Editor's Note

Reflective Teaching Practice:
The Instructor as Researcher

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Research. The mere mention of the term in a professional development workshop with teachers can result in a slight increase in tension in the session, not so casual glances at watches, and murmurs signifying physical discomfort for what lies ahead. In a western setting, all of the above could be accompanied by a slight rolling of the eyes, communicating the idea that "this is not going to be useful for me as a practical teacher, it will be a waste of my time, and I won't understand (or be interested in it) anyway." While there may be some justification for such responses from teachers to more esoteric, theoretical research, far too often all research and classroom practice are artificially divorced, resulting in separate research and practical streams in conferences, and even in the current publication, distinct research and practically-oriented articles. In many cases, research has been seen as the domain of the university professorate (May, 1998), with little or no relevance to what "real" teachers do in the classroom (I can imagine the signs of agreement and silent applause in the aforementioned professional development workshop in response to such statements!). In reality, the distinction between research and practice is much more fluid, and the relationship much closer.

Many authors have suggested that action research can fill the gap between theoretical investigation and practical application (Avison, Lau, Meyers, & Nielsen, 1999; Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Nunan, 1992; Waters-Adams, 2006). The nature of action research challenges the traditional paradigm of centralized research. No longer is research limited to university professors controlling variables, primarily statistically analyzing results, and seeking to publish in academic publications. Action research is classroom and school based, descriptive and critical, with the goal of greater understanding leading to effective change in the local context (May, 1998; Mills, 2000). Whereas neutrality and objectivity are central in traditional or classical research, this contextualized focus of action research allows for more collaboration between those involved to understand professional practice more clearly, resulting in enhanced learning opportunities (Chandler & Torbert, 2003; Ferrance, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; May, 1998; Mills, 2000; O'Brien, 2001; Stringer, 1996).

While many credit Kurt Lewin with first using the term *action research* in the early 1940s (Ferrance, 2000), it was later in the 1950s and again in the 1970s that this approach to research methodology became more widely accepted and employed in educational settings (Berg, 2004; Ferrance, 2000). Notable authors have more recently defined action research in relation to the field of English language education: Richards and Farrell (2005) refer to action research as

"teacher conducted classroom research that seeks to clarify and resolve practical teaching issues and problems" (p. 171). Burns (2010) suggests that action research is based on teachers "taking a self-reflective, critical and systematic approach to exploring [their] own teaching contexts" (p. 2). Action research is "teacher initiated investigation in order to increase understanding and bring about change" (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p. 12).

As these authors indicate, action research is based on practitioners' systematic investigation of classroom activities in order to carry out deliberate actions to improve the teaching and learning situation (Burns, 2010; Richards & Farrell, 2005). As a result, action research is situation or context specific (Nunan, 1992; O'Brien, 2001), conducted in regular classrooms, and typically small scale (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Such research is carried out, often collaboratively, by practitioners (teachers, principals, or others working in a school setting), who engage their students as active participants in the process rather than viewing them as research "subjects" (Avison, Lau, Meyers, & Nielsen, 1999; Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Maguire, 2003; MacIsaac, 1996; Lovat & Smith, 1995; May, 1998; McKay, 2006; Stringer, 1996; Tripp, 1998). Burns (2010) focuses on the process of what she has termed *problematizing*, through which a practitioner considers an area of teaching that can be improved, questions the current process, and develops new ideas or alternatives to improve the educational outcomes.

While the terminology is slightly different, many authors have described the step-by-step process through which practitioners critically examine their educational situations. This process often begins with reflection, and can be led by questions related to persistent or significant problems students are having in class, or why the teacher's efforts in class are not producing the desired results (Nunan, 1992; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Once this initial focus is identified, discussing the situation with peers and colleagues can often help to further narrow the research question. Investigating what has previously been discussed related to the issue in the literature is also key (McKay, 2006).

Once a topic or question is identified and specified, planning a course of action is important (Burns, 2010; Ferrance, 2000; Lovat & Smith, 1995; Mills, 2000; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). During this step, focus may be placed on determining what is occurring in the classroom setting to better understand the problem at hand, or if the problem is clear, steps that can be initiated to improve the situation can be identified. Action researchers need to determine what data is necessary to answer the research question or to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention. Where, how, and when data can be gathered and later analyzed need to be considered. Here again, working together with peers and colleagues and consulting the literature are effective methods to pool resources and find and lend support.

