature predominantly since the late 1980s. In this article, I discuss the antecedents, definitions, processes, and purposes of action research in the field of English language teaching. Action research is also considered in relation to more established notions of basic and applied research. The current scope and nature of action research studies found in the literature are then analysed. The article concludes with a consideration of some of the challenges to the status of action research as a research methodology and the issues that will need to be addressed if action research by language teachers is to be sustainable.

1. Introduction

Action research (AR) is part of 'a quiet methodological revolution' towards qualitative research approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998: vii) that impacted on the social sciences in the latter half of the 20th century and emerged in reaction to scientific, experimental and quantitative paradigms. The move towards participative, 'naturalistic' enquiry, with its exploratory-interpretive underpinnings (Grotjahn, 1987: 59), is influenced by philosophical developments in humanistic psychology (Rogers, 1961); liberationist education (Freire, 1970); social phenomenology (Schutz, 1967); social constructionism (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963); critical theory (Foucault, 1970; Habermas, 1972); cultural studies (Frow & Morris, 2003); and feminist studies (Lichtenstein, 1988).

Since at least the 1940s, *action research*, and its related branches, *action science*, *action learning*, *practitioner research*, *participatory research and collaborative/cooperative enquiry*, have been part of this general movement. Action research is seen as a means towards creating meaning and understanding in problematic social situations and improving the quality of human interactions and practices within those situations. It now pervades numerous disciplinary fields and national contexts, including the field of applied linguistics. These other fields encompass industry, work organisation and worker democracy in Norway (Selander, 1987); health care professions in Hong Kong (Kember, 2001; Nichols, 1997); business and management in Europe (Somekh & Thaler, 1997); organisational and human development in the European Union (Biott, 1996); higher education in Australia (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992); vocational education and training and social work in Europe (Hutchison & Bryson, 1997); community activism in Brazil (Knijnik, 1997); and environmental sustainability internationally (Tilbury & Wortman, 2004).

The focus of this paper is educational action research, and particularly AR carried out in the field of applied linguistics and English language teaching (ELT). I begin by tracing the antecedents and development of AR in general. I then discuss definitions and descriptions of educational AR, its processes, purposes and characteristics. Next, I consider how AR has emerged and developed in the fields of English language teaching. Following is a discussion of the purposes for which AR is carried out in the field and the kinds of AR studies published to date. I then consider some of the criticisms of AR and the issues that arise for action researchers in conducting such studies. I conclude by discussing some of the challenges to the status and sustainability of AR in the ELT field.

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2. The origins and development of action research

The modern seeds of AR in educational contexts can be found in the work of John Dewey (although they can be traced back to Aristotle). Dewey's arguments against the separation of theory and practice were profoundly influential in educational enquiry in the first part of the 20th century (and into the present time) and laid the basis for future calls for research by educators into their own practice. A historical examination of AR over the following 60 years reveals a proliferation of definitions, interpretations and uses, influenced by the thinking of the times.

The social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, is widely accredited with being the 'father' of action research,

Table 1 Major characteristics of approaches to action research

	Technical AR	Practical AR	Critical AR
Philosophical base	Natural sciences	Hermeneutics	Critical theory
Nature of reality	Measurable	Multiple, holistic, constructed	Inter-related 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 (problematising)
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, social and economic 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

if not the originator of the term (cf. Collier, who referred to 'action-research, research-action', 1945, p. 300). Lewin, influenced by the work of the social philosopher, J. L. Moreno, in group dynamics and social movements in early 20th century Germany (Altrichter & Gstettner, 1993), conceived of 'research leading to social action' (Lewin 1946, reproduced in Lewin 1948: 203) and saw AR as a spiral of steps, 'each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action' (Lewin, 1948: 206).

Lewin's vision of the role that socially motivated enquiry could play encompassed industry, the military, and a whole range of other political and economic systems, a point often overlooked by contemporary educational action researchers. By the 1950s, the climate of the times de-emphasised the links to social justice movements (Kemmis, 1993). In keeping with the more positivist era, the forms of AR that filtered into education emphasised the scientific and experimental, thus moving away from the progressive intentions of its earlier roots. Over the decades since its entry into educational fields, AR has evolved through various conceptual and interpretive 'generations' (McTaggart & Garbutcheon-Singh, 1988; McKernan 1996; Noffke, 1994) – the technical-scientific and problem-solving (1950s to 1960s), drawing on scientific and quantitative methods (Corey, 1949); the practical and illustrative (1970s), utilising case study and description to contribute to educational and curriculum theory (Elliott, 1978; Reid, 1978; Schwab, 1969; Stenhouse, 1971, 1975); and the critical-emancipatory (from the mid 1980s), drawing on critical, constructivist and dialectical methodologies (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Fals Borda, 1979; Freire, 1982; Hall, 1979; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982). (See A. Burns, 2005 for a more detailed overview).

Table 1 (adapted from Masters, 2000: 7) compares the major characteristics of these various generations of AR. Over time, features of each of these approaches have impacted on AR in the ELT field. However, as the ensuing discussion illuminates, the influence of each approach is variable and contested.

3. Processes of action research

A central aspect of AR is the simultaneous focus on action and research. The *action* component involves participants in a process of planned intervention, where concrete strategies, processes or activities are developed within the research context. Intervention through action occurs in response to a perceived problem, puzzle or question – a gap between the ideal and the reality that people in the social context perceive as in need of change. The gaps might relate to teaching, learning, curriculum or syllabus implementation, as well as aspects of school management or administration. Wallace (1998: 19) suggests the following possible areas as a focus for action in language teaching:

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

While different combinations of participants might be involved in the practical action, AR is often advocated to be a collaborative process best undertaken by groups of researchers acting collectively (cf. A. Burns, 1999; Cohen & Manion, 1994; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982).

The *research* element of AR involves the systematic collection of data as planned interventions are enacted, followed by analysis of what is revealed by the data, and reflection on the implications of the findings for further observation and action. At this point, a further cycle of interventions, plans and actions might be initiated, depending on previous data analysis. The processes of AR are inherently flexible and are subject to changes in direction (cf. McNiff, 1988), as interpretations, meanings and further actions must inevitably be made with reference to the specific circumstances and social contingencies of the research context (Somekh, 1993, refers to AR as 'chameleon-like' p. 19). Curriculum improvement and participant involvement, embedded within the unpredictability of the social and political situation, are twin pillars underpinning AR. The research process is typically less predictable than in other research approaches, in that it is characterised by a spiral of cycles involving planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, which are applied interactively according to the social and political context of the research environment and the personal and professional backgrounds of the researchers (Somekh, 1993).

While numerous variations of Lewin's original model of the AR process have been proposed over the decades, arguably the best known version is that devised by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). They propose four essential movements evolving through a reiterative and self-reflective spiral or loop, and repeated according to the scope, purposes, and outcomes of the research:

- *Plan* – prospective to action, forward looking and critically informed in terms of: i) the recognition of real constraints; and ii) the potential for more effective action
- *Action* – deliberate and controlled, but critically informed in that it recognises 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 and McTaggart, 1988: 11–14; see also A. Burns, 1999: 33 for a diagrammatic representation.)

