

# Action Research: Enhancing Professional Practice and Knowledge in Pre- and In-Service Language Teacher Education

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This symposium focused on the concept of Action Research (AR) and its potential for language teacher learning and development in the settings of pre- and in-service language teacher education. At the heart of becoming and being an expert language teacher is the continuous development of expert knowledge, pedagogical skills, and professional practice. Involvement in action research projects can help student and expert teachers alike to develop their professional knowledge base in direct relation to their field of practice as well as to initiate and promote reflection on their teaching practice (Burns, 2010; Dikilitas & Griffiths, 2017; McNiff, 2017).

Researchers and one student teacher from five different countries presented general conceptual ideas on AR and its role in language teacher education (LTE), reporting on research projects carried out in a variety of LTE contexts. The LTE contexts comprised German and English as a second language, and English and Spanish as a foreign language. (See the list of presenters and their presentation topics below.)

Despite its well-documented potential for teacher learning and development, action research as a methodological tool of teacher education poses challenges for teacher educators and for the actual action researchers as its targeted outcomes differ from conventional academic research (Mehlmauer-Larcher & Schlick, 2021; Stringer, 2019;). The primary aim of educational action research is not to generate scientific knowledge but to find solutions to practical problems situated within the researcher's field of practice. Within this general frame of AR, the presenters' positions ranged from a rather broad and open ethnographic viewpoint (Gallagher-Brett; Rauch; Schart; Villacañas) to a more impact-oriented empirical orientation to action research (Asgari & Zanin; Borbely; Dehler; García).

The presenters in this symposium explored individual and collaborative action research projects in language teaching settings ranging from pre-school (Asgari & Zanin) to secondary school level (Borbely; Dehler; García) as well as extramural settings (Villacañas) and foreign and second language classes including a project in a bilingual learning environment (Asgari & Zanin). The presented projects ranged from short- to long-term interventions introducing pre-service student teachers and qualified in-service teachers alike to the concepts of action research and its actual implementation in their language teaching contexts. The research foci

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were manifold and covered language teaching issues like the development of feedback strategies, the increase in linguistic input and output, the teaching of pronunciation, and multimodal and multiliterate orientations to language teaching.

As an approach to teacher education, AR seeks to introduce student teachers and qualified teachers to research-based thinking and to facilitate systematic inquiry into, critical evaluation of, and reflection on their teaching practice. Ultimately, involvement in AR aims at developing research literacy (Brown & Coombe, 2015) and making a research- and inquiry-based habitus an integral part of professional teacher identity. The eight contributions focused on different phases of LTE, ranging from early pre-service education (García) at Master level including a student teacher (Borbely) presenting the AR project he carried out during his Master practice phase to the level of teacher development involving projects with qualified practising language teachers (Asgari & Zanin; Dehler).

In addition to exploring concrete AR projects, the presenting participants in our symposium reported on research carried out in order to explore the attitudes of student teachers as well as practising teachers to research in general and to AR in particular (Dehler; García). Other presentations dealt with the challenge of educational managerialism (Gallagher-Brett), which reduces teacher education to 'mere training' in schools without any university-based education, and how, under these circumstances, few university-based teacher education programmes strive for the inclusion of a reflective and inquiry-based approach to teacher learning. Additionally, participants in the symposium were informed about a well-established national in-service programme for subject teachers (Rauch) focusing on action research as well as various international action research networks, their aims, services, and target groups.

The presentations were springboards for further discussions dealing with the conceptualization of the term 'research' in action research as an approach to practitioner research. Some participants referred to research in the context of action research as a kind of inquiry belonging to the tradition of quantitative research and its distinctive characteristics and aims, such as striving for objectivism, whereas other participants stressed the importance of context-specific investigations involving various kinds of research methods as defining features of action research.

A project reporting on student teachers' reservations and critical attitudes to AR (García) led to an exchange on the issue of the contradictory principles which underly the process of doing research as opposed to carrying out teaching interventions. An implicit understanding of research as an exclusive search for objectivity poses the danger of hindering a cyclical-iterative approach to practitioner research as one of the distinctive features of AR. In connection with the targeted aims of AR it was pointed out that, on the one hand, action research aims at widening the reflective perspective (Villacañas) and not at narrowing the scope of reflective processes initiated by and involved in action research. On the other hand, a view of AR mainly aiming at testing the impact of interventions needs to take a more narrow and pragmatic view in order to carry out a defined and very concrete research inquiry. To sum it up, action researchers in educational settings need to consider how they want to deal with the complexity of the field and context they work in and where they carry out AR. Do they, as action researchers, prefer to systematically analyze and describe the complexity of their field of research or do they prefer to focus on a more narrowly and clearly defined aspect of teaching they want to analyze and improve on a concrete level?

Finally, the question needs to be raised as to what kind of knowledge and expertise language teacher educators need in order to introduce (student) teachers to action research (Svennen & White, 2021). When fulfilling their role as teacher educators, what is it they need to critically reflect upon, what is it they need to teach (student) teachers who carry out action research projects, and what do language teacher educators need to reflect upon together with (student) teachers?

## Presenters and topics of presentation:

Marjan Asgari & Renata Zanin (Free Open University Bozen-Bolzano, Italy):  
*Feedback strategies during kindergarten activities in German as a second language.*

Thomas Borbely (University of Vienna, student teacher):  
*Action research: Teaching pronunciation in EFL. Enhancing students' production of /v/ and /w/.*

Svenja Dehler (University of Göttingen, Germany):  
*Action research in action: Perspective of in-service teachers on an action research project carried out in their classroom.*

Angela Gallagher-Brett (Queen Mary University of London, UK):  
*Proactivity on the one hand, individualisation on the other: Action research in language teaching in the UK.*

Marta García (University of Göttingen, Germany):  
*'This is not scientific at all!' Student teachers' conceptualization of and feelings about conducting (action) research in the foreign language classroom.*

Franz Rauch (University of Klagenfurt, Austria):  
*Action research and teacher education: Concepts and experiences*

Michael Schart (University of Jena, Germany):  
*What does it mean to undertake research imbedded in everyday practice?*

Luis Sebastian Villacañas de Castro (University of València, Spain):  
*Sustaining Deweyan 'growth' at the heart of English language learning: An action research project (2016-2020).*

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