Twenty Questions about Action Research[1]

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For some time now, action research has been used to investigate important issues in language teaching and learning. Still, there is some confusion in our field about what action research is, how it is done, and whether or not it is a legitimate form of academic research. In this brief literature review, a variety of sources will be used to address these concerns.

This paper will tackle these and other issues by using a modified form of the guessing game, "Twenty Questions." In this game the players ask a series of yes-no questions to try to identify a mystery object or person. Here the "rules" have been expanded somewhat to permit the use of WH-questions as well. My intent is to answer many of the questions people ask as they are considering their own entry into action research.

1. What is action research?

Action research is a research method which consists of systematic, iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. It has been defined as "small scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention" (van Lier, 1994, p. 32, following Cohen & Manion, 1985, p. 174).

According to Bailey (2001, p. 490), "*action research* is an approach to collecting and interpreting data which involves a clear, repeated cycle of procedures." Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) note that the "linking of the terms 'action' and 'research' highlights the essential feature of the method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning" (p. 5, as cited in Nunan, 1990, p. 63).

Action research was started by Lewin (1946) in the United States as a means of addressing social problems. Psychometric research in the experimental tradition overshadowed action research in the U.S. for many years, but action research has continued in the U.K, Australia, and parts of Europe and Asia. It has recently re-emerged in the U.S. as a viable approach to applied research in both L1 and L2 education contexts. Its original social orientation is embodied in the definition of action research espoused by Carr and Kemmis (1985, p. 220), who say that action research is "a form of 'self-reflective enquiry' undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out." (See also Kemmis & Henry, 1989, p. 2.)

It can sometimes be helpful to explain something by stating clearly what it is not. Kemmis and Henry (1989, p. 2) have written about "Four Things Action Research is NOT." They say:

1. It is NOT the usual thing teachers do when they think about their teaching. It is systematic and involves collecting evidence on which to base rigorous reflection.

2. It is NOT (just) problem-solving: it involves problem posing, too. It does not start from a view of problems and pathologies. It is motivated by a quest to improve and understand the world by changing it and learning how to improve it from the effects of the changes being made.

3. It is NOT research on other people. Action research is research by

particular people on their own work, to help them improve what they do, including how they work with and for others.

4. It is NOT the "scientific method" applied to teaching.... It adopts a view of social science which is distinct from a view based on the natural sciences (in which the objects of research may legitimately be treated as "things"); action research also concerns the "subject" (the researcher) him or herself.

Nunan (1990, p. 63) provides an apt summary statement. He says that action research "represents a particular attitude ... in which the practitioner is engaged in critical reflection on ideas, the informed application and experimentation of ideas in practice, and the critical evaluation of the outcomes of such application."

2. What are the systematic steps involved in action research?

According to Bailey (2001, p. 490), the action research cycle begins when the researcher decides to address a problem, investigate an issue or pose and answer questions in his or her own context. Then he or she plans an action to initiate the first investigative cycle. This action is then carried out – thus the label action research. The researcher also carefully observes the outcomes of the action. Here observation refers to systematically collecting data while and after the action is taken. The researcher uses these data as the basis for reflecting on the outcome of the action. He or she then plans a subsequent action, after which the cycle begins again (Burns, 2000, Kemmis &

McTaggart, 1982, 1988; Nunan, 1993; van Lier, 1994).

Different models of action research depict this cycle in somewhat different ways, and may use slightly different vocabulary to label the procedures. For instance, Christison and Bassano (1995) emphasize the preliminary stages as they describe a five-phase cycle: (1) select area, (2) collect data, (3) organize data, (4) analyze and interpret data, and (5) take action. At this point, they say, the cycle begins again.

The process is not always so precise and neat, however. Often as action research proceeds, new concerns arise. As a result, new goals may be set during the iterations, as depicted in Figure 1 (van Lier, 1994, p. 34):