In presenting this model, Kemmis and McTaggart stress that their aim is to develop a simplified and concrete interpretation of Lewin's abstract description of the AR process. However, the model has been criticised for its over-representation of AR as a series of fixed and predictable steps. Elliott (1991) argues for a more complex approach, which engages the dynamic, unfolding and mutually reinforcing processes of AR. Hopkins (1993) warns of the dangers of representing in a prespecified way what are essentially intended to be free and open courses of action. McNiff (1988) finds the model too systematic; not only, she argues, does it overlook creative and spontaneous episodes, but it implies that an uncritical application of a prescriptive system of research is required on the part of teachers. Thus, such an approach fails to accommodate teachers' own role in the development of theory and interpretation. A. Burns (1999) reports that in practice the language teacher researchers with whom she worked in Australia perceived AR as a series of 'interrelated experiences' (p. 35) involving eleven identifiable and interactive phases. She goes on to describe this framework of experiences as:

1. exploring: feeling one's way into research topics
2. identifying: fact finding to begin refining the topic
3. planning: developing an action plan for gathering data
4. collecting data: using initial data-gathering techniques related to the action
5. analysing/reflecting: analysing data to stimulate early reflections
6. hypothesising/speculating: predicting based on analysis/reflection
7. intervening: changing and modifying teaching approaches
8. observing: noticing and reflecting on the outcomes of the changes
9. reporting: verbalising and theorising the processes and outcomes
10. writing: documenting accounts of the research
11. presenting: giving reports/presentations on the research

It seems that AR in practice is much 'messier' than most models suggest. The processes experienced by action researchers are best viewed as necessarily adaptive to the educational situations and circumstances of the participants and to the particular social, cultural and political exigencies that motivate and surround them. As Edge (2001: 3) suggests 'responses to issues in specific contexts will arise most usefully from those contexts; they can rarely, with success, be imported from outside and applied'.

4. Research paradigms – locating action research

The inherent tension in the terms, *action* and *research*, means that practitioners new to AR may struggle initially to gain an understanding of it as a research

methodology. As Cohen and Manion (1994: 186) point out, the two terms each assume a different form of activity and purpose and, 'when conjoined in this way, lie as uneasy bedfellows'. ELT teachers themselves note their difficulty in disassociating the approaches adopted in AR from those they believe should characterise research more generally:

> My experience of action research is that is difficult to grasp or explain the concept until one is in the process of doing it. (Jane Hamilton, cited in A. Burns, 1999: 20)

Freeman (1998: 14) throws light on the difficulties experienced by new AR practitioners when he states, 'to some degree teachers are the victims of conventional ideas of science', in that they may believe that 'systematic [scientific/experimental] procedure . . . holds the key to being a researcher'. It is relevant, therefore, to clarify briefly how AR differs from basic and applied research.

Basic or scientific approaches, typically the dominant view of research for novice practitioners, focus on objectivity, control and the search for universal truths. The assumptions of scientific paradigms are built on generations of empirical investigation in the natural sciences underpinned by notions of objectivity, reliability, generality and reductionism. R. Burns (1998) notes that basic scientific research could not exist without four major characteristics: *control*, *operational definition*, *replication* and *hypothesis testing*. Control is central to identification of cause and effect relationships resulting from the experimentation, and is essential if unambiguous results are to be achieved. Operational definitions of terms are also vital to avoid confusion of terminology and meaning, while replication, or the confirmation of experimental results through repetition, allows theoretical ideas to be further tested for reliability. Hypothesis testing involves the systematic analysis of results based on measurable evidence.

In contrast to basic research, which is aimed at the development of theory in its own right, the purpose of applied research is to make available the potential to apply theory to practice. McDonough and McDonough (1997: 43) suggest that applied research in language education offers 'at least three different kinds of paths':

1. Research results and the theory they support are applied to the solution of language teaching problems.
2. The methodology, rather than the products, of existing research is applied to problems of human performance.
3. A body of knowledge and theory building is developed and applied to solve a particular set of problems.

They contend that it is the third option that most 'blurs the distinctions between basic and applied research' (p. 43). Approaches used in applied research are typically more varied than those of basic research, in that a range of methods might be directed at i) the research problems that are the focus of the study; ii) the research questions that arise; iii) and the data collection procedures that will best serve to investigate those questions (see Grotjahn, 1987, for a detailed overview of different approaches to research).

In contrast to basic and applied studies, AR takes an explicitly interventionist and subjective approach. Because it is centrally situated in the local concerns and problems of the research participants, its aims are to investigate issues of practical importance, using systematic data collection procedures. In addition, action researchers use the findings from the investigations to deliberately change, modify and improve practices. This element of change and improvement represents a key distinction from other forms of research where the main focus is more likely to be on issues of theoretical significance (Crookes, 2003) and the applications recommended are typically made from a generalised rather than localised standpoint.

Table 2 outlines some of the major differences in approach among basic, applied and action research.

5. The emergence of action research in the field of language teaching

The overview in section 2 shows that AR has a relatively long presence in mainstream education. However, its impact on the field of language teaching is much more recent. Although empirical research by language teachers was proposed (e.g. Lane, 1962) alongside early calls in broader educational circles, serious proposals for practitioner research were advanced only from the late 1980s. The idea of involvement by language teachers paralleled the growing interest in classroom-based research (Allwright, 1988; Chaudron, 1988, Day, 1990, Long, 1983; van Lier, 1988) and learner-centred curriculum development (Nunan, 1988; R. K. Johnson, 1989). Repositioning the teacher as a reflective, enquiring and self-motivated practitioner (Zeichner & Liston, 1996) was an inevitable concomitant of the rise of communicative and learner-centred language teaching (e.g. Breen & Candlin, 1980; Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Rivers & Temperley, 1978; Widdowson, 1972) on the one hand, and of renewed debates about what should be considered legitimate goals for teacher professional development (Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Candlin et al., 1989, Richards, 1990) on the other. (See A. Burns, 2005 for a more extensive discussion).