After a plan (or methodology) has been formulated and then initiated, data is collected and analyzed. It is important to keep in mind that no plan will be executed exactly and flawlessly due to the organic nature of the educational and research processes. What is more important is to anticipate the necessity to alter the plan and make systematic and recorded notes of the logical alterations so that they can be reported in detail at a later time (Ferrance, 2000; McKay, 2006; Mills, 2000; Nunan, 1992; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

Once the analysis has been completed, reflection on what has occurred becomes the focus. What has been learned about what is happening during the educational process, or how effective the planned intervention was, are questions that can be addressed at this stage (Burns, 2010; Lovat & Smith 1995; O'Brien, 2001; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Richards & Lockhart,

1996). Through such critical reflection, curricular changes or innovative teaching methodologies, techniques, or assessments can be recommended (Richards & Farrell, 2005). A word of caution may be useful at this stage: results from research, particularly in the social sciences, including education, are rarely definite and finite. While research should and does provide a deeper understanding of what is occurring at a specific time and in a specific context, research often results in the formulation of more questions than it answers, leading to further reflection and investigation. Kemmis developed a frequently referenced representation of the action research process that illustrates how the investigative process leads to findings and conclusions, then reflection, and then on to further questioning and continued investigation in an ongoing process (1990, as cited in MacIsaac, 1996, Mills, 2000, and O'Brien, 2001).

The final step in the process is sharing your insights with others (Nunan, 1992; Richards & Farrell, 2005). While academic publications and conference presentations and proceedings are formalized avenues to share research results, other less formal or informal opportunities exist through school-based professional development activities or scheduled report-back or topic-based discussions. The nature of the way in which insights are provided to a wider audience is not as crucial as the process itself: sharing your experiences and knowledge with others concerned with the same or similar issues leads to the development of professional learning communities. Others are interested in what you as a teacher have to say about what you have observed and learned in your own teaching context. This step-by-step process is a hallmark of scientific study (O'Brien, 2001), and provides a framework that helps to ensure reliability and allows others to generalize your findings to their own teaching contexts.

Nevertheless, some teachers may be less than enthusiastic when considering the possibility of engaging in action research. One of the most common retorts may be that "I'm a teacher, not a researcher." While that job description may be accurate, as practitioners, we all engage in sharing our experiences with colleagues about what has happened in our classes. The action research process takes this a step further, beyond what happened in class, to why and how this happened in class, and how the learning process can be improved based on this more detailed understanding (Burns, 2010). Many practitioners engage in this process of reflection informally and individually, learning from their experiences (O'Brien, 2001). Action research systematizes this process of reflection so the knowledge we have gained individually can be shared and used by others to improve their teaching outcomes, providing an opportunity for the teacher to become the researcher (Waters-Adams, 2006).

Time is a concern and is seen as a major constraint to engaging in action research by many teachers. There would be little argument that a teacher's schedule is hectic and busy, yet within that schedule, many of the activities related to action research may already be present. Often teachers reflect on the successes or challenges faced in their classes and share these insights with colleagues (reflection). Teachers often consider and implement methods or techniques to improve their teaching or assessment of students (taking action), consider the impact of those changes on students' motivation, achievement, or attitude (data collection and analysis, further reflection), and again share these experiences with colleagues. The action research process takes the activities in which teachers are already engaged and provides a basis for a more systematic consideration of what occurs in the classroom setting so that the complexities of the learning process can be highlighted, leading to a better understanding of problems, challenges, and solutions (Burns, 2010).

While many teachers may suggest that doing research is not part of their job, most would agree that maximizing the effectiveness of the learning process in the classroom is. To accomplish this goal, understanding and studying the teaching process in your own context is necessary

(Lovat & Smith 1995). This greater understanding allows teachers to be able to make informed decisions about what they do in their classrooms, and assess their own results (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Mills, 2000; O'Brien, 2001). Such empowerment and realized success can lead to positive change, professional development, and a renewed interest and passion for teaching (Burns, 2010).

Lastly, teachers may question what they can add to what is already available in the literature, incorrectly assuming they have nothing new to say. As mentioned earlier, a hallmark of research is that it leads to more questions than conclusions. There continue to be questions to be investigated, problems to be solved, new and innovative methodologies and techniques to be implemented and evaluated, and lessons to be learned from our shared experiences: all teachers can contribute to this dialogue within the professional community as to how they have understood the learning process more clearly in one way or another (Ferrance, 2000; Waters-Adams, 2006).

