

of the information you have collected. The *observation* phase involves you in a continuing process of organizing, categorizing, and reducing the information with the purpose of finding explanations and patterns. Although there is not any fixed procedure for the analysis of data, Burns (2005) suggests the following useful steps as an overall framework for your analysis.

1. Assembling the data: collect all the data you have, review your initial research questions and look for broad patterns, ideas or trends that may answer your questions.
2. Coding the data: refine the broad picture you have developed by coding your data into more specific patterns or categories.
3. Comparing the data: compare the categories or patterns across different sets of data (e.g. interviews with questionnaires) to see if they are similar or different. Then develop tables and charts to graphically display the data.
4. Building meanings and interpretations: think deeply about the data and look for more abstract 'big pictures'. Try to identify connections and develop overall understanding of the whole process of your research.
5. Reporting the outcomes: Develop a plan to present your research and what you have found 'from the beginning to the end' to tell others.

You may now feel that data analysis in AR is a challenging and difficult process. But the point is that analyzing AR data is a continuing and recursive process. This means that it is possible (and necessary) for you to begin your analysis as you go along with your data collection. You can, for instance, begin scrutinizing and reflecting on the first set of your data as soon as you get them, and continue to do so as you collect further data. This will definitely

make your research worthwhile and your data analysis easy.

The final phase in the cycle of AR is *reflection*, which basically involves you to critically reflect on your teaching practice, on your research process, on your beliefs and values and on your feelings and experiences. In this step, you also draw out your overall conclusion and think about the entire process of research. Here, you may also consider ways of sharing your research study with others, and plan your next AR.

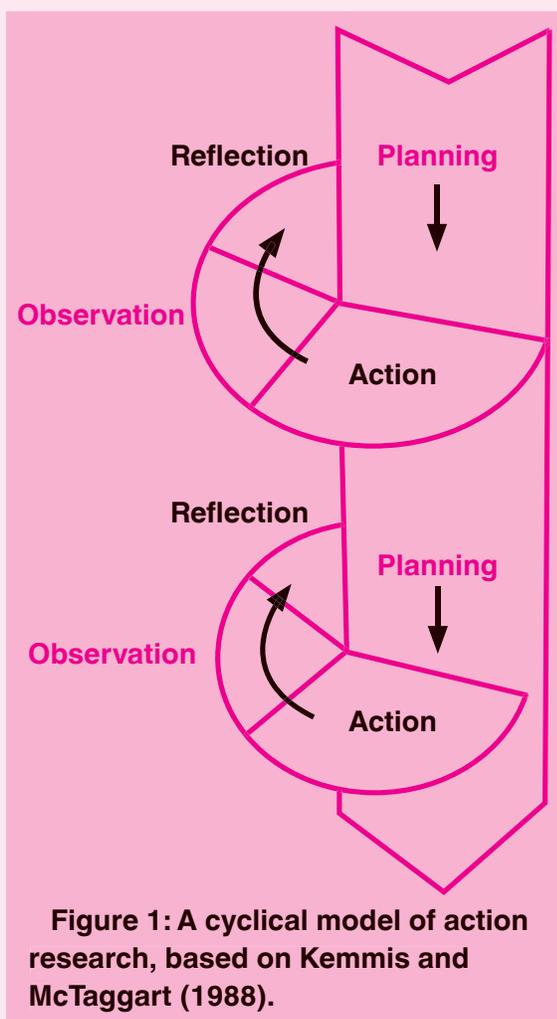
The summary above has provided a brief overview of AR and, along with further reading, it will enable you to develop an overall picture of this approach toward research. However, if you choose to be an action researcher you should develop your understanding of AR by joining email lists, reading journals, and attending conferences and workshops, where researchers are speaking, so much the better. In the end, though, I would like to emphasize that the real journey of understanding AR only properly gets under way when you begin your own AR.

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A Model for Doing AR

At this point you might be thinking how you can do an AR. There are various models of AR, but according to Burns (2005), who is a major author in this field, AR is a dynamic, flexible and cyclical process of research which typically involves four broad steps of *planning*, *action*, *observation* and *reflection*. These steps are illustrated in Figure 1.



Based on Burns' model, *planning* includes identifying a problem or issue, formulating research questions based on the problem or issue, and developing a plan of action in order to solve the problem or improve a specific aspect of education.

In other words, in this step 1. you decide what aspects of your educational activities to investigate, 2. you develop and refine research questions, and 3. you consider what potential improvements are possible.

