

## TOWARDS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTION RESEARCH IN TEACHER EDUCATION: A MODEL FOR EFL TEACHER

**Amina Hamdoud**

School normal superior (ENS), Bouzaréah, Algiers, Algeria

[Hamdoud.amina@ensb.dz](mailto:Hamdoud.amina@ensb.dz)

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Corresponding author. Houda BOUMEDIENE. mail: [univ.boumediene@gmail.com](mailto:univ.boumediene@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract:**

Teaching English as a Foreign Language has been the subject of inquiry over the years. How to develop effective teaching methods? How to improve teaching quality? What materials to use? How to integrate technology for a better teaching of the FL? and many more questions are frequently posed about ways of teaching, instructional means, the learners, etc rather than the teacher. Teachers are the main agents in this TEFL enterprise and not much has been done to investigate their route towards professional development especially in FL contexts. This paper suggests the implementation of action research as a design for teachers to become researchers in their own classrooms. It is an urgent need for FL teachers to undertake an inquiry stance to become producers of research results in their own contexts rather than just consumers of what other researchers find.

Thus, this paper introduces action research, justifies the need for its implementation in FL settings and provides some models of this design to be used by teachers for the improvement of teacher education and their practices in the EFL classroom.

### **Keywords:**

EFL teacher; action research; model; teacher education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

In most EFL settings, English language learning and teaching is a core subject of inquiry where teaching methods and approaches, learner differences and learning strategies are key areas of discussion and research among many others. Yet, teacher education and professional development in FL contexts, such as Algeria, have not received much attention in terms of inquiry and innovative programs. Few studies have been conducted and the literature is scarce of findings in relation to teacher education, teacher research and continuous professional development in the Algerian context.

Therefore, it is crucial to consider this area of investigation and make attempts to implement more effective approaches to improve teaching practices by involving the key agents of this process, i.e. the teachers and their professional development.

This paper suggests the implementation of action research in teacher education as a model to promote EFL teaching and teachers' professional growth. It first presents action research design and its importance; then, it showcases its relevance to EFL teachers and teacher education, and finally, justifies the need for its implementation, when, and how by reviewing the most appropriate models already implemented in similar contexts and that will be open to evaluation and adaptation.

The first section is devoted to the presentation of the design and its importance in educational research.

### **1. Action research: definition, roots, and characteristics**

Different types of inquiries exist within the field of education and approaches vary depending on the nature of the issue and the research objectives. Research can be classified into: basic and applied. Basic research is concerned with theory/hypothesis testing, making generalizations and the use of highly objective, scientific and rigorous methodologies. Applied research employs quantitative and qualitative methods for the understanding of human behavior in a social context with the possibility of intervention. Action research, however, is explicitly and mainly 'interventionist' and 'subjective' (Burns, 2005) for it is based on issues that concern a given context that cannot be generalized to other settings and areas.

This last emerged as a result of the increased urge to investigate contextual and local issues of high practical concerns in a social context by practitioners and educators. The *action* part of the design is introduced by Burns (2005, p.58) as the component which:

involves the participants in a process of planned intervention, where concrete strategies, processes or activities are developed within a 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.

Action research methodology is attributed to the social psychologist Kurt Lewin who believed that research is a path towards 'social action' (Lewin, 1945, in Burns, 2005). He considered action research as a cyclical process involving steps of planning, taking-action and evaluating the results of the action. Yet, the origins of action research can be traced back to the works of John Dewey who called for the engagement of educators into the investigation of their own practices. Reflection and experience are considered key tenets of what is referred to as 'Deweyan inspired action research framework' (Stark, 2014). This leads the discussion to educational action research that pertains to teachers and educators and that is the main concern of this paper.

Educational action research is the design for teachers, it focuses on practical and local research problems that require immediate change. It is done by and for the practitioner (teacher, administrator, etc.) who is expected to collaborate and work within a community of researchers for mutual benefits in terms of research findings and implementation of new practices. As a distinct form of educational inquiry, action research lays the groundwork for teachers to become problem solvers in their own classrooms. Thus, the main features that characterize educational action research can be summed up in Hart's (1996, in Wood and Smith, 2016, p. 65) words as 'problem-focused, context specific, participative, involves a change intervention geared to improvement and a process based on a continuous interaction between research, action, reflection, and evaluation'.

