Revitalise your classroom with action research:

A powerful form of professional development

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Overview

1. Action research: an emerging and learning process
2. Identifying topics/issues
3. Developing research questions
4. Considering ethical issues
5. Ways of collecting data
6. Reflections and questions to keep the action going
7. Some examples for doing AR in ELT, Mathematics and IT.

Why has practitioner research emerged?

Since the late 1980s, there has been a strong trend towards the idea of practitioners conducting research in their own contexts.

Why has this phenomenon occurred?

Influenced by emerging theoretical trends

Increased recognition of situated, qualitative, interpretive research

Growth in naturalistic enquiry influenced by humanistic and social psychology

Advances in theories of social phenomenology and social constructivism

Increase in research on teacher cognition, identity and agency

Advances in theories of effective teacher education based on concept of teacher as life-long learner (bottom-up vs top-down)

The voice of a Turkish teacher

[Teacher] educational programs should be conducted in our own context. Sometimes we join one day seminars for a plenary speaker or raffle only. I took a lot of notes until now. However, only very little is relevant to me.

The voice of a Turkish teacher

A teacher development program should be long term, interactive and suitable for our needs.

Content-embedded ("thing-based") professional development

Teacher Education

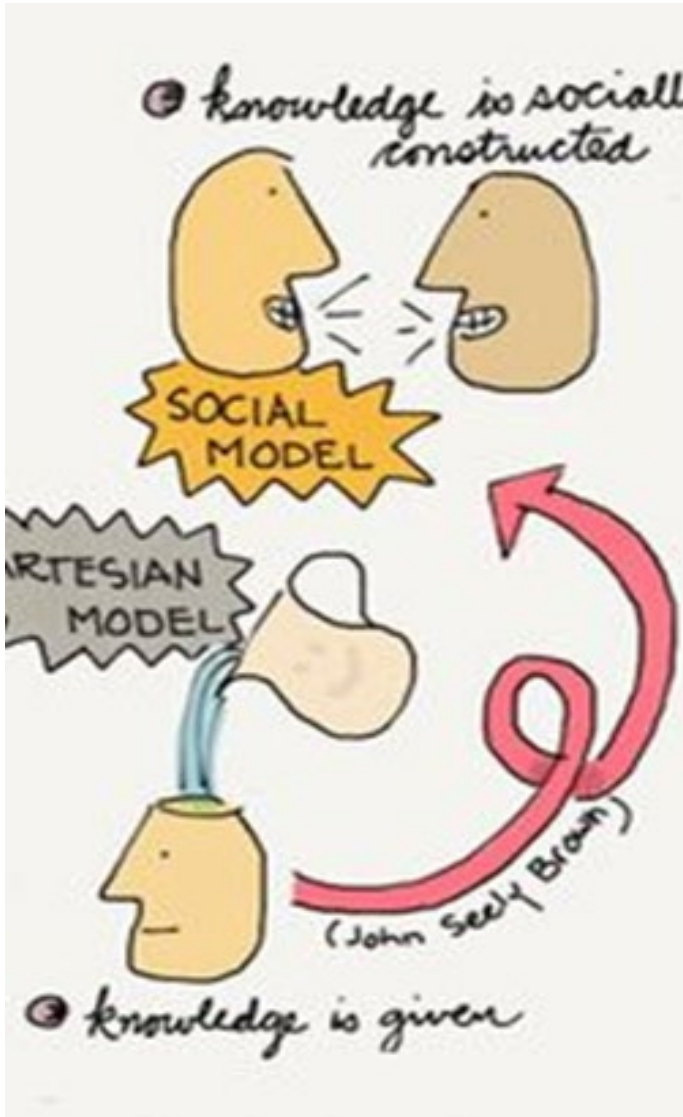(formal body of knowledge)