Advocates of the 'teacher as researcher' (e.g. Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Long, 1983; Nunan, 1989a, 1989b; van Lier, 1988) argued that practitioner involvement provided a way to bridge 'the gulf between research bodies and the teaching

Table 2 Major characteristics of basic, applied and action research

Research type	Philosophical assumptions	Purpose	Main methods	Outcomes	Criteria for judgement
Basic	Universal truths generalisable across time and space are achieved through scientific enquiry	To establish relationships among phenomena, test theory, and generate new knowledge	Quantitative approaches, hypothesis testing, control of variables, rigorous sampling	Development of theory	Objectivity, verification of theory, generalisability, rigour and reliability of research methods, published through refereed, scholarly journals
Applied	Societal phenomena can be scientifically studied and understood	To generate understanding of human behaviour and problems for the purpose of intervention	Qualitative and quantitative approaches, data collection directed towards ensuring reliability and validity	Development of generalisable theoretical knowledge that can be applied to the social situation	Objectivity, rigour and scientific insights for application to social situations, published through specialised, refereed, applied journals
Action research	People within social situations can solve problems through self-study and intervention	To develop solutions to problems identified within one's own social environment	Mainly qualitative, interpretive, cases studied reflectively through cyclical observational and non-observational means	Action to effect change and improvement, and deeper understanding in one's own social situation	Subjectivity, feasibility, trustworthiness, and resonance of research outcomes with those in the same or similar social situation

profession' that had 'ensured that many research programmes are not related to the professional concerns and interests of teachers and students' (Beasley & Riordan, 1981, cited in Nunan, 1989a: 16). Action research or 'teacher-initiated action' (Nunan, 1989b) was seen as a way 'to encourage teachers to adopt a research orientation to their own classroom and to engage in research projects of one sort or another' (Nunan, 1989a: 17). Similarly, van Lier (1989), arguing for more extensive use of ethnographic approaches in classroom research, noted the potential for participation by teachers and learners, and the links with AR, teacher empowerment, and teachers 'helping themselves to research' (p. 49). Others, while cautiously supporting such initiatives, clearly showed reservations about the real role that teachers could take in research:

> There is a sense in which serious practitioners, in any field, will expect to monitor their own performance as objectively as possible. In this sense, language teachers should always be engaging in 'research', if they are to work responsibly and professionally. But beyond this is a whole tradition of educational and linguistic research which could be linked in with the concerns of language teachers. (Brumfit & Mitchell, 1989: 3)

Similarly, Wallace (1991: 56) outlined the problems faced by the teacher as researcher: 'to do research properly requires special expertise, a lot of time, financial resources and perhaps particular personality traits, for example an academic bent, etc.' and appeared lukewarm in his evaluation of AR:

> 'Research' of this kind is simply an extension of the normal reflective practice of many teachers, but it is slightly more rigorous and might conceivably lead to more effective outcomes. (p. 57)

The publication of Nunan's volume, *Understanding language classrooms* (1989b) represented a significant step in making classroom research accessible to many teachers. Acknowledging the teacher as 'an autonomously functioning individual, rather than the servant to someone else's curriculum' (p. xii), it provided a rationale for conducting teacher research, a practical set of guidelines and tools and a line of argumentation to which many teachers could easily relate. The general editor's preface (Candlin, pp. ix–x) judged the book to provide a 'refreshing and eminently practical' path out of the dilemma of the problematic divide between theory and practice. Nunan's conceptualisation of research – 'too broad for some tastes, I suspect' (p. xii) – provided a catalyst for a spate of other publications throughout the 1990s, particularly those that centred on teacher development, and ensured that AR continued to gain a foothold in the literature. For example, the collection by Richards and Nunan (1990), which offered the first extended discussion of issues in second language teacher education, included chapters (Gebhard, Gaitan & Oprandy, 1990; Nunan, 1990;

Richards, 1990) on ways teachers could develop their investigative skills. Richards distinguished between teacher training and teacher education (cf. Freeman, 1989; Larsen-Freeman, 1983), pointing out that the latter perspective required a shift in the roles taken by both student teachers and educators. If teachers were to become significant instructional decision-makers, he argued, teacher educators needed to guide student teachers in the process of generating and testing hypotheses and 'the student teacher must adopt the role of autonomous learner and researcher' (p. 15).

The theme of the teacher as reflective, research-oriented, self-directed professional continued throughout the 1990s with a number of other notable publications (A. Burns, 1999; Edge & Richards, 1993; Freeman, 1998; Gebhard, 1996; Nunan & Lamb, 1996; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Wallace, 1991, 1998). These publications, repainting the teacher as a thinking professional rather than a passive recipient of teacher-proof methods, were complemented by parallel trends concerned with teacher decision-making (Nunan, 1992a), the knowledge base of teaching (Freeman, 1994; Freeman & Johnson, 1998), the reconceptualisation of teacher education (Clarke, 1994), teacher cognition (Borg, 1998; Woods, 1996), teacher beliefs (A. Burns, 1996), the teacher as learner (Freeman & Richards, 1996; K. Johnson, 1992) and teachers' personal practical knowledge (Golombek, 1994). These themes were echoed by claims of the emergence of a post-method era in curriculum and pedagogy (Kumarivadivelu, 1994; Prabhu, 1992; Richards, 1990). Prabhu, for example, rejected as naïve the concept that 'specialists can formulate a good teaching method and then get teachers to implement it in their classrooms', and argued that 'classroom teaching can improve only to the extent that teachers themselves act as specialists' (Prabhu, 1992: 225).

The increase in volumes focusing on research methods for the language teaching field in the early 1990s (D. Johnson, 1992; McDonough & McDonough, 1996; Nunan, 1992b) broadened the scope of the available literature and began to include teachers amongst the targeted readership. References to AR and accounts of its processes and techniques started to be included. Nunan's volume, while directed mainly towards graduate students in applied linguistics courses, included 'classroom teachers' amongst its audience. The volume by McDonough & McDonough (1997), more specifically directed at teachers in classrooms, includes explicit discussion of how to carry out AR. The period since the late 1990s has seen an even healthier increase in the number of volumes directed at conducting research in the language teaching field (Brown & Rodgers, 2002; Dornyei, 2002; Holliday, 2002; Porte, 2002; K. Richards, 2003; McKay, 2005). However, those dealing specifically with how to conduct AR in language teaching (A. Burns, 1999; Freeman, 1998; James, 2001; Wallace, 1998) remain relatively limited in number.

6. The purposes and scope of action research activities in the field of language teaching

The discussion so far has suggested that AR in the educational context is motivated by a number of different purposes, as encapsulated in the following statement:

> Educational action-research is a term used to describe a family of activities in curriculum development, professional development, school improvement programmes, and systems planning and policy development. These activities have in common the identification of strategies of planned action which are implemented, and then systematically submitted to observation, reflection and change. Participants in the action being considered are intricately involved with all of these activities. (Educational Research and Development Council, 1981, n.p.)