It is a distinct type of research that is more applicable to teachers in the sense that it is:

Focused on immediate application, not on the development of theory on general application. It has placed emphasis on a problem here and now in a local setting. Its findings are to be evaluated in terms of local applicability, not universal validity. Its purpose is to improve school practices and, at the same time, to improve those who try to improve the practices: to combine the research processes, habits of thinking, ability to work harmoniously with others, and professional spirit. (Best & Kahn, 1989, in Womack, 1997, p. 4)

After delineating some of the key characteristics of action research, some methodological considerations of this design and how it developed with the different research worldviews is outlined in this paper as well.

In its earlier applications and emergence, action research, with its 'interventionist' property, was considered to pertain to the positivist paradigm. According to Borg (1987): 'action research is one that has a treatment. It attempts to establish cause and effect, but on a very local scale' (In Womack, 1997, p. 2). However, and despite depicting it as a systematic form of inquiry, researchers (Isaac & Michael, 1987, in Womack, 1997) pointed out that it lacks 'scientific rigor' due to weak internal and external validity, situational objectives and unrepresentative samples. Therefore, the design shifted to the 'subjective', 'interpretivist' paradigm by the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This came as a reaction to the number of features inherent in the positivist/quantitative approach that were not possibly applicable to the action research design that combines change and the role of the researcher as an insider in the process of a local/context-based inquiry.

Thus, what research paradigm does action research belong to?

Research philosophies or worldviews build up the main underpinnings of the existing research approaches, which, in their turn, branch into a number of designs and research tools. For action research, it links to the concept of 'praxis' (Wood & Smith, 2016) as it targets change and attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice. It is often attributed to the pragmatic paradigm and the 'combined' or 'mixed' approach since it employs quantitative and qualitative tools to collect data. Creswell (2014, p.34) claims that it is a design that uses 'quantitative and qualitative data for individuals to study education problems that they face in their settings'. Therefore, methodologically speaking, action research pertains to the pragmatic worldview and the combined approach.

## 2. Action research and EFL teachers

Action research for language teachers bloomed alongside classroom-based research, the development of learner-centred language curricula, and the rise of communicative language teaching (Allwright, 1988; Chaudron, 1988, Day, 1990, Long, 1983; van Lier, 1988; Nunan, 1988; R. K. Johnson, 1989, in Burns, 2005). Researchers (e.g. Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Long, 1983; Nunan, 1989a, 1989b; van Lier, 1988) advocating the 'teacher researcher' stance argued that this practitioner's involvement in local educational inquiries would make research findings more relevant to teachers and to their concerns. In light of these claims, Nunan (1989, in Burns, 2005, p. 61) viewed teacher-initiated action 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'. However, other researchers (eg. Brumfit & Mitchell, 1989, in Burns, 2005) stressed on the need to take this type of inquiry seriously and rigorously and that teachers should be responsible and professional when conducting action research. These criteria have been emphasized as key requirements especially after the problems reported by teacher researchers which were outlined by Wallace (1991, in Burns, 2005) as: lack of expertise in research, time needed to conduct this type of research, financial resources, and the personality trait of the researcher.

The 'teacher as learner' and 'teacher as researcher' themes flourished with the advocacy of the post-method era in language teaching pedagogy. This came as a reaction to the idea that all teaching practices and methods should emanate from specialists and not from teachers. However, this was rejected and replaced by the claim that classroom teaching can improve only to the extent that teachers themselves act as specialists' (Prabhu, 1992, in Burns, 2005, p. 62).

So, how far is educational action research relevant to EFL teachers?

- Action research targets educational issues and attempts to solve them in a specific learning and teaching situation.
- It investigates areas such as curriculum innovation and tries to understand and evaluate the occurring changes after taking action.
- It bridges the gap between academic research findings and applications of these findings in the language classroom.
- It directs teachers who are 'reflective' towards professional development and growth.
- It makes teachers familiar with research concepts and methodologies so that they become research practitioners themselves.
- It involves teachers more in critical thinking practices.

Therefore, this 'teacher as researcher' position aims to engage teachers in professional development and to involve them more in solving their classroom issues through educational research action-based practices.

As regards previous findings on the relevance of educational action research to EFL teachers and teacher education, a number of studies and their results are reported to illustrate the main areas of inquiry in relation to teacher education and action research especially in FL settings.