Once your plan for AR is prepared, you can turn to the action step and put your plan into action. The action stage includes collecting data for your study. Thus, here you need to decide how you can collect data, and who can provide data for your study. Another consideration is the type of data you need to collect. To have a better idea of the appropriate methods of data collection it is helpful to understand the possibilities that exist. Mills (2011) divides data collection techniques into three general categories

- e Observing and taking field-notes (e.g. classroom observation, checklists, etc.)
- e Asking people for information (e.g. using interviews, questionnaires, tests, etc.)
- e Using and making records (e.g. audio and videotapes, archival documents, journals, etc.)

The choice of data collection technique depends on your research questions, time and resources. Generally, it is recommended that action researchers use multiple sources for data collection in order to ensure that the collected data are reliable. But if you are a novice researcher, it is probably wise to limit data collection in your first AR, so that you have a manageable amount of information to analyze. After making decisions about techniques of data collection, you combine your classroom activities with data collection procedure and collect data over an agreed period of time.

Now that you have looked at what is involved in the *action* step, I move on to the *observation* step to explain ways of analyzing data and making sense

action research, both have common characteristics. These characteristics are: 1. the researcher/teacher has a practical focus, 2. the researcher/teacher studies her own practice and context, 3. the researcher/teacher has a plan of action, 4. the researcher/teacher seeks to improve the quality of education.

In the field of ELT, however, practical type of AR is more common. Farrell (2008) asserts that action research in ELT is predominantly associated with the study of classroom activities rather than addressing social problems. Burns (2005) maintains that an examination of the current forms and purposes of AR in ELT confirms that AR is often portrayed as a means of improving classroom practice and enhancing teacher professional development. Therefore, it is safe to claim that the practical type of action research is more or less the standard version of AR in ELT.

In some cases, the action researcher tries to solve a local and practical problem, such as students' lack of motivation. Such an approach involves teachers examining their own classroom situation in order to improve their teaching practice

In what follows I present a framework for conducting *practical action research*. If you are interested in knowing more about participatory action research you can see the following sources.

1. McIntyre, A. (2008). *Participatory action research*. London: Sage Publications.
2. Nunan, D. (1989). *Understanding language teaching: A guide for teacher*

initiated action research. London: Prentice-Hall.

3. Crookes, G. (1993). Action research for second language teachers: Going beyond teacher research. *Applied Linguistics: 14* (2), 130-144. Also available at (<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~crookes/acres.html>).

The Scope of AR

Action research is an applied form of research and is very useful for solving educational problems. You can use it to address a problem, typically one in your classroom or school. The scope of AR is thus very broad and you can focus on any particular aspect of your teaching. Fischer (2001) suggests that the focus areas of AR can be classified in four broad categories. These areas include: 1. your teaching and making changes in teaching, 2. your students and their learning, 3. the textbooks, educational materials, and curriculum, 4. your educational attitudes, beliefs and opinions. Burns (2005), however, offers a more comprehensive list of focus areas. She maintains that the possibilities for AR are endless and include, at least, the following areas:

- e Increasing learner autonomy
- e Integrating language skills
- Focusing on classroom interactions
- Understanding student motivation
- Developing productive skills (writing & speaking)
- Promoting group work
- Making classrooms more communicative
- Trying out new textbooks and educational materials
- Assessing students' progress and evaluating the course
- Using technology in classroom instruction
- Applying and testing out current ideas and theories to classroom

Hatch & Farhady's *Research design and statistics in applied linguistics* and Hatch & Lazaraton's *The research manual: Design and statistics for applied linguistics* only cover a range of experimental-quantitative research designs. Thus, we see that within these major textbooks, that have shaped our current thinking on research methodology, no room is left for AR. It is not, therefore, surprising to realize that there is a suspicion in the Iranian ELT context to the effect that AR often leads to poor quality research studies which are neither, publishable nor desirable (Mehrani, 2015).

In this digest, I am going to clarify the nature of AR, to distinguish between two main understandings of AR and to present a general framework for conducting AR. I hope that this brief introduction to AR will be useful for a better understanding of our choices of research methodology, and for removing the negative perceptions associated with this genre of research in our country.

What Is Action Research?