Teacher Training
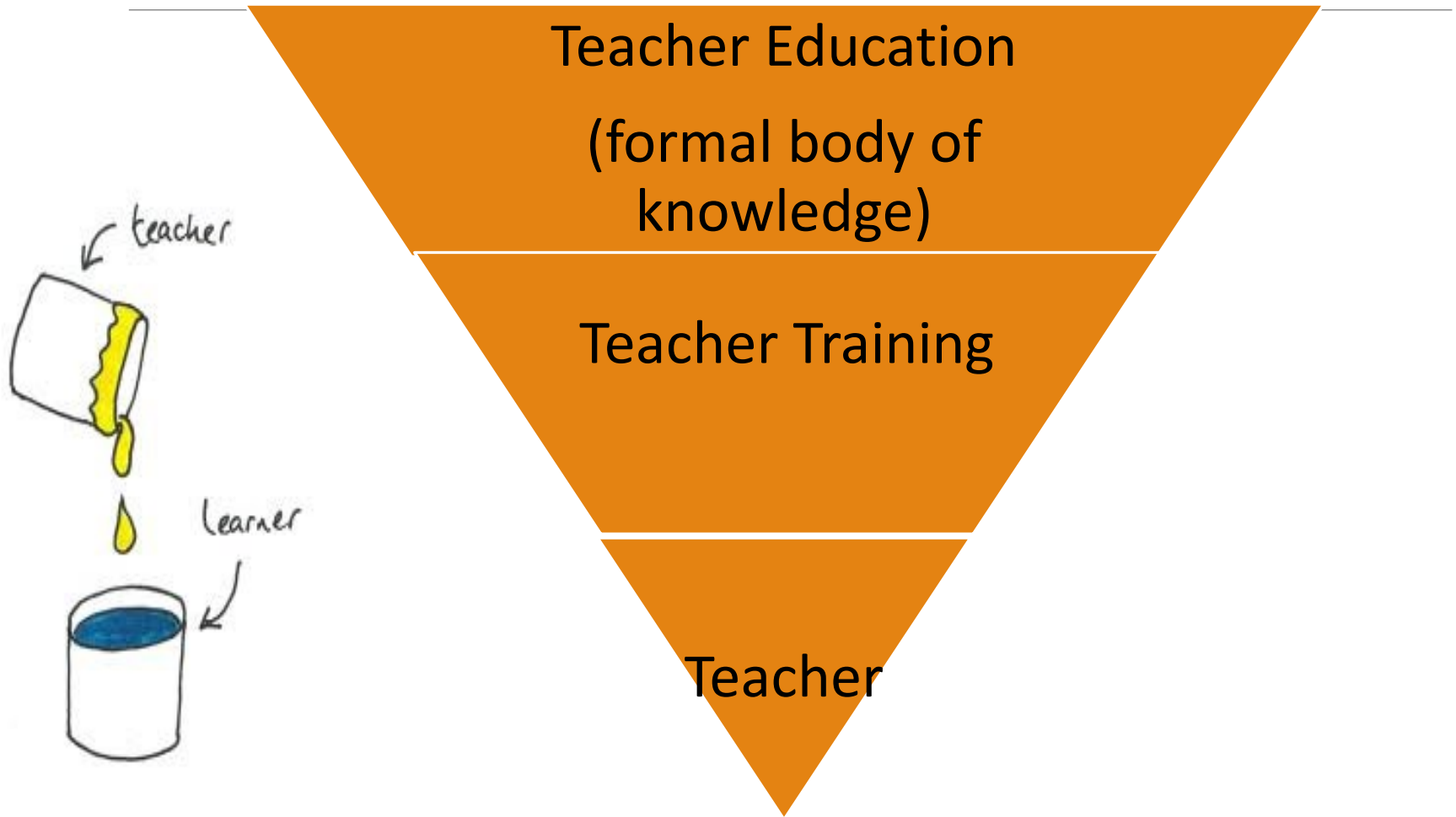
Teacher

Context-embedded ("being-based") professional development

Teacher exploration

Teacher learning

Teacher

Content-embedded and context-embedded

Teacher education and professional development

Teacher Education

20th century thinking

21st century thinking

Teacher Education "done" to teachers – **decontextualied**

+
Teacher Education teachers "do" to/for themselves – **context-embedded**
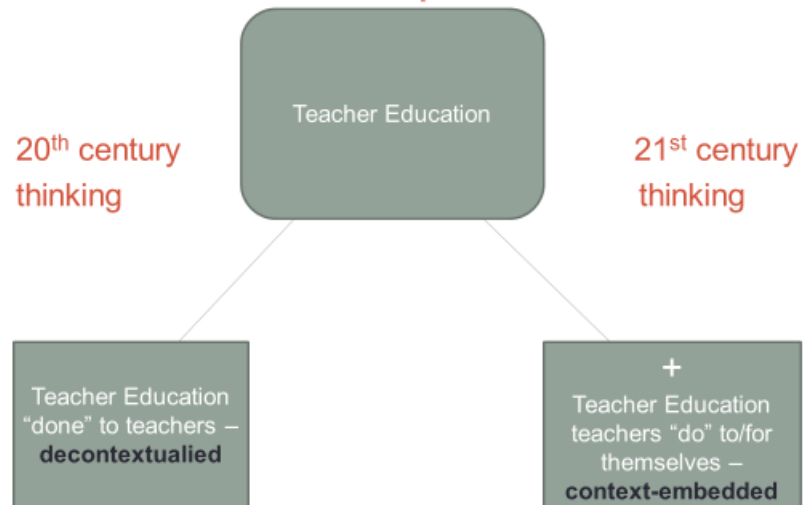
Context-embedded PD

Learning circles/problem-solving

Action research/Exploratory practice/Lesson study

Case studies

Peer observation

Personal/group reading

Mentoring and collaborative learning

Personalised online learning
- Long term
- School-based
- Internal accountability

Reflect: So, what is action research?

What is your current understanding of action research?

Features of classroom action research

a self-reflective, systematic, participatory and critical approach to classroom enquiry

participants are actors in the classroom (teachers - and learners) but also researchers