Hine (2013), for example, discusses the place of action research within a Master of Education degree and within the teaching profession in two different contexts. He emphasizes on the major role action research plays in the preparation and professional development of teachers and pre-service teachers. The first is a four months' action research project for ESL teacher trainees, teachers experienced two cycles of action research; the first to investigate students' learning strategies and the second involved teachers in the implementation of a plan to improve some areas of their students' learning. At the end of the project, teachers showed an appreciation of the novel ideas they were introduced to and how they contributed to their professional development experiences. The organizers of the project, however, stressed on the need to devote enough time to benefit from these projects and put into practice their outcomes. The second program of this study is for undergraduates, it involves them in a four-course sequence learning experience over a three-year period where each student 'designs, executes, reflects upon, and disseminates an original, context-specific action research project' (Homter & Frabut, 2012, in Hine, 2013, p. 156). After submission of the action research reports as a final stage of the program, students have acquired some methodology skills and demonstrated competencies in relation to action research inquiry. The organizers of this program and research observers concluded that this type of programs engages would-be teachers in problem-solving processes of relevant classroom issues and thus, enhances their teaching competency.

Regarding EFL contexts, three studies are reported in this paper. In the first one, Marlina, Ramdani and Sri (2016) conducted a study on how pre-service teachers in Indonesia carry out action research as a final project. Three students research papers were analyzed and questionnaires were used for data collection. The findings demonstrated some misunderstanding from the part of the pre-service teachers on how to conduct this type of research and also in relation to data collection and analysis. The study pointed out to an important issue of relevance to EFL teachers and that is lack of knowledge and expertise in conducting educational action research.

Han (2017), in a different study, describes the difficulties encountered by in-service teachers when conducting action research. The participants were involved in an action research project for which a case study was carried out to investigate the problems they faced in the process. The study also suggested some solutions to the identified problems. The approach adopted was mainly qualitative whereby interviews, observation notes and reflection journals were relied upon to collect data. The thematic analysis of the data revealed the following problems:

- Teachers have heavy workloads that prevent them from engaging in research projects.
- Teachers did not know much about the action research design at the beginning of the project. For this, they received a lecture to explain the design and its process.
- Teachers were not able to narrow down and work on specific research questions.
- Teachers inability to select appropriate research tools for data collection and lack of skills in data analysis.

The two studies, therefore, reported some issues that pre and in-service teachers encountered in conducting action research. In addition, a third study by Yigitoglu and Kesli Dollar (2018) investigated the influence of action research on teacher cognition in an exploratory research study. Turkish MA student in-service teachers were engaged in the completion of action research proposals on which they were interviewed. The data obtained from their reflections and responses showed their increased awareness about their research skills and the positive influence of action research on teaching practices despite the institutional and contextual constraints of using this design in their classrooms.

These studies and their findings described teacher researchers use of action research in their studies together with some of the problems they encountered. The next section justifies the implementation of the design in the EFL context provides some models for a more effective integration in teacher education.

### 3. Why implement action research in teacher education?

It cannot be denied that conducting action research is not a simple easy task. Some educators resist the idea of conducting research and the involvement in research-based activities. This might stem from the exposure to pure theoretical concepts in research methodology and statistics classes at the undergraduate or post-graduate level. Thus, some teachers show unwillingness to engage in any form of educational inquiry and argue that it is the responsibility of expert researchers to bring about new approaches and methods of teaching that they are supposed to use with confidence.

However, when they teach in their own classrooms, teachers think and reflect about their practices on a daily basis. They encounter some issues that need careful scrutiny and sometimes remediation and these, are very often special to the classroom they are working with and might not be applicable to a wide range of contexts. Therefore, taking the stance of a teacher researcher and, more appropriately, an educational action researcher, is more rewarding than consuming ready-made solutions, techniques or methods from other researchers which can be inadequate for the teaching situation in question.

In relation to the benefits of implementing action research in teacher education, Mertler and Hartley (2017) contend that research for teachers provides: 'a systematic mechanism for (1) collecting meaningful student data (as well as data from other educational sources), and then (2) using those data as the basis for better-informed educational decision making'. These decisions are congruent with the students' needs and will serve them directly as they are generated from an insider who is aware and/or has experienced the problematic situation himself or herself, i.e. the teacher.

Second, and given that research work and findings in educational research is sometimes undervalued and never placed at the same level of scientificity as the other disciplines, involvement in classroom-based action research adds systematicity and rigor to educational research conducted by teachers. Therefore, the combination between teaching as an art and teaching as a science can then be achieved (Mertler, 2013, in Mertler, 2017).



Last but not least, action research promotes continuous professional development and growth as it warrants an updated and sustained implication in questioning teaching practices and research. According to Mertler (2019), teachers are not only capable of posing research questions through action research, but they are ready to test solutions and evaluate different alternatives. This will turn them into experts and professional researchers in their own contexts and classrooms.