Action research has also been criticized. This approach to research does not often result in the identification of clear cause and effect relationships or the testing of hypotheses in the traditional sense. Others have questioned the reliability or generalizability of action research findings (McKay, 2006). Yet others support the approach. While attention to methodology to ensure reliability is a concern, Nunan (1992) points out that action research activities "fulfill a professional development function" and should be considered acceptable forms of research "if they address questions of interest to other practitioners, if they generate data, and if they contain analysis, and interpretation . . ." (p. 19). While the debate related to the validity of action research and with which criteria the process should be evaluated will continue, what is clear is that there is support for the approach and that action research has become common in social science investigation, particularly in education (Avison, Lau, Meyers & Nielsen, 1999; Berg, 2004; Checkland & Holwell, 1998; Susman & Evered, 1978; Waters-Adams, 2006).

What many can agree on is that the goal of action research is improving the teaching and learning process (Richards & Farrell, 2005) through systematic investigation and problem solving (Waters-Adams, 2006). The process is collaborative, carried out by teachers studying themselves and their students (Richards & Farrell, 2005; Waters-Adams, 2006). Few would discount the benefits of the action research process, not only as a tool to understand the teaching process more clearly, but also to further personal professional development (Burns, 2010; Ferrance, 2000; Waters-Adams, 2006).

The authors in the current volume examine issues in language teaching in Asia, from both classroom-based and broader perspectives. Timor considers choices surrounding the language of instruction in elementary and secondary schools in Israel. Basing her research on teachers' attitudes and practices, she offers a model for the effective use of students' mother tongue in the language-learning classroom.

Two papers look at the way technology is integrated into the learning experience of our students. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is the subject of Nicholes' research. He investigates to what extent CALL can support students' understanding and learning of grammatical structures at a university in China. A paper by Nguyet and Mai in Vietnam looks at the effective use of video as an instructional tool to teach conversational strategies.

Overall motivation of students is the topic of the article by Chen. In Taiwan, the author examines how the broader social context affects the way in which students view themselves as language learners and speakers of a second language.

Writing is the focus of other papers in the teaching practice section in this volume. In Japan, science and engineering students in a university in Japan combined computer-based text analysis with more traditional paper-based analysis while studying writing structures. In this context, Oghigian and Chujo found that students at varying levels benefitted from this approach. In Vietnam, Loan examines how to best prepare students for international standardized tests. She presents a communicative model of writing instruction that is appropriate to the cultural context of both Vietnam and other countries in the region. In Japan, Bankier examines the effectiveness of feedback provided on students' writing. He sought to determine the impact of alternative modes of feedback on students' successful writing revisions.

Two papers here focused on approaches to learning and related activities of students in Vietnam. Diem reports on the success of a project-based learning approach, resulting in an alternative to the traditional classroom environment. The results indicate that both students' skills and motivation were improved. Also in Vietnam, Thanh and Huan researched the effectiveness of task-based learning with students at a community college. Focusing on developing students' vocabulary, the authors found that motivation and achievement increased with such an approach.

There are many who contribute their time and energy to make this publication a success. Most important are the practitioners, teachers, and researchers throughout the Asian region who continually strive to provide exceptional learning opportunities to their students. Special appreciation is extended to those authors who were willing to share their knowledge and experiences with a wider audience through the inclusion of their papers in this volume. The additional contributions of the Advisory and Editorial Board members, as well as the Assistant Editors, Mr. Chea Kagnarith, Dr. Ben Fenton-Smith, Ms. Deborah Harrop, Mr. John Middlecamp, and Ms. Alice Svendson are crucial in the publication of each volume, and are very much appreciated. Additionally, Ms. Kelly Kimura, as the Assistant Editor-in-Chief, plays a leading role in bringing together the contributions of the authors in each issue. I would like to express a great deal of gratitude for her consistent professionalism and dedication to the development of each issue.

The future of language education in Asia will continue to change, adapt, and meet new challenges. By taking on the role of not only practitioners, but also researchers, educators in the region can not only have an impact on the effectiveness of their actions in the classroom and the achievement of their learners, but may also make an impact on the policy initiatives and the development of the field in the region. Who better to research and evaluate teachers in the region, than those teachers themselves?

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