aim is to identify 'problematic' situations or issues

bring about critically informed understanding and change

underpinned by democratic principles
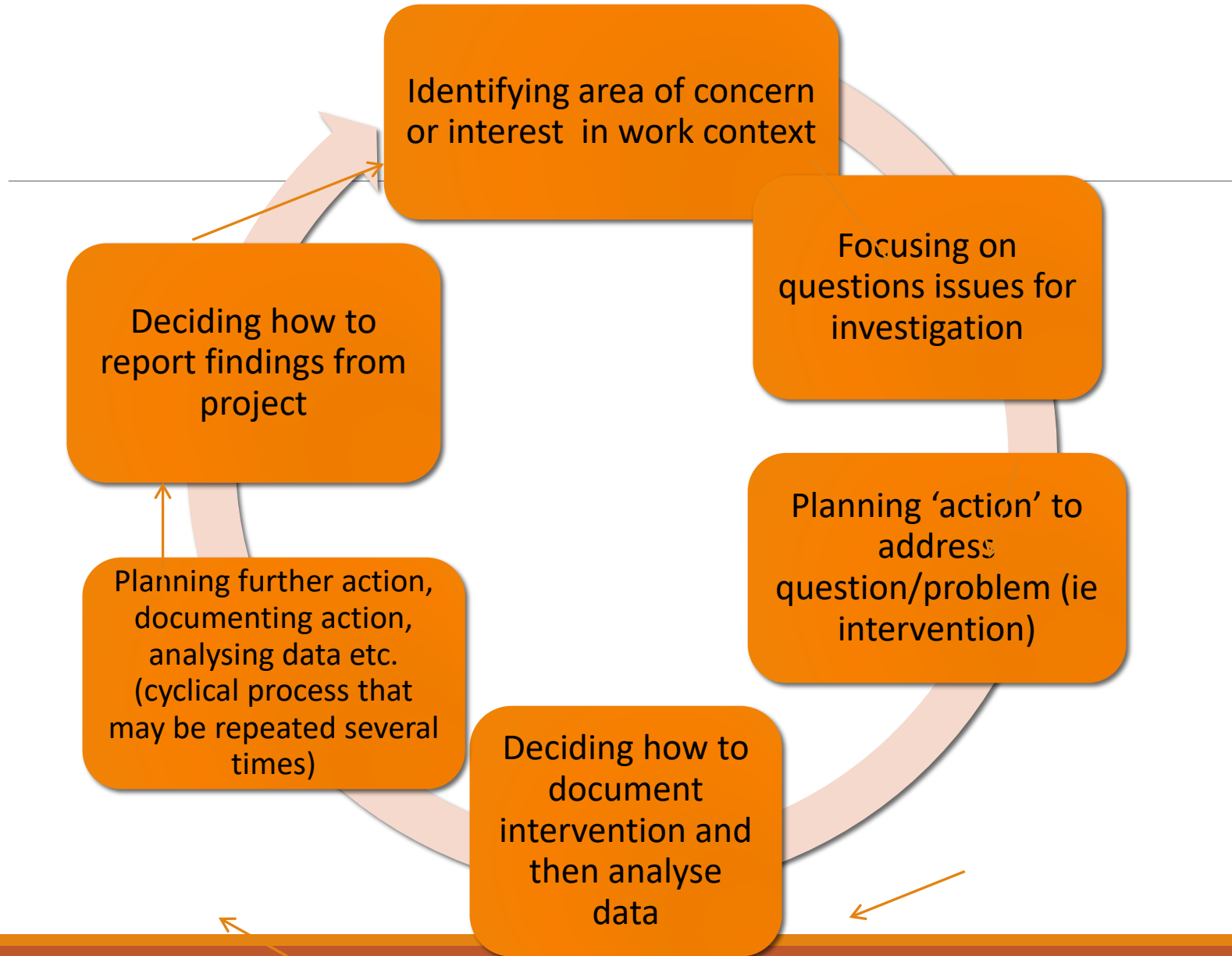
(Burns, 2010)

Action as the motivator for research

Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice. (Kurt Lewin, 1948: 202-3)

There is nothing so practical as a good theory (Lewin, 1951: 169)

Doing action research

Identifying area of concern or interest in work context

Focusing on questions issues for investigation

Planning 'action' to address question/problem (ie intervention)

Deciding how to document intervention and then analyse data

Planning further action, documenting action, analysing data etc. (cyclical process that may be repeated several times)

Deciding how to report findings from project

Some ways to find a focus

Consult colleagues on "hot teaching issues"

Set up a blog/web discussion for a short time

Brainstorm things that have puzzled/challenged you and your colleagues

Make mind maps and connect your ideas

Read articles and develop some questions

Use finishing statements (I/*we don't know enough about..*)

Identify issues in your school and share ideas

Look through recent journals for key topics

Some differences between AR and other types of research

- It is research *with* people not *on* people

- The researcher is simultaneously a direct participant in the research (two hats!)

- It deliberately intervenes in the research setting (insight, change, development)

- It is "subjective" rather than "objective"

- The goal is local 'theories for practice' (Burns, 1996) rather than generalisable findings

Reflect: Your research focus?

Think about some teaching/learning issues (community, school, learners, curriculum) in your context:

What key issues/areas of student learning are of interest?

What key issues/areas of teaching practice are of interest?

What key issues/areas require deeper professional understanding or change?

Refine your focus and develop questions

Questions should be:

Clear: unambiguous and understandable

Specific: can see how to answer them

Answerable: can see what data are needed

Relevant: worthwhile for the context

Interconnected: form a coherent whole

But...not all AR has to start with fully developed questions!