These were but some benefits of using action research by teachers, the next section will discuss some models that were proposed by researchers for an effective incorporation of this design in teacher education.

#### **4. Implementing action research in the classroom: common models**

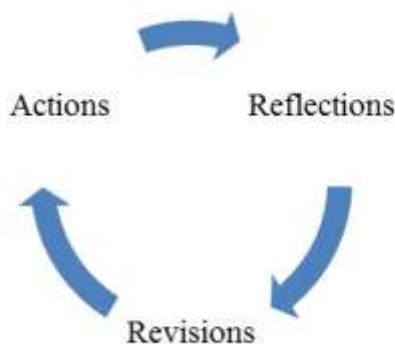
As discussed earlier in this paper, action research has a different purpose if compared to other educational research methodologies. It is destined to teachers and practitioners who, although follow the same logic in doing research, should focus on specific steps. This section will review some models that delineate the main stages of the process of conducting an action research study.

Before presenting some of these models, it is worth noting that the literature on action research implementation by teachers and especially pre-service teachers' reported a number of difficulties such as lack of expertise, skills and time. In light of this, Ryan (2017) noted that: 'Some may harbor the notion that pre-service teachers are not ready to investigate their own practices; however, even with introductory experiences and with data collection and evaluation, pre-service teachers can travel deeper into their own learning' (p.3)

Thus, some key conditions must be present for an effective application of this educational design by teachers and educators. In the Algerian context, for example, some novice in-service teachers mentioned issues of time needed for doing action research, training in conducting it and in implementing action and collaboration between pre-service teachers and their trainers (Hamdoud, 2020).

As a result of these limitations, pre and in-service teachers have at their disposal a number of models suggested by researchers for a more effective use of the action research design. This paper presents some models that can guide teachers to adopt the cycle that fits their needs and educational classroom problems.

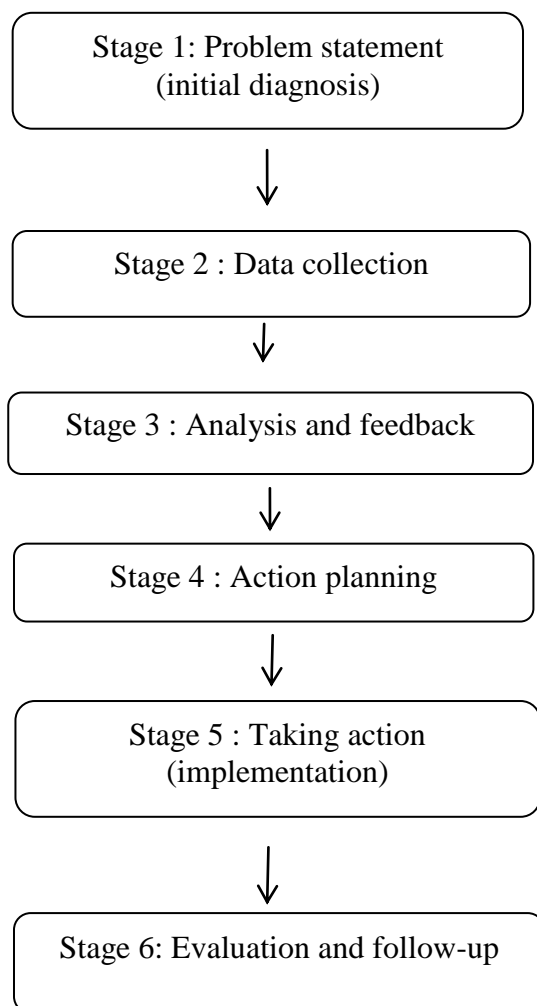
The first and earliest model depicts the action research cycle as 'responsive' and 'recursive' as teaching practices need frequent revisiting and checking. The key stages in this cycle are: planning, acting, observing, reflecting and revising (Dewey,1933, Lewin, 1948, in Ryan, Young & Kraglund-Gauthier, 2017).



**Figure 1:** Action Research Cycle (Ryan, 2009)

In this model, pre-service teachers plan their action research study during the observation phases of the practicum. They implement the action required whenever the opportunity of teaching is present, then the data collection phase follows. The next stage is observation and reflection on the results obtained out of the action taken. Finally, they receive feedback from their trainers and revise further the action that was initially implemented for success or otherwise.