Amongst some of the major goals that can be identified in AR associated to date with the field of language teaching are:

- to address and find solutions to particular problems in a specific teaching or learning situation (Edge, 2001; Hadley, 2003; Wallace, 1998)
- to underpin and investigate curriculum change or innovation and to understand the processes that occur as part of an educational change (A. Burns & Hood, 1995; Lotherington, 2002; Mathew, 1997; Thaine, 2004)
- to provide a vehicle for reducing the gaps between academic research findings and practical applications in the classroom (Crookes, 1993; Dufficy, 2004; Macleod, 2003; Sayer, 2005)
- to facilitate the professional development of reflective teachers (Allwright, 1993; Coles & Quirke, 2001; Kitchen & Jeurissen, 2004; James, 2001)
- to acquaint teachers with research skills and to enhance their knowledge of conducting research (A. Burns, 1999; Crookes & Chandler, 2001; Freeman, 1998; Nunan, 1989a)
- to enhance the development of teachers' personal practical theories (Golombek, 1998)

While AR in ELT clearly responds to a variety of goals, some (e.g. Crookes, 1993) have argued that it is a moot point whether the majority of AR studies conducted in the language teaching field lie within the critical-emancipatory and radical-transformative category. Crookes (1993) holds that AR in the language teaching field falls mainly into the 'teacher as researcher' movement (cf. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Strickland, 1988), while research of the

critical-emancipatory kind 'has gone almost without representation in SL [second language] discussions of this topic' (p. 133).

An examination of the current forms and purposes of AR in the field confirms that, to date, it is portrayed predominantly as a means of enhancing teacher professional development. The current goals and outcomes tend to lie in the realms of personal and/or professional action and teacher 'growth' rather than in the production of knowledge about curriculum, pedagogy or educational systems. While there is clearly merit in such avenues for teacher research and professional development, there are also limitations. As I have argued elsewhere (A. Burns, 1999: 208–9), the danger of adhering to the action-research-as-professional-growth model is that teachers can become co-opted into the very institutional norms that AR might seek to critique. Melles (2001: 156), in a case study of a collaborative AR project conducted in his teaching institution in New Zealand, touches on this issue:

> It is important to let practitioners question my, your and our practices and to address issues that transcend the classroom and enter the world of policy and institution . . . The reflective annotated journal used in this project attempts to create this critical dimension and help us probe our own professional beliefs and concepts . . . As I commented to a colleague at the conclusion of the project, we would like to think this has made a difference not only to ourselves. Has it? How can we know this? These are questions we still need to explore.

Furthermore, despite the decade or so of widespread advocacy of practitioner AR in the literature, the extent of involvement by teachers still appears to be limited. Moreover, empirical data on the location and incidence of AR by teachers remains almost non-existent. It is also the case that much of the AR conducted by teachers stays unpublished or is disseminated, often verbally, only to a localised audience. As Crookes & Chandler (1999: 20) comment: 'In many cases, action research projects may never surface in a written form at all – the inter-practitioner aspect of the communication precludes this'. This makes mapping the actual nature, purpose and scope of AR in the field difficult. Nevertheless, it is valuable to trace a variety of different ways in which AR is currently conducted and published.

6.1 Action research in teacher education

One major category of AR activity occurs as part of formal programs of tertiary study (e.g. Diploma or Master's courses). A scan of websites offering applied linguistics, TESOL or language education courses highlights – particularly in locations such as Britain, Europe, the UK, the US, Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong – the trend towards including AR as a component of teachers' professional training. The following kinds of entries are typical:

> This course develops students' understanding of quantitative and qualitative research methods and familiarizes them with research issues and statistics related to applied linguistics. In addition, students are guided through the methodology of action research and the process of topic choice for the Major Project. (Candian University)

> In this course students conduct small-scale action research projects into practical issues in their workplaces. The topic of the research should be negotiated with the course coordinator. The study is presented at the end of the course at a formal class presentation. (Australian University)

Publications from this category of activities typically emerge as graduate dissertations (e.g. Mingucci, 2002; Raikes, 2003; Ogane, 2004), or are produced by the academic teacher educators involved, who describe the research carried out by their students, the students' experiences of conducting AR, or the processes and outcomes of including AR components in formal courses. Tsui (1996), Crookes & Chandler (2001), and Jones (2004), exemplify this approach. Tsui introduced AR to 38 practising ESL teachers enrolled in the Postgraduate Certificate in Education program at the University of Hong Kong. Using her students' project reports as a basis, she notes that the students first used audio or video recordings to identify issues for investigation in their own classrooms. Over 70% of the teachers identified student reticence and anxiety about speaking in English in the classroom as a major issue for them. Tsui goes on to describe how her students perceived reticence and its contributing factors as well as the practical strategies they employed to overcome this problem. However, there is little comment on the impact of action research on her students.

Crookes & Chandler argue that the lack of attention to pedagogy, or provision for future life-long learning and faculty development in many current teacher preparation programs is problematic. This observation motivated their introduction of an AR component into an undergraduate language teaching methodology course for beginner teachers of Spanish and German at the University of Hawai'i. It was aimed at increasing structured reflection through inquiry into teaching. They trace the reactions of their students as well as the impact the research had on their own changes to the course. Their report differs from Tsui's in that it foregrounds the developmental processes of AR both for themselves and their students.

Jones (2004) notes that the teacher students enrolled in his course on Research Methods in Language Teaching at the University of Canberra did not perceive themselves as researchers or as likely to read or undertake research in their future professional contexts. Therefore, their resistance to the course and to learning about research methods was high. He provides an account of how the teachers began to see the relevance of practice-oriented AR projects. He argues that there are 'many benefits'

that emerge for teachers as a result of introducing an AR component that can potentially feed into their development as future reflective professionals. Further publications exemplifying the category of accounts by teacher educators are Thorne & Qiang (1996), Markee (1997) and Orsini-Jones (2004). Borg (2005) is unusual in that it includes edited chapters written by the teachers involved in a university course at Bachelor level, as well as an overview by the editor of how AR was integrated into the degree.

6.2 Action research by classroom practitioners

Less common in the literature, as Bell (1997) points out, are individual accounts by teacher practitioners working in classrooms. In her editor's introduction to the *Canadian Modern Language Review*, she notes that the L2 education field lags well behind the general educational literature: 'Very little teacher research has appeared in the journals, which forces the question of why this should be so' (p. 3). She attributes the reasons for the minimal literature in the ELT field to 'a clash of methodologies', emanating from the domination of the psychometric model of research within the field (cf. Lazaraton, 2000), and the difficulty for language teachers of setting up experimental conditions in the 'natural confusion and complexity' of the classroom. While the articles in the journal are dedicated to bridging the gap, they are still all written, as she herself notes, by 'writers who combine work as a language teacher with a joint role as a researcher' (p. 5).

Almost a decade later, published accounts of AR undertaken by teachers are still relatively restricted. In some cases, studies by individual teachers are motivated by work previously undertaken as part of qualificatory programs. Having been introduced to concepts of AR, teachers sustain their research efforts as a way of continuing to expand their professionalism (Steve Cornwell, personal communication, October 5, 1998; Rainey, 2000; Cowie, 2001). For others, AR represents a legitimate way for practitioners to become part of the wider research community of the field (e.g. Melles, 2001; Santana-Williams, 2001).