Figure 1: Cycles of Action Research (reprinted from van Lier, 1994, p. 34)
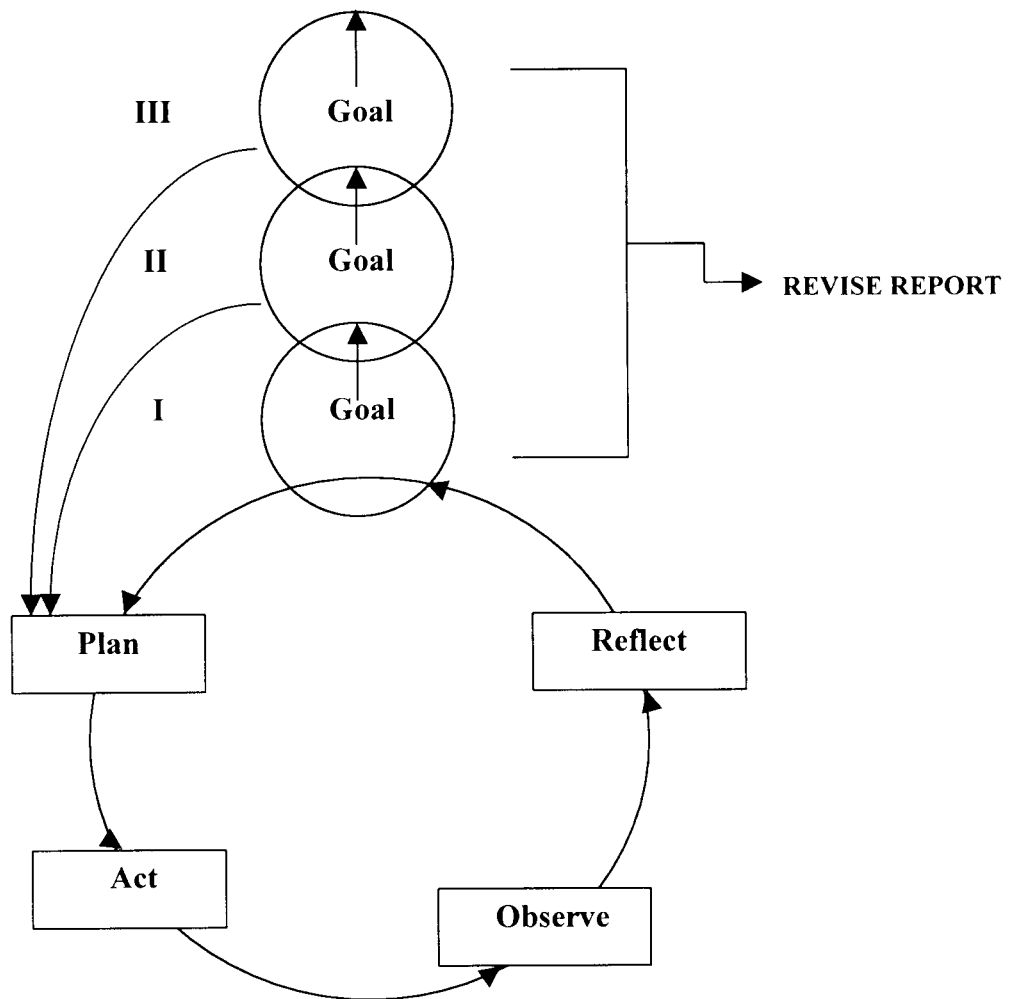
3.   What are the goals of action research?

Regardless of the specific model, Coles and Quirke (2001) point out that action research is a problem-solving strategy which "encourages practitioners to question what they are doing, to identify their concerns, to do some research, and then to take action" (p. 14). These authors stress that the purpose is "research in search of improvements."

Cohen and Manion (1985, p. 211, as cited in Nunan, 1990, p. 64) list five general goals which can be accomplished via action research: "(1) to remedy problems in specific situations; to improve a given set of circumstances; (2) for in-service training, giving teachers new skills and heightening self-awareness; (3) as a means of injecting additional or innovative approaches to teaching and learning into a system that normally inhibits innovation and change; (4) to improve communications between the practicing teacher and the academic researcher; and (5) to provide an alternative to the more subjective, impressionistic approach to problem-solving in the classroom." In a very broad sense, the goal of action research is to seek local understanding and bring about improvement in the context under study (Bailey, 2001, p. 490).

4. Is action research the same thing as classroom research?

No, but the confusion is understandable because in our field, because action research is often conducted in classroom settings. Long (1980, p. 3) defined classroom research as "research on second language learning and teaching, *all or part of whose data are derived from the observation or*

measurement of the classroom performance of teachers and students" (italics in the original). Allwright (1983, p. 91) expanded the definition of classroom research (or *classroom-centered research,* as it is also called) as follows:

> Classroom-centered research is just that – research *centered* on the classroom, as distinct from, for example, research that concentrates on the *inputs to* the classroom (the syllabus, the teaching materials) or on the *outputs from* the classroom (learner achievement scores). It does not ignore in any way or try to devalue the importance of such inputs and outputs. It simply tries to investigate what happens inside the classroom when learners and teachers come together. At its most narrow, classroom-centered research is in fact research that treats the language classroom not just as the *setting for* investigation but, more importantly, as the *object of* investigation. Classroom processes become the central focus.