Although some variations exist in the models proposed by researchers, they do share the main framework suggested by Kurt Lewin. One of these describes the process as follows:



**Figure 2:** Action research model (Tomal, 2010)

In this model, the process starts by the identification of the issue; for example, the teacher notices that the students are struggling to understand some parts of the lesson. In the second step, the teacher researcher collects data to understand the reasons behind the issue s/he identified (by conducting a needs analysis or a survey for instance addressed to the students). Third, the data analysis stage follows to yield some feedback and results about the factors behind students' difficulties in grasping course content. On the basis of the findings obtained, the action researcher plans remediation or action that might take different forms. For example, the teacher decides to change the teaching method or to provide extra materials for students to

understand better. After planning, the teacher implements the action, observes and evaluates it for further reflections and adaptations. This model, too, is characterized by its cyclical nature, but it is more detailed in terms of steps.

The last model that this paper presents is the one put forward by Townsend (2010, 2012) which is described by Wood and Smith (2016) as a more critical approach. It is an extended model compared to the previous ones and is demonstrated in the table below:

Stage	Key activities
1. Refining a focus	This initial phase involves a period of reflection, dialogue (especially if action research is being conducted as part of a collective) and consultation to identify a potential focus for change.
2. Conducting reconnaissance	A phase during which a focus is refined and developed and potential actions identified. The intention of this phase is to further clarify, and possibly refine, the focus articulated in stage 1. It also helps to understand what is already happening in relation to this focus, both within and beyond the immediate focus for action.
3. Reflecting on progress	This aspect is intended to build on the reconnaissance to consolidate what has been learnt. This is not a stage of itemizing the outcomes of reconnaissance, but rather should be an interrogation of the initial focus and identifying how what has been learnt from reconnaissance relates to those initial aspirations. This might include deciding that the initial focus was in some way inappropriate.
4. Planning for action	Having established the outcomes of reconnaissance, the next stage is to identify appropriate actions. Although intended to be actions which address the overall focus, this could include a second reconnaissance phase. This could be appropriate if the focus is refined, or developed, or is now judged to be inappropriate. However, the aspirations of this stage fit into three main themes:

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What actions should now be taken?</li> <li>2. How can the outcomes of these actions be observed?</li> <li>3. How should the action steps proceed, including asking who else should be involved and in what ways?</li> </ol>
5. Implementing and observing action	<p>This is the stage at which actions are introduced. Note that this is not the first thing that happens in the research action process but arises from a process of reflection and reconnaissance. While the emphasis on this stage is concerned with the implementation of an action plan, two forms of observation are also carried out: observing the progress of implementation and the immediate effect of actions. Please also note that in this extended model the observing and action stages that are separate in above cycles are combined.</p>
6. Reflecting on and evaluating change	<p>The final stage is an opportunity to pause, take stock and ask: what has changed? In one respect this can involve a formal phase of evaluation, but is also likely to involve a period of reflection on the original purposes of the action research, and to ask not only whether they have been addressed, but also whether they and the initial perceptions have changed. The intention is that this will then lead back to step 1 and the clarification of a revised focus.</p>

**Table 1:** Action research cycle (Townsend, 2010, 2012)

The models showcase the same key stages of an action research process with a clear focus on: observation and reflection, planning and implementation and evaluation. More recent models, such as the ones initiated by Tomal (2010) and Townsend (2010, 2012) are more detailed than earlier ones, like the one suggested by Lewin which was characterized to be basic. They seem to give more prominence to the pre-planning/implementation stages like: reflection, observation and reconnaissance as Townsend named it than to the action itself that is evaluated and possibly refined again. This is what distinguishes the action research process from other methodologies and gives it a cyclical rather than a linear nature.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper outlined some of the key aspects related to educational action research starting from its definition, origin, characteristics and methodological considerations. Action research serves EFL teachers in multiple ways; it offers them the opportunity to embrace the role of reflective researchers and engages them in their own classroom-based inquiries. So, they bring about contextualized and appropriate solutions to their daily educational problems. It also stressed on the relevance of this design for teachers who are eager to develop professionally and become more experts in methodology skills and critical thinking. The paper has also reported some findings of previous studies whereby pre-service and in-service teachers employed the action research design and expressed their satisfaction with its practicality and adequacy in dealing with language classroom issues. They also described some difficulties related to the time and expertise required for its effective implementation. The last section of the paper was devoted to the models available for teachers to use in conducting an action research study that is scientific, structured, rigorous and accessible to them. Therefore, teachers are not only expected to teach and consume research outcomes in a passive way, but also to contribute and act through observing and reflecting on foci, planning appropriate actions and evaluating them for the aim of improving teaching practices.

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