Richards (1998), in a collection of case studies from language classrooms, offered a rare opportunity for the publication of short accounts of classroom investigations by teachers. These accounts, solicited from teachers internationally, were written to a common format – context, problem, solution – provided by the editor and are accompanied by interesting meta-commentary from teacher educators across the world. While not specifically labelled AR, many of the accounts fall within a teacher as researcher paradigm, as they investigate small-scale problems of interest to the teachers concerned and describe a range of practical strategies the writers employed to address classroom issues. Thus, they present attractive and digestible accounts for a teacher audience (Graham Crookes, personal communication, 22 January, 2002).

To date, Edge (2001) represents one of the few substantial edited collections of teacher AR conducted in a variety of international language teaching contexts, for example, Japan, Brazil, Thailand, Slovenia, and the United Arab Emirates. As well as ranging across numerous geographical locations, the collection illustrates a variety of educational sectors and classroom concerns. For example, adopting a teacher-researcher partnership, Jackstädt and Müller-Hartmann (2001) conducted AR on integrating new media into Year 11 and 12 EFL classrooms in a German comprehensive school and also looked at the implications for teacher education. The role of background culture came to the fore in the students' attempts to communicate with other students internationally. Pierre's research (2001) is located in the in-house training environment of the French subsidiary of an American (later Dutch) owned information technology company. She investigates 'the influences and complexities involved in communicating in a global business community' (p. 159) and identifies implications for pedagogical practice and interaction in the training program. Adams' research (2001) focuses on young adult learners attending intensive short courses in Britain and living with British host families. She investigates some of the reasons why, counter-intuitively, intensive exposure to the language did not appear to result in improved language ability. She describes the pedagogical strategies, including the concept of structured 'noticing' activities, arising from her research.

Apart from such collections (see also Hadley (2003), who provides an edited collection of AR by teachers in South East Asian countries, and the forthcoming volumes to be published by TESOL in the Language Teaching Research Series in 2006 and 2007), accounts of research by individual teachers are relatively rare, particularly in major journals in the ELT and applied linguistics field. Where they do appear, they tend to be concentrated in journals with a specific focus on language teaching issues and an interest in classroom-based research. Some examples include Kebir (1994) in *TESOL Journal*, McPherson (1997) in *Prospect*, Mok (1997) in *Educational Action Research*, Pauli (1997) in *Language Learning Journal*, Mingucci (1999) in *TESOL Matters*, Dutertre (2000) in *Applied Language Learning*, Murphey (2001) in *Language Teaching Research*, Thaine (2004) in the *ELT Journal*, and White and Lewis (2004) in *Guidelines*. Practitioner publications on AR are also more readily located in the journals of language teacher professional associations or collections of the conference papers of TESOL associations, as for example, Rankin (1999) in *Die Unterrichtspraxis*, Coles & Quirke (2001) in the *Thai*

TESOL Newsletter, Knoerr (2001) in *Les Cahiers de L'Apluit*, or Deverick (2002) in *TESOLANZ Journal*. E-learning journals such as *Networks* <http://education.ucsc.edu/faculty/gwells/networks/> will increasingly provide new forms of access to teacher AR.

6.3 Collaborative action research in educational programs

A further category of AR activity that may also give rise to teacher investigations and include teacher-produced publications is collaborative AR undertaken as part of broad curriculum change and professional renewal processes within particular educational institutions, systems or programs. Work in Australia by A. Burns & Hood (e.g. 1995), A. Burns and de Silva Joyce (e.g. 2005) and Burton (1998), in India by Mathew (1997), in Hong Kong by Tinker Sachs (2002), in the United Arab Emirates by Coles & Quirke (2001), in New Zealand by Kitchen & Jeurissen (2004), and in China by Lewis & Anping (2002) are examples. Such activities often involve collaboration between researchers based in universities, undertaking funded projects and working with groups of teachers located in different schools or teaching centres, as in the case of A. Burns and her colleagues, Burton, Tinker Sachs, and Mathew. What distinguishes these studies from those in the first category is that the researchers are usually working, not with the 'captive audiences' of enrolled teacher students, but with teachers who are personally motivated to enhance and develop their professional practices and to learn more about research.

For example, Mathew (1997) describes a large scale national Curriculum Implementation Study project conducted in India from 1993–97 funded by the Central Board for Secondary Education (CBSE). The aims of the project were to support the implementation phase of a newly developed communicative curriculum, *Interact in English*, in secondary school classrooms. The curriculum was the outcome of a previous large-scale project.

> The notion of teacher-involvement in the first phase of the Project was further developed in the second phase, to enable many more teachers to participate in the monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum collaboratively . . . The teacher-researcher role envisaged was based firmly albeit contentiously on the belief that curricular processes cannot be evaluated without self monitoring on the part of the teacher. (pp. 2–3)

Thus, one of the three major objectives of the study was: 'To encourage and help teachers to become researchers themselves in their own classroom' (p. 3). Having received training in techniques and strategies of classroom-centred investigation, teachers were involved as field-researchers gathering data from different stakeholders, including teachers, students, principals and parents. They were also introduced to the concept of 'mini-projects' or 'small-scale classroom-based studies which they could take up in their own classrooms and in collaboration with other teachers' (p.12). In all, 250 field-researcher teachers took part in the study with 800 schools finally participating (approximately 25% of the total CBSE affiliated schools in the country). Approximately 50 of these teachers also conducted mini AR studies. The findings from their field-based data collection and mini-projects formed a major contribution to the overall evaluation of the feasibility of the curriculum reform and the issues that arose in its implementation, such as the relevance of the content, teacher training needs, student performance, and the nature of school management structures that facilitated or impeded effective implementation. Mathew reports that being field-researchers had a significant impact on the teachers, including professional growth, more awareness of communicative approaches, and deeper understanding of the new curriculum. Teachers believed that their classroom teaching was more effective, that they understood how to provide more opportunities for skills practice, aimed for better classroom interaction and devised more efficient evaluation procedures. In addition, teachers indicated that they felt professionally enriched, more confident and less isolated.

Tinker Sachs, an academic from the City University in Hong Kong, worked with action researchers who were English language teachers based at primary and secondary schools in a project funded by the Hong Kong University Grants Committee, entitled *Fostering and Furthering Effective Practices in the Teaching of English*. The aims of this government-initiated project were 'to enhance the professional competence and status of teachers' (Hong Kong Government, 2000) and to forge stronger links between schools and universities. These aims followed from 'a climate of doubt on the part of school officials about the professionalism of teachers' (Tinker Sachs, 2000: 35). Although the project initially aimed at 25 teachers, the researcher finally worked with eight volunteer teachers to identify their preferred areas for investigation, to formulate their AR plans and to finalise the research. A valuable aspect of Tinker Sachs' account of the project, as well as those of the six teacher authors included in her 2002 volume, is that they highlight the political and logistical challenges involved in such a research undertaking, as well as the more intangible necessities of volunteer teachers undertaking AR, such as 'space':

> . . . breathing space, space to reflect, space to plan, space to discuss, space to be creative and investigative, physical space in which to work comfortably. (p. 45)