AR means different things to different people. But at the very least, it involves inquiring into one's own practice through a cyclical process that includes, planning, acting, observing and reflecting on a problem with the purpose of improving practice. Crookes (1993) maintains that AR carries a general implication that teachers, not researchers, do action research. Therefore, other types of research such as qualitative and quantitative research are different from AR in that the former is conducted *by researchers on teaching and teachers*, while the latter is done *by teachers and for teachers*. Another difference is that while the main goal of AR is to improve practice, the purpose of other

types of research is basically to advance theoretical knowledge. It is also assumed that conducting other types of research requires extensive training, experience and qualifications, but in AR extensive training is not required. Thus, even if you do not have any background in research, you might consider designing your first AR project after reading this short article!

Burns (2005) maintains that an examination of the current forms and purposes of AR in ELT confirms that AR is often portrayed as a means of improving classroom practice and enhancing teacher professional development

A review of the literature in mainstream education shows that there are two general conceptions of AR. In some cases, the action researcher tries to solve a local and practical problem, such as students' lack of motivation. Such an approach involves teachers examining their own classroom situation in order to improve their teaching practice. This type of AR is often referred to as *practical action research*. The focus of the researcher in the second type of AR, however, is not limited to the classroom setting, but she seeks to improve the quality of institutes, community, and social lives. In this approach toward AR, the researcher studies ideological issues such as social justice with the purpose of improving and empowering individuals and organizations in educational settings. This approach is best known as *participatory action research*. Although there are differences between practical and participatory

Introduction

Although action research (AR) has a long history in mainstream education, its presence in the profession of English language teaching (ELT) is far more recent, going back to the late 1980s (Burns, 2005). It is, therefore, a relatively new concept and predictably has become a fashionable buzzword in ELT. A quick scan of library shelves and research journals shows that AR is rapidly becoming a major educational research paradigm. There are also numerous journals and newsletters in various countries that publish AR studies done by teachers, for example *The Language Teacher* (<http://jalt-publications.org/tlt>), *The TESOL-SPAIN Newsletter* (<http://www.tesol-spain.org/en/>), *Newsletter of Hawaii TESOL* (<http://hawaiiitesol.wildapricot.org/>), *Networks: An On-line Journal for Teacher Research* (<http://journals.library.wisc.edu/index.php/networks/index>), *The Canadian Journal of Action Research* (<http://cjar.nipissingu.ca/index.php/cjar/index>), *Teachers network* (<http://www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/research/>). In addition, there are many local associations that are actively looking for AR reports from language teachers.

In the Iranian ELT context, however, the idea of AR has been handled more rhetorically than practically. For instance,

we find it, from time to time, a keynote speaker talks of AR as a new possibility for teachers' professional development, or as a direction for contextualized knowledge advancement. But discussions bearing on AR and how it is conducted in practice are extremely rare in our language teacher education programs.

Similarly, we sometimes see, in journal announcements and conference calls, school teachers are invited – often more pretentiously than genuinely – to submit AR reports for publication or presentation. However, analysis of the actual practice of academic journals and conferences reveals that the majority of ELT research studies in Iran are conducted by university instructors, not by practicing teachers (Mehrani & Khodi, 2014).

In addition, retrospective examinations show that AR is not represented in the major research methodology textbooks that are widely used in the Iranian ELT context. For example, Farhady's *Research Methodology in Applied Linguistics* serves as an introduction to quantitative research. Brown's *Understanding research in second language learning: A guide to statistics and research design*

is similarly meant for teachers to develop their knowledge of statistics in research.



ACTION RESEARCH:

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

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چکیده

در مقاله پیش رو در پی معرفی مفهوم و ماهیت اقدام پژوهی هستیم. بدین منظور نخست به تبیین جایگاه اقدام پژوهی در رشته آموزش زبان در ایران خواهیم پرداخت. سپس با ارایه تعریفی جامع از اقدام پژوهی، دو برداشت مختلف از آن را مورد بررسی و مقایسه قرار خواهیم داد. در نهایت چارچوب نظری برای انجام اقدام پژوهی در کلاسهای آموزش زبان ارایه خواهیم کرد.

کلیدواژه‌ها: اقدام پژوهشی، برنامه‌ریزی، مشاهده، بازتاب

Abstract

This article provides a brief introduction to the concept of action research, as a new genre of educational inquiry. The paper begins with a short history of action research, situating the development of action research in mainstream education, and more particularly in the Iranian ELT context. The article proceeds with a general definition of action research and a distinction between the two general conceptions of action research presented in the literature. Then, it turns to present a general framework for conducting action research. It is hoped that this brief introduction will serve as an initiative aimed at promoting this form of research among Iranian language teachers.

Key Words : action, action research, planning, observation, reflection