Neither of these definitions specifies a research method that must be used to investigate language classroom processes. Indeed, classroom research is defined by the location and the foci of investigations – not by the method(s) used (Bailey, 2001).

5. Is action research the same as teacher research?

No, although these terms are often used interchangeably. In both first language (L1) and second language (L2) contexts, teacher research is defined by the agent, the person (s) doing the research. It is simply research

conducted by classroom teachers, regardless of the methods they use. According to Bailey (2001, p. 490), teacher research "has gained momentum in the past two decades, particularly in first language education" (see, e.g., Kincheloe, 1991). The concept is growing in L2 education contexts, however.

In our field, teacher research is often connected with teacher development and empowerment (Brindley, 1991). The central idea is that by investigating teaching and learning, teachers "learn more about the craft and the science of teaching so that we may improve our work as teachers" (Bailey, 2001, p. 490). The *Teachers Develop Teachers Research* series (see, e.g., Edge & Richards, 1993) reports on several action research projects and other teacher research projects.

6. Are there examples of published action research available in language education?

In the past decade, a number of action research projects in language education have been published in prestigious international journals. A special edition of *Orbis Linguarum* edited by Michońska-Stadnik and Szulc-Kurpaska (1997) documents a wide-scale action research investigation of learner independence by teachers at different colleges in Poland. Edge (2001) provides a collection of action research studies by language teachers working in many contexts.

Numerous examples of action research appear in the *Teachers' Voices* series, published by the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research in Australia (Burns & Hood, 1995, 1997, 1998; Burns & de Silva Joyce, 1999, 2000, 2001; de Silva Joyce, 2000). McPherson (1997),

who also works in Australia, used action research to investigate her grouping strategies with her multi-level adult ESL learners.

In the United States, Dutertre (2000) conducted a study of her teaching of Turkish as a foreign language to military personnel, and Szostek (1994) used action research to examine the effects of introducing cooperative learning in her secondary school Spanish class. Snow, Hyland, Kamhi-Stein, & Harclerode Yu (1996) reported on a wide-scale project with ESL students in Los Angeles junior high schools. Kebir (1994) used action research to investigate the communication strategies of her adult ESL students.

Several publications exist now about action research conducted in Hong Kong. For example, Mok (1997) focused on student empowerment in English by using various interventions at a secondary school there. Chan (1996) reviewed action research as a vehicle for professional development in the Hong Kong context. Tsui (1996) reported on a project in which thirty-six secondary school teachers and two other teachers used action research to investigate their students' reticence about speaking English in their EFL classrooms. Curtis (1999) also investigated the use of spoken English in EFL classrooms in Hong Kong using action research. A chapter in Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001) reports on an action research study Nunan conducted in a class he taught at the University of Hong Kong. (See also Kwan, 1993.)

7. What topics that are typically investigated in action research?

The topics of investigation in action research arise naturally from the issues in the setting under study. Many topics investigated in action research studies have been mentioned above. In addition, Nunan (1990, p. 71) lists several questions that could be explored through action research. These include issues related to planning, implementation, classroom management, and teacher talk. Tinker-Sachs (2000, p. 41) lists the action research foci selected by eight EFL teachers in Hong Kong.

There are many possible topics, but it is important that the focus of any given study be one which the participants can actually influence during the action steps. It is unlikely that much would be gained, for instance, by a single teacher working alone in his or her own context to try to change international attitudes toward second and foreign language learning.

8.   What journals publish action research studies in our field?

In language education *Prospect: A Journal of Australian TESOL* has played a key role in publishing action research studies, as has the *TESOL Journal*. There is now a journal called *Educational Action Research*, which publishes reports from both first and second language contexts. *Foreign Language Annals, The Language Teacher*, and various IATEFL publications also welcome action research submissions. Other journals, such as the *TESOL Quarterly* and the *Modern Language Journal*, accept empirical studies for review regardless of the particular research method used.