Apart from illustrating the outcomes of large-scale funded projects, these types of studies are also

symptomatic of the growing tendency in educational policy documents to recommend integrating AR into language teacher education. Statements such as the following increasingly exemplify trends in this direction:

> This report proposes a European Profile for language teacher education in the 21st century. It deals with the initial and in-service education of foreign language teachers in primary, secondary and adult learning contexts and it offers a frame of reference for language education policy makers and language teacher educators in Europe . . .
>
> In summary, the report proposes that foreign language teacher education in the twenty-first century should include the following elements of initial and in-service education:
> [Listed under Strategies and Skills]
> 29. Training in peer observation and peer review.
> . . .
> 31. Training in action research.
> 32. Training in incorporating research into teaching.
> (European Profile for Language Teacher Education – A Frame of Reference, pp. 4, 6)

6.4 Action research by teacher educators

There is yet another category of AR activity that remains more under-reported than those already described. In a review published in 1993, Hammadou (cited in Crookes & Chandler, 2001) lamented the lack of research on foreign language teacher education. Her search of the literature revealed little work in this area, or in higher education generally, compared with research on primary and secondary teaching. She called for studies on teacher education using a variety of methodological approaches, but particularly AR, of which she could find no examples at the time. Crookes & Chandler's work provides one example of a study that uses AR within and *on* language teacher education. However, in the 1990s, such studies were spasmodic and rare.

Hammadou's call for research on language teacher education was echoed recently by Bartels (2001), who poses the question: *Is action research only for language teachers?* Bartels points out that while there have been numerous calls for teachers 'to undergo extensive professional preparation, and if possible, to conduct research on their classrooms' (p. 71), professional preparation and research for teacher educators has received little attention. Furthermore, Bartels states, many applied linguists who teach formal courses seem uninterested, or even bewildered, by the concept of undertaking research on their teaching. To follow up on this perception, Bartels interviewed 20 linguists and applied linguists working in a variety of German language teacher education programs to see whether they had conducted any research on their teaching of courses related to knowledge about language (KAL). None of his respondents had engaged in such research. He suggests that this situation is likely to be prevalent in other countries.

While acknowledging that there may be a number of reasons for the lack of interest in KAL teacher educator research – for example, the assumptions that theoretical knowledge is sufficient, or that applied linguists are primarily researchers rather than teachers – Bartels poses the question, 'Does this disparity in expectations really reflect a double standard for teachers of language and teachers of KAL, or is it justified by differences between the two occupations?' (p. 74). Bartels suggests that AR by teacher educators would serve to lessen the perceived gaps between theory and practice and increase quality provision of teacher preparation. Bartels' interest in research by teacher educators, particularly AR on the teaching of KAL, has culminated in the first major collection of studies on teaching practices in teacher education contexts (Bartels, 2005). A. Burns and Knox (2005, in Bartels) is an example of AR carried out by two teacher educators on the impact of their applied linguistics Master's course on the subsequent teaching practice of two of their teacher students. They found that the extent to which theoretical concepts on the teaching of grammar were taken up depended on and interacted with numerous personal and professional variables, and with the changing contingencies of the local workplace. As a result of their research they changed the way they taught the course, by introducing problem-based learning approaches that promoted deeper engagement with the material. Further collections such as Bartels would be invaluable in further strengthening and exploring the nexus between theory and practice, and validating the status and relevance of AR in higher education contexts.

7. Critiques of action research and some responses

As a form of research, AR suffers from a number of criticisms. In the language teaching field, Jarvis (1981) echoes one of the major arguments that has dogged AR from its inception – that research is an activity best left to academic specialists who have the training and capacity, and that AR is without academic prestige. Similar sentiments were re-expressed in a recent issue of the TESOL Research Intersection (RIS) Newsletter (2001), where the following statements appeared:

> The Board of TESOL does seem to recognize the value of carefully conducted hypothesis-based empirical research, but they also emphasize (even overstate) the limited usefulness and accessibility of such research for professional teachers. Their solution is to get professional teachers to think of themselves as researchers – not by training them in research techniques that would help them carry out rigorous, publishable studies that would be of value to the entire profession, but by expanding the definition of research to include reflecting on and theorizing about one's own teaching for the purpose of improving one's own teaching . . . whether action research really does (or can) consistently lead to better teaching practices remains an open empirical question that has not yet been resolved and I (as well

as many fellow members of the RIS) feel that all of the hype about action research in the TESOL organization is simply not warranted at present. (Jarvis, 2001: 2)

Such commentary would be considered by those who support practitioner research as unfortunate for a number of reasons (e.g. Borg, 2002). It reinforces rather than dissolves the traditional status boundaries between researchers and teachers. It misreads the scope and complexity of the research approaches and methodologies that have emerged over the last two decades in the applied linguistics and TESOL field, and it excludes a research agenda of importance for the language teaching profession – what happens in ESL and EFL classrooms that can inform us about effective learning and teaching? For such questions to be genuinely and rigorously answered the skills and expertise of teachers and researchers in combination are required. It also misses a crucial point. As Borg points out, the question of 'whether action research really does or can consistently lead to better teaching practices' (p. 2) is one that could equally be applied to the kind of empirical research Jarvis is promoting.

Nevertheless, views such as those of Jarvis need to be addressed seriously if AR is to argue for its standing as a research methodology. The major challenge, as Argyris & Schön (1978: 85) put it, is 'to define and meet standards of appropriate rigor without sacrificing relevance'. From a positivist perspective, some of the main criticisms of AR (and of qualitative research more generally) that warrant attention are that it:

- has not developed sound research procedures, techniques and methodologies
- is small-scale and therefore not generalisable (has low external validity)
- shows low control of the research environment and therefore cannot contribute to causal theories of teaching and learning
- exhibits strong personal involvement on the part of the participants and therefore is overly subjective and anecdotal
- is not reported in a form that conforms to a recognisable scientific genre.

Other criticisms include its informal and unformed structure involving imprecise cycles of research and action, the apparently irreconcilable tensions between action on the one hand and research on the other, the temporary and evolving nature of the outcomes, and the difficulties of replicability (cf. Rapoport, 1970). While action researchers may argue that their research illuminates and adds insight to theoretical hypothesising, and offers opportunities to offset the oversimplification and reductionism of controlled scientific models, these arguments have not necessarily borne much weight.

It is useful to consider what features of AR might be extended to respond convincingly to Argyris & Schön's challenge and to the main points of criticism listed above. Checkland & Holwell (1998) suggest that any piece of research entails three elements: a linked framework of ideas and concepts; a way of applying the ideas; an area of interest in which to apply them. One way in which AR studies could be strengthened is for the underlying concepts and methodological processes and assumptions to be made clear, so that the 'linked framework' of the research is identifiable and the procedures undertaken made explicit. Thus action researchers should strive to provide full and adequate details of the epistemological approaches and assumptions underpinning the research, the specifics of the research context, careful documentation and analysis of data, and explanation of the meanings the researcher seeks to create. These elements establish the *goodness criteria* (Holwell, 2004) that are central to qualitative and interpretive research in general.