Some hints for developing questions

1. Avoid questions you can do little about (e.g. changing the whole school curriculum!)

2. Tailor questions to the time you have available (be realistic!).

3. Keep things relatively simple – not too many questions at once.

4. Choose questions of relevance/ interest to you/your colleagues/school plan.

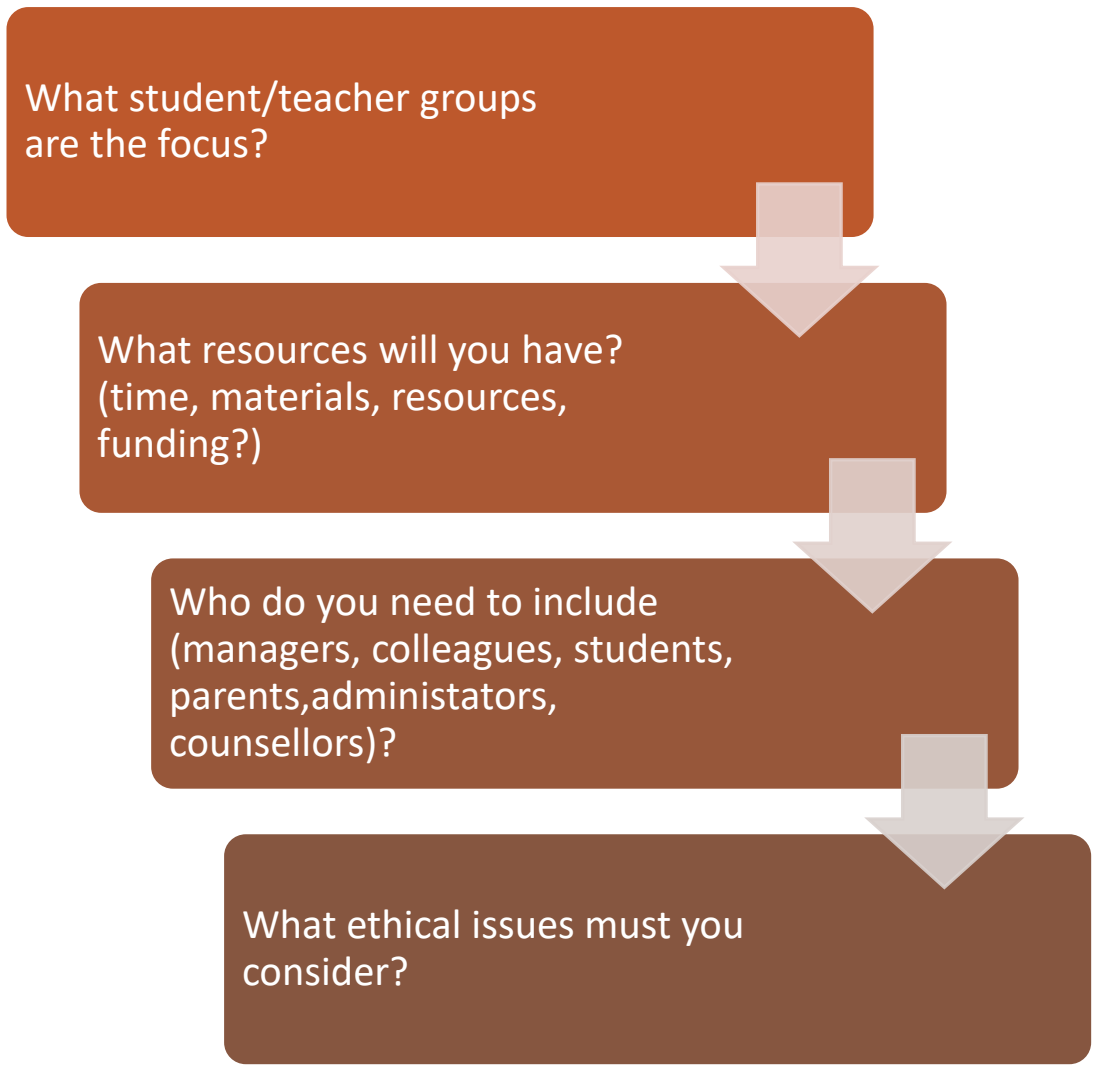5. Aim for open-ended wh-questions.

Reflect: Your initial questions?

Develop a question that might begin your AR.