9.   Are there published sources of guidance about conducting action research?

Yes, there are ample resources available to teachers and others who wish to conduct action research projects. Many of these are found in the general education literature (see, e.g., Argyris, Putnam & Smith 1985; Carr & Kemmis, 1985, 1986; Cohen & Manion, 1985; Corey, 1953; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 1998; Goff, 1996; Greenwood & Levin, 1999; Hustler, Cassidy, & Duff, 1986; McLean, 1995; Nixon, 1981; Noffke & Stevenson, 1995; Reason & Bradbury, 2000). An excellent resource is *The Action Research Planner*, compiled by Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) at Deakin University in Australia. It provides several frameworks and practical advice about setting up and carrying out action research projects and is currently in its third edition (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

In addition, there are now numerous resources geared specifically toward action research in the second or foreign language context. These include the books by Burns (1998) and Wallace (1998), and portions of research methods books (e.g., Nunan, 1989, 1992). Although not specifically about action research, Johnson's two books (1998, 1999) and Freeman's (1998) book, *Doing Teacher Research: From Inquiry to Understanding*, provide appropriate guidance for teachers who wish to conduct action research and other types of research in their own classrooms. There are also several helpful articles, including those by Burns (1995, 1997, 2000), Chamot (1995), Christison & Bassano (1995), Crookes (1993), Curtis (1998), Knowles (1990),

Nunan (1990, 1993), Tinker-Sachs (2000), van Lier (1994), and Wong (1994).

10. Are there electronic-medium resources available about action research?

There are many websites which offer information about action research in educational contexts. Some of those most closely related to language education are listed in Appendix A. Due to space constraints, only a few key addresses are listed, but many of them have links to other websites.

11. Is action research really legitimate research?

Yes. Hatch and Lazaraton (1991) define research as "a systematic approach to searching for answers to questions" (p. 9). The philosophy and procedures of action research fit this definition well, provided the iterative cycles are carefully followed. According to Nunan (1992, p. 3), research is a "systematic process of inquiry consisting of three elements or components: (1) a question, problem or hypothesis, (2) data, and (3) analysis and interpretation." Action research entails all three of these elements.

Action research has been described as one of the three main empirical research approaches for examining phenomena in language classrooms, the others being experimental research and naturalistic inquiry (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Bailey, 1998; Bailey, Omaggio-Hadley, Magnan, & Swaffer, 1991). Given the large number of action research studies that have been published in the past decade, it is clear that this approach is gaining wider acceptance.

12. What sorts of data are used in action research?

Action research studies in L1 and L2 teaching and learning have employed a wide variety of data collection procedures. For instance, Christison and Bassano (1995) report on techniques for collecting data through interviews with and surveys of language students. These authors provide several examples of their survey instruments.

Classroom observation is a common approach to data collection in action research. The appendices in Nunan (1990) provide examples of checklists and observation forms that can be used to document issues in classroom management, language learning tasks, and classroom interaction.

Audio-recordings (van Lier, 1992) and video-recordings (Hutchinson & Bryson, 1997) are also particularly valuable data collection procedures in action research. Recordings can be transcribed for detailed analyses of classroom interaction, learners' questions, teacher talk, error treatment, turn taking, and so on. In addition, the tapes themselves or the transcriptions derived from them can be coded for a variety of features. If more than one researcher codes the data, inter-coder agreement indices can be calculated to document the consistency of the categorization (see Chaudron, 1988).

Teachers' and learners' journals and observers' field notes can also be used as data in action research. For information on teaching journals, see Bailey (1990), Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001), and Brock, Yu, and Wong, (1992). Samway (1994) has written about techniques for making field notes while teaching.

More traditional quantitative data are also used in action research. These include measurements, such as test scores, and frequency counts (e.g., turns taken, attendance and enrollment records), and students' evaluative ratings of activities or materials.

13. Is action research necessarily atheoretical?

No. Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) clearly state that "action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice into the one whole: 'ideas-in-action'" (p. 5). According to Mingucci, "proponents of action research believe that theory and practice should be one body, not two distinct entities, as advocated by traditional research. Theory should not be disconnected from everyday classroom activities" (1999, p. 16).

Although many action research projects start with a practical problem or concern, rather than with a theoretically motivated hypothesis, others are directly related to existing theory. An example is van Lier's (1992) study of Vygotskyan principles to promote interaction in a low-level ESL class. His work with the ESL learners resulted in discussion materials for use in his language teacher education courses, which fed back into the ESL class, and so on. The applicability of Vygotsky's theory to action research has also been investigated by Crawford (1995).