In relation to the second point above, Bailey's (1998) argument is useful – that AR should not be judged by the traditional criteria of random selection, generalisability and replicability, as its goals are to establish local understandings. *Recoverability* (Checkland & Holwell, 1998), in contrast to external validity, is essential in AR. This means that the research 'story' must be plausible and the process by which the research was undertaken recoverable by an external audience in relation to the methodology, and the procedures of data collection and analysis. The recoverability principle of AR is often neglected in the AR literature currently available in the field.

As with other qualitative research, control of the environment is not a goal of AR. Action research confronts rather than minimises the variables present in the research context and attempts to seek explanations inclusive of those variables. The aim of the research is to provide rich descriptions and practical solutions that might have resonance for other practitioners in comparable situations. Thus, an important aspect of AR is the development of research *themes* or issues which are acted upon within a declared framework and in relation to a specific context and which provide the motivation for the research (Holwell, 2004). Research themes that link prospectively and retrospectively through different iterations of the research serve to strengthen explanations that are developed over periods of time.

Iteration is a further principle of AR that contributes to enhancing rigour and reducing subjectivity. Iterations of the AR cycle enable initial insights and findings to give way to deeper, new but related, questions. Further data collection then serves to: i) build on evidence from previous cycles; ii) expand the scope of the study; iii) triangulate the data across different episodes, sites and subjects through multiple data sources; iv) test new findings

against previous iterations of the cycle; and v) avoid the bias inherent in cross-sectional research. The iterative aspect becomes particularly powerful when research is conducted collaboratively, as findings and outcomes can be cross-referenced across multiple activities (Kock et al., 1997). Sets of themes can thus be explored over time in different classrooms and/or educational contexts (Checkland, 1991).

In response to criticisms of the 'unscholarly' reporting of AR, Crookes (1993) and Freeman (1998) argue that accurate and fair ways of representing the outcomes inevitably incur new and unconventional discourses and genres. These genres are more akin to the narrative forms found in qualitative research than to traditional forms of scientific reporting. Criteria for establishing the truth-value of accounts of AR will be the meaningfulness and trustworthiness (Mishler, 1990) of the reporting. A central question for an AR audience is: To what extent does this account resonate with my understandings of practice and have meaning in my context?

8. The impact of action research – benefits and limitations

In previous sections, I have outlined the nature and extent of the current spread of AR activity in the language teaching field. In many of the studies reviewed there seems to be general agreement that involvement in AR has positive benefits for teachers, although it is often difficult to ascertain the precise nature of the impact on teaching and learning, and especially of the sustainability of the impact.

Among the benefits of educational AR identified by Kemmis & McTaggart (1982: 2–5) are that teachers develop skills in:

- thinking systematically about what happens in the school or classroom
- implementing action where improvements are thought to be possible
- monitoring and evaluating the effects of the action with a view to continuing the improvement
- monitoring complex situations critically and practically
- implementing a flexible approach to school or classroom
- making improvements through action and reflection
- researching the real, complex and often confusing circumstances and constraints of the modern school
- recognising and translating evolving ideas into action.

In the field of language teaching, similar claims have been made (e.g. Belleli, 1993; Crookes & Chandler, 2001; Freeman, 1998, Nunan, 1993; van Lier, 1994). A. Burns (1999: 14–15) states that the Australian teachers with whom she worked reported that they had experienced:

- deeper engagement with their own classroom practices
- a better understanding of research and methods for carrying out research
- less sense of isolation from other teachers
- a sense of sharing common problems with other teachers
- a personal challenge, satisfaction and professional growth
- heightened awareness of external factors impinging on their classrooms.

Very few studies, however, provide empirical data on the extent of conceptual change that occurs over time for action researcher teachers. One exception is Linder (1991, cited in Roberts, 2000) who studied the impact of AR on teachers participating in a year-long project on mixed ability teaching in a secondary school in Israel. Linder found that changes in participants' development of personal theories about teaching were idiosyncratic and emerged as a series of evolutionary paradigm shifts as new concepts and insights were incorporated into existing ones.

The issues of teachers' capacity for significant conceptual change and the theorising of practice are ones that have emerged in recent reassessments of the impact of AR. Implicit in the definitions and claims made about AR is that reflection and theorising on practice are a precursor to substantive change. Through processes of self-evaluation and empirical evidence from systematic classroom investigation, teachers will reassess their current belief systems and (re)theorise their classroom practices. Henry & Kemmis (1985: 3) make this claim explicit:

> [Action research] requires people to put their practices, ideas and assumptions about institutions to the test by gathering compelling evidence which could convince them that their previous practices were wrong or wrong-headed.

Others, in the language teaching field (e.g. Nunan, 1989a) have suggested that engaging in AR enables teachers to test out their theories against those emerging from research and that:

> . . . the exploration of classroom issues and problems should lead teachers from practice to theory and back to practice again as a sort of ongoing professional growth spiral. (p. 16)

In the general educational literature, however, a number of writers have commented on the lack of theorising typically exhibited by teachers involved in AR. Adelman (1989), who was closely involved with

Stenhouse and Elliott's work in the UK, argues that teachers' published accounts lack evidence of any curriculum change based on rigorous rethinking of the underlying assumptions: 'What these cases lack is the hard, joint theorizing on the relationships of values, action and consequences prior to the devising of fresh options for action' (p. 177). Griffiths and Tann (1992: 72) concur, arguing that teachers seem to be concerned only with practical aspects of classroom activity:

> The action research carried out by experienced teachers on various courses demonstrated the same concern with practical detail and smoothly running classrooms . . . Moreover it only rarely called basic professional values into question or raised questions of hidden assumptions behind ways of working.

In the language teaching field, Roberts (1998) notes similar difficulties in some of the cases of AR he analysed. He describes the problems experienced by tutors (Lennon & James) in a university Diploma course offered in the Basque country in 'leading teachers to go beyond description and to analyse the implications of the data they collected' (p. 266). Lennon & James (1995) note that there was a great degree of variation among individual teachers in the level of reflection and their conceptual thinking about change. Linder (1991) too found great variability in the level of analysis and criticism amongst the teachers she worked with. Roberts (2000: 47) argues that most prominent accounts of how to conduct AR have underestimated the difficulty of enabling teachers to clarify personal theories and 'have not adopted sufficiently structured or probing means to do this'. His argument may go some way towards providing one explanation in relation to Crookes' criticism, referred to earlier, that much AR in the language teaching field has emerged only in a practical rather than critical form. One of the current challenges for AR in the language teaching field, therefore, might be how to enable and enhance the reflective and interpretive capacities of practitioners engaged in research processes.