If possible, discuss your question with other colleagues working in your subject area.

What student/teacher groups are the focus?

What resources will you have? (time, materials, resources, funding?)

Who do you need to include (managers, colleagues, students, parents, administators, counsellors)?

What ethical issues must you consider?

Remember to clarify the scope of the study

Consider ethical issues

These relate to the quality, value and worth of the research.

Three key questions:

Whose permission/consent is needed?

Who will be affected by the research?

Who should be told about the research when it is completed**?**

Two main sources of data collection:

Observational (what people do)

Non-observational (what people think)

Develop your plan of action and collect data

Collecting observational data

observation (watching in a social situation)

observation notes (factual accounts of events)

recordings (audio/video)

transcripts (documenting interactions)

photographs (shots/images of context)

maps/diagrams (layout/interactions)

documents (teacher/student texts produced in context)

Collecting non-observational data

journal/diary (recording ideas/thoughts)

"jottings" (memory aids)

surveys/questionnaires (closed, rank option, open questions)

interviews (structured, semi/unstructured)

narratives (autobiography/life history/professional accounts of practice)

discussions (conversations/focus groups)

Reflect: Deciding on your data sources

Consider your AR focus and questions:

What are the main actions/interventions you intend putting in place?

What data do you require to document the actions and answer your main question(s)?

What method(s) will you use for collecting the data?

Analysing your data

The critical task...is not to accumulate all the data you can, but to "can" (get rid of) most of the data you accumulate. This requires constant "winnowing". (Wolcott, 1990:35)

In other words, data

crunching

squashing

squeezing

Data analysis within the reflective process

Data analysis in AR is dynamic and recursive and occurs throughout the AR process.

It includes and relates to:

practical action in the research setting

unbiased reflection/dialogue/collaboration

(re)experimentation and (re)application of practical strategies

what the data are telling you (key messages)

open-mindedness towards the emerging outcomes (challenging our assumptions)

Analysing the data in AR – key steps

1. Assemble the data - *collect and reflect*

2. Code the data - *categorise and quantify*

3. Compare your data – *describe, compare, and contrast*

4. Build meanings and interpretations – *look, think and refine*

5. Report the outcomes – *organise and present the research "story"*

After the action

Outcome

What worked? What didn't work?

Situation

Therefore, which of our assumptions about action seem correct? What do we now understand?

Action

How will we act next? How will we sustain the action to reach the envisaged future?

English Australia-Cambridge English Action Research in ELICOS Program, 2010-2023

Diana and Alla's research
(Cossar-Burgess & Eberstein (2013)

- University of Tasmania (English Language Centre), Hobart

- Direct Entry Academic Program (DEAP) 15 week Program – students aiming for university

- 16 students and 2 teachers

- Mixed nationality backgrounds

- Little emphasis on structured speaking in current DEAP course

Diana and Alla's research

"Most students were worried about speaking In their future university classes. Our main focus was on increasing their confidence and enhancing learner autonomy through self-assessment."

How can we include self-assessment in existing speaking tasks to increase learner autonomy?

Diana and Alla's research

1. The students completed formative assessment tasks (tutorial discussions) in Weeks 3, 8 and 12.
2. They did an initial self-analysis of speaking skills and set goals. They did this after each assessment task.
3. From Weeks 5-15 they completed speaking tasks and logs. The tasks were designed from student input (e.g., short conversations with non-classroom interlocutors; self-recordings; English-only).
4. Diana and Alla analysed student recordings, logs and questionnaire responses.
5. Students said they found conversation tasks, followed by self-recording the most valuable for their speaking development.

Sevda and Ahmet's research
(Dolapcioglu & Doğanay (2022)

- Students at a mid-level school in Hatay, Turkey

- 34 students and 1 teacher

- Students were in 5th grade

- Mixed socioeconomic backgrounds

- Little ability to use critical thinking in mathematics

Sevda and Ahmet's research

"The students' skills of interpreting, of ways of finding solutions, and of explaining was [that] most of the students were barely uttering a few sentences."