14. How does action research differ from reflective teaching?

While there are many similarities, action research and reflective teaching do differ. Both entail the collection of data about what goes on in our classrooms, but

reflective teaching may be conducted without taking a series of action steps (see Richards & Lockhart, 1994). That is, teachers may practice reflective teaching without changing anything that they normally do. Also, because of its inherent iterative cycles, action research "needs to be longitudinal" (van Lier, 1994, p. 36). It typically encompasses a series of actions and data collection points. Reflective teaching does not necessarily include "a potentially lengthy series of interventions" (Bailey, 1997, p. 11). Furthermore, reflective teaching may be a very private endeavor, whereas action research is generally both social and participatory.

Finally, several authors claim that research is characterized by the publication of the findings (see, e.g., Bailey, 1997; Burns, 2000; Nunan, 1993; van Lier, 1994). Whether the results of action research are shared through a print-medium journal, a website or chat room, a poster session at a conference, or an informal report at a staff lunch meeting, the results of action research are often disseminated, whereas the results of reflective teaching typically are not.

15. Why is action research called "participatory research"?

Action research is referred to as participatory research because, by definition, it is conducted by one or more participants in the setting under investigation. Unlike the experimental research tradition, which values objectivity over involvement, "action research is a type of research which assumes that the practitioners themselves are often the best people to carry out research on their own practices" (van Lier, 1994, p. 31). In addition, "the inquirer in action research is a

full participant in the situation, because no outsider would have enough insight into the complexity of the social process being studied to analyze it fully" (Mingucci, 1999, p. 16). In cases where more than one person conducts the investigation, the method is referred to as collaborative action research.

16.   What is meant by "collaborative action research"?

Although action research can be carried out by individuals, it is often conducted by pairs or groups of people. One reason for collaborating is that the participatory nature of action research typically surfaces the differing viewpoints of the participants in the context under investigation. Action research is conducted in naturally occurring social settings (rather than in laboratory settings created for the purposes of an experiment). Therefore, studying aspects of the interaction among the people in such settings often calls for eliciting many people's perspectives on events (see, e.g., Snow et al.'s [1996] use of students' opinions).

There are also issues of practical support. It is sometimes difficult to carry out professional responsibilities such as teaching, while at the same time observing the enactment of those responsibilities. If teachers are investigating issues related to their own classrooms, it can be very helpful to have another person observe and take notes during a lesson. In van Lier's (1992) research on his low-level ESL class, both his student teacher and the program director provided him with observational field notes which provided perspectives other than his own on the issues he was investigating.   In Enright's (1981) study of students'

responses to changes in the science curriculum, the deputy head of the school would occasionally teach the class in order for the teacher to participate in the lesson and experience the curriculum from the students' point of view. She also read Enright's diary entries and occasionally added her own comments.

The collaboration can come from someone internal to the program, as in the cases of van Lier (1992) and Enright (1981) cited above. Calhoun (1993) has described three approaches to action research that are related to the issue of internal collaboration. She notes that individual teacher research, collaborative action research, and schoolwide action research have different purposes, emphases and results (p. 62).

Outsiders to the program can also contribute to action research. As van Lier acknowledges, practitioners conducting research on their own contexts can be aided "at times with the help from academics who have some relevant expertise to offer" (1994, p. 31). In this latter case, however, it is important that the local participants retain ownership of the project (see Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001; Tinker-Sachs, 2000). There is "a delicate balance between collaboration and cooperation" (Tinker-Sachs, p. 44). *Collaboration* involves "researchers and teachers communicating frequently and openly and working equally as peers" (ibid.). *Cooperation*, on the other hand, "has an element of following what the other says – it is one-way individual action rather than two-way interaction as seen in collaboration" (ibid.).   For further information, see Burns (1998, 2000) for in-depth L2-oriented discussions, and Oja and

Smulyan (1989) for discussions in the L1 context.

17. What are the disadvantages of action research?

Like other approaches to research in L2 contexts, action research is not without its problems. Tinker-Sachs (2000, p. 48) has noted that "there are many problems inherent in conducting action research":

> Among these problems are (1) the existing climate in the schools in terms of the kind of support that administrators and colleagues offer to each other, and (2) the inflexible demands placed on teachers by the need to complete the school's syllabus. In our research we found these two areas the most difficult to combat (p. 48).