9. Taking stock of the status of AR

The range of activities and the impact on participating teachers discussed in the previous sections provide evidence that AR is now acceptable as a relevant professional movement in the language teaching field. However, the practice of AR on an international scale among language teachers does not appear to be widespread. Borg (unpublished) suggests that AR has taken root only in places where teachers are well supported and teach in instructional contexts, such as in Australia and North America, that are atypical of the conditions in which most language teachers work. The majority of ELT professionals, he contends, remain 'uninvolved' because essential conditions that promote AR, such as motivation, support, research knowledge and skills, and the potential for dissemination of findings are generally not in place.

Rainey (2000) argues that despite 'the enthusiastic campaign among . . . teachers and teacher educators in favour of the practice of action research', interest and involvement in AR may actually be in decline. She compares the level of interest in AR at international TESOL conferences in the early 1990s with the number of papers being offered at more recent conferences:

> In 1999, for example, the author attended three such conferences in Singapore, Turkey and Canada, but out of a total of some 300 sessions, only five were related to research based in classroom action. (p. 66)

In order to 'test the waters' (p. 67), Rainey conducted an international survey of classroom teachers in 10 countries – China, Colombia, Greece, Japan, Morocco, Poland, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Thailand and Tunisia. The distribution of the surveys was undertaken by contacts familiar with concepts of AR who had access to teachers with regular opportunities for professional development. Of the 240 surveys distributed, 228 were analysed to test seven hypotheses, the first of which was that most of the teachers surveyed would have some knowledge of action research. To Rainey's surprise a 'staggering 171 (75.5%)' (p. 72) of the respondents had never heard of AR. Only two of the 30 Chinese respondents, none of the 28 Polish teachers and one of the 27 Japanese teachers knew about it. Colombian (16 out of 30) and Thai teachers (13 out of 29) were the most aware. Rainey then analysed the 55 responses from those who indicated they knew about AR. Her second hypothesis was that the teachers surveyed would have heard only about AR as professional self-development. She found this to be partially confirmed, with the most common understanding being related to solving a classroom problem or improving classroom methodology. However, a small number of respondents indicated an understanding of the broader potential for outcomes related to reform beyond the classroom. There was also some evidence of collaborative AR activity (12 teachers).

The third hypothesis, that most of the teachers who had heard of AR would not actually do it, was not confirmed. Forty-one out of 55 teachers (75.9%) claimed to do AR, although those who seldom did (18 or 33.3%), combined with those who never did, made up a total of 31 (57.4%) not very active researchers. In terms of explanations about why teachers did or did not do AR (hypothesis 4), the most common reason for not undertaking it was lack of time. However, the need for more training in research, and more support through collaboration also emerged. Others found lack of encouragement from colleagues and school authorities to be demotivating,

while one teacher also seemed confused about how AR was different from routine attempts to improve teaching. Hypothesis 5 was that those who did AR would not write regular reports. Only five (15.2%) and three (9.1%) teachers respectively reported that they seldom or never wrote up their research. While this hypothesis was rejected for this sample, Rainey does not see this finding as a cause for optimism. Her research was not able to probe what happened to the reports or whether and how they were made public and she recommends more research to explore this issue further. She comments: 'One thing is certain . . . as yet, not many of these reports are making their way into the general TESOL literature (p. 76).

Her final two hypotheses (6 and 7) – that teachers would have heard about AR from an overseas speaker at a conference, and that most teachers would be sceptical about it and see it as just another fashion in ELT – were not confirmed. She sees these results as one of the most encouraging aspects of the research. Thirty-one of the teachers (58.5%) had heard about AR from university teachers in their own countries, while other sources included colleagues, teacher training courses, ELT for development projects, and language degree programmes. Therefore 'a [more] solid and permanent' (p. 78) source of information was available to teachers in these countries than the input of the passing international speaker. She notes also the absence of scepticism towards AR demonstrated in the responses.

Rainey concludes that amongst those aware of AR the responses to it are very positive. Two of the main concerns that emerged were the need for adequate research training and the need for research to extend beyond the individual classroom.

In order to delve further into teachers' perceptions, Rainey conducted follow-up interviews with seven of the participating teachers to clarify their main needs and concerns. A major theme was the need for collaboration with colleagues at their own and other schools, with school authorities, inspectors, teacher trainers, and researchers (5 of the 7 teachers). Clearly, teachers desire broader recognition and involvement by others beyond the individual classroom when undertaking AR (cf. A. Burns, 1999; Lagemann, 1999).

I have reported Rainey's work in some detail as it represents one of the few empirical studies to date to explore the incidence of AR internationally. The sample size is small and the number of geographical locations limited to 10 countries; therefore, the results need to be interpreted cautiously, as Rainey herself points out. Nevertheless, she provides an interesting and rare picture of the nature of the impact of AR in teachers' professional lives.

Under the present circumstances, undertaking AR still appears to be a 'rocky road' (Christensen et al., 2002) for many language teachers and one that is demanding in terms of awareness, knowledge, skills, time and motivation. The lack of awareness of AR demonstrated by Rainey among a cohort of respondents who have regular access to professional development is high and is a concern for those in the field of teacher education who advocate AR. This is even more the case when it appears that teachers who partake of it value it highly. Another area of concern is the low incidence of publication, even though it appears that various aspects of their AR are being written up by teachers – and not just for the purpose of accredited courses. This lack of dissemination contributes further to the problem of the 'legitimation' of AR (Leo van Lier, personal communication, 25 January, 2002) by, and for, teachers. It also inhibits the positioning of teachers' voices in policy and academic discussion of effective teaching and curriculum change and underestimates the role that small-scale AR projects can make in national initiatives (Candlin, 1991; Mathew, 1997).

10. Challenges and future directions

Action research has had an impact in English language teaching and language teacher education, but interesting challenges and tensions remain – in this field as in others. It is clear that understandings of its purpose, scope and practices in various contexts differ greatly. Questions concerning the future directions of AR arise in a number of broad areas.

1. How should we envisage the primary purposes and outcomes of AR? Is it mainly a vehicle for practitioners' personal and professional development, or can it also have a role in the production of knowledge for the field?
2. Is AR simply an accessible version of research for teachers, or does it also denote an emerging paradigm with its own epistemology, methodologies and investigative practices? If so, how should standards of quality be addressed?
3. In what ways can AR open up opportunities for collective forms of knowledge about teaching and learning that are inclusive of academic and teaching communities? What kinds of relationships between teachers, teacher educators and researchers will need to emerge to facilitate collective knowledge production?
4. (How) can AR activity in language teaching also address broader issues of curriculum development, social justice and educational political action, thus contributing to the greater sustainability of effective educational practices?

Most importantly, if AR is to flourish, the field of language teaching will need to reflect seriously on how the conditions and opportunities for greater participation by teachers can be enhanced. The

evidence suggests that there are few teachers who engage in AR who do not agree that it has a positive impact on their practice. The challenge for the field is to ensure that the potential for involvement in AR of all those who consider themselves to be ELT professionals is maximised.

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