How to promote critical thinking in my mathematics teaching?

Sevda and Ahmet's research

1. The teacher used a rubric to measure CT skills (understanding, comparison or solutions, reaching and proving right solutions, suggesting new solution, reflection.)
2. He introduced learning practices involving authentic tasks outside class (e.g buying shoes).
3. He video-recorded student group activities, used CTR before and after, and interviewed students.
4. He watched the videos with another researcher to evaluate his teachin g of CT skills and make changes in practice.
5. The findings showed that students improved in all five CT skills.

Peter's research
(Brereton, 2016)

- 2 IELTS writing classes at British Council, Tokyo

- Class 1 had 13 Japanese and one Saudi student

- Class 2 had 14 Japanese and one Korean student

- All taking IELTS to study in UK or Australia

Peter's research

"""As a regular teacher of exam preparation courses, I am often frustrated by the limited feedback that I can give students on their writing and the inefficient use of my time correcting.."

How can I encourage students to become more involved in reviewing and learning from theirown writing.?

Peter's research

1. Students published their weekly writing on a closed wiki (with option to use pseudonyms)

2. Peter posted weekly video screencasts of about 5 mins, reading their work aloud and suggesting improvements, explaining corrections and giving overall feedback

3. Students watched their own feedback as well as feedback for two other students, and made comments explaining what they had learned

4. Students' writing improved considerably (e.g. by 1.0 on IELTS writing for one student) and several students continued to use the wiki after the class
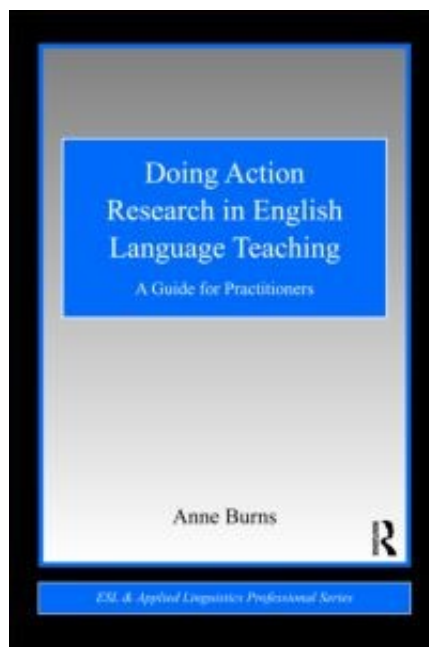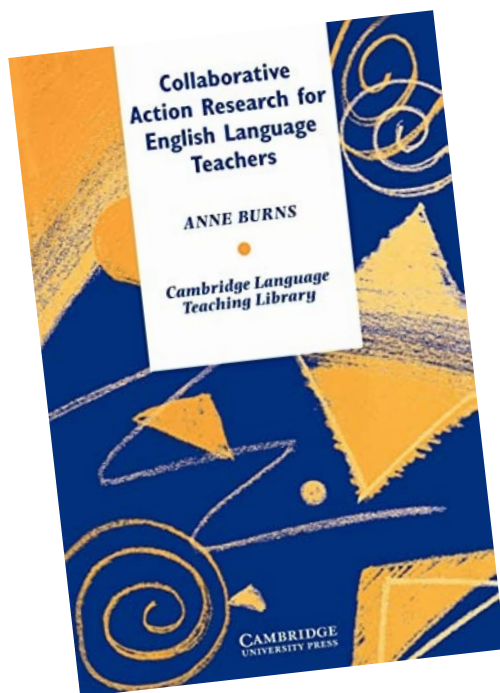
Action research is powerful!

Where a teacher is able to stay in their teaching context, enriched by reading, reflective teaching and action research, the experience usually leads to sustained development.

(Mann, 2005: 108)

Thank you for listening – and further reading!

Any questions about AR?

Some references and further reading

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For numerous teacher accounts see *www.cambridgeesol.org/rs notes/*   *The latest one from the Action Research in ELICOS Program is number 81.*