Nunan echoes these points and adds others. He discusses five central disadvantages (Nunan in Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001, pp. 141-143):

1. Teachers are typically not given recognition or time for doing research.
2. The agenda can be highjacked by the administration.
3. The agenda can be subverted from within by teachers who feel threatened, or who want to bolster their own position within the political context of their work.
4. Teachers may lack the technical skills and knowledge to conceptualize and put into operation the research that interests them.
5. Doing action research can get in the way of teaching.

These issues are matters of concern, although some can be overcome with training and collaboration. (See also Nunan, 1993).

Mingucci (1999) points out that finding the time and the resources for conducting action research has been a major difficulty for teachers. She asks, "Without time and monetary support, how can teachers do it? Where can we get the funds to support teachers in their professional development?" (p. 16)

In terms of publication, action research is relatively new in language education, and in some places it lacks the recognition and prestige of experimental research or even naturalistic inquiry. Furthermore, no agreed-upon criteria are widely available for judging the value of studies. Also, critics schooled in the scientific method object to the lack of control over variables. They also claim that

> because the subjects are not randomly selected from the population, the findings may not be generalized (as the term is used in experimental research) beyond the particular setting of and the people involved in the project (Bailey, 1998, p. 94).

For these reasons, people who are only familiar with the experimental quantitative paradigm may not recognize action research as "rigorous" research.

18. What are the advantages of action research?

According to Bailey (1998) there are several advantages to action research. Learning to do action research does not normally require the lengthy training involved in acquiring the statistical analytic skills of the quantitative paradigm, so it is a

more accessible approach than is experimental research. In addition, it can be conducted by teachers in their own classrooms, and "it does not require quantifiable data, large numbers of subjects or artificial control over variables" (p. 94). Since it is intended to lead to directly applicable results, action research involves participants in investigating and improving their own settings. And, as van Lier (1994) has noted, "action research leads to a re-evaluation of our reality and goals as teachers, of the students' needs and aspirations, and of the contextual (social, institutional, political, etc.) constraints and resources that facilitate or inhibit our work" (p. 36).

19. How is action research related to professional development?

According to Mingucci (1999), action research "provides a central strategy for development and makes staff development an integral component of the institutional and personal contexts in which it operates" (p. 16). She adds that as a professional development process, action research meets both teachers' needs and organizational needs; it unites theory and practice; and it provides opportunities for "continuous learning, personal mastery, and active participation in the decision-making process," thereby empowering the members of the organization.

Action research has been linked to professional development in many contexts. Ruiz de Gauna, Díaz, Gonzalez, and Garaizar (1995) reported on teachers' professional development as the result of an action research project in a pre-school context in the Basque region of Spain. Chan

(1996) looked at action research as a vehicle for professional development in Hong Kong. Nunan reported on some of his own development as an EFL teacher in Hong Kong (see Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001) and about his teacher education work in Australia (1990). Coles and Quirke (2001) described an "action learning" project undertaken by EFL teachers in the United Arab Emirates. Mingucci (1999) reported on the use of action research in ESL staff development in the U.S. Some teachers (e.g, McPherson, 1997) report on their own growth as a result of doing action research. (See also Goff, 1996.) Thus there is ample evidence that action research has the potential to promote professional development.

20. Why should teachers get involved in action research?

In addition to the growth opportunities cited above, there are other good reasons for teachers to conduct action research. Collecting and analyzing data can help us discover patterns in our interactions with our students.   In the process, we discover interesting new puzzles and answers, which is an energizing process. By learning about other people's research we gain novel ideas for teaching and for further investigations. In addition, by sharing the results of our action research at conferences and in journals or on websites, we can get feedback from other teachers and learn from their experiences. McPherson (1997, p. 61) summarizes the benefits she experienced from conducting action research:

> This action research project played a major role in helping *me* to understand the learning issues

involved *in my class* and in developing systematic ways to investigate and address them.... Action research was flexible enough to allow *me* to change the focus of *my* investigation from developing and trialing language learning materials and activities to addressing issues of difference and diversity (bold italics added).

In spite of the obstacles, then, it appears that there are both individual benefits and social advantages to be gained by language teachers who undertake action research investigations.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed twenty questions related to action research. These questions have focused on practical issues as well as the viability of action research as a legitimate approach to empirical research in language education contexts.

We have seen that the term *action research* is not synonymous with *classroom research* or *teacher research*, even though it is often conducted by teachers in classrooms. While there are both advantages and disadvantages to action research, it is clearly gaining momentum in language classroom research.

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