

## Action research: An overview

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**Abstract.** "Action research" is a research type of great practical value and high frequency of usage in language teaching. An insightful look into the nature and sequence of investigation in this approach is essential for teachers and research workers. On the basis of collected data from different sources, with a high level of conciseness and lucidity, this article provides coherently expressed ideas comprehensible to readers on the following issues:

What is "Action research"?

The purposes of action research

The importance of action research

The effects of action research

Differences between action research and formal research

Steps for classroom action research

### 1. What is "Action research"?

*Action research* is deliberate, solution-oriented investigation that is collectively or personally owned and conducted. It is characterized by spiraling cycles of problem identification, systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data-driven action taken, and, finally, problem redefinition. The linking of the terms "action" and "research" highlights the essential features of this method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of increasing knowledge about and/or improving curriculum, teaching, and learning.

The concept of action research can be traced back to the early works of John Dewey in the 1920s and Kurt Lewin in the 1940s. It is

Stephen Corey and others at Teachers College of Columbia University who introduced the term action research to the educational community in 1949. Corey [1] defined action research as the process through which practitioners study their own practice to solve their personal practical problems.

Very often action research is a collaborative activity where practitioners work together to help one another design and carry out investigations in their classrooms. According to John Elliott, teacher action research is "concerned with the everyday practical problems experienced by teachers, rather than the 'theoretical problems' defined by pure researchers within a discipline of knowledge" (Elliott, cited in Nixon, 1987). Research is designed, conducted, and implemented by the teachers themselves to improve teaching in their own

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classrooms, sometimes becoming a staff development project in which teachers establish expertise in curriculum development and reflective teaching.

The prevailing focus of teacher research is to expand the teacher's role as inquirer about teaching and learning through systematic classroom research. This approach is naturalistic, using participant - observation techniques of ethnographic research. It is generally collaborative, and includes characteristics of case study methodology.

The research team provides support and a forum for sharing questions, concerns, and results. Teachers advise each other and comment on the progress of individual efforts. Participating in collaborative action research helps eliminate the isolation that has long characterized teaching, as it gives an impetus to professional dialogue and thus, creates a more professional culture in schools.

## **2. What are the purposes of teacher action research?**

*Teacher Action Research* is research designed to help a teacher find out what is happening in his or her classroom, and to use that information to make wise decisions for the future. Methods can be qualitative or quantitative, descriptive or experimental.

Action research has been employed for various purposes: for school-based curriculum development, as a professional development strategy, in preservice and graduate courses in education, and in systems planning and policy development. Some scholars advocate an action research approach for school restructuring. Action

research can be used as an evaluative tool, which can assist in self-evaluation whether the "self" be an individual or an institution.

## **3. Why is teacher research important?**

School restructuring movement has site-based, shared decision-making at its core. With the newly acquired autonomy, come up new responsibilities. Teachers, local schools, and school districts are accountable to all stakeholders for the policies, programs, and practices they implement. It is not enough for teachers merely to make decisions; they will be called upon to make informed decisions, decisions which are data driven. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to be much more deliberate in documenting and evaluating their efforts. Action research is one means to that end. It is very likely the emergence of site-based decisionmaking has precipitated the resurgence of action research; the two seem to be complementary. Action research assists practitioners and other stakeholders in identifying the needs, assessing the development processes, and evaluating the outcomes of the changes they define, design, and implement. The self-evaluation aspect of action research is congruent with the philosophies contained in the Total Quality Education and Outcomes Based Education movements currently being advanced in many educational institutions.

## **4. What are the effects of action research?**

There is a growing amount of evidence of the positive personal and professional effects that engaging in action research has on the practitioner. *Action research* provides teachers with the opportunity to gain knowledge and skill in research methods and applications

and also to become more conscious of the options and possibilities for change. Teachers participating in action research become more critical and reflective about their own practice. Teachers doing action research attend more carefully to their methods, their perceptions and understandings, and their whole approach to the teaching process.

It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the school by understanding it. As teachers engage in action research they are increasing their understanding of the schooling process. What they are learning will have great impact on what happens in classrooms, schools, and districts in the future. The future directions of staff development programs, teacher preparation curricula, as well as school improvement initiatives, will be impacted by the things teachers learn through the critical inquiry

and rigorous examination of their own practice and their school programs that action research requires.

Teachers' action research questions emerge from areas they consider problematic, from discrepancies between what is intended and what actually occurs. The unique feature of teachers' questions is that they emanate solely neither from theory nor from practice, but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two. Teacher research will force the re-evaluation of current theories and will significantly influence what is known about teaching, learning, and schooling.

It is often said that teachers often leave a mark on their students, but they seldom leave a mark on their profession. Through the process and products of action research teachers will do both.

#### Differences between action research and formal research

Aspects	Formal Research	Action Research
Training needed by researcher	Extensive	On own or with consultation
Goals of research	Knowledge that is generalizable	Knowledge to apply to the local situation
Method of identifying the problem to be studied	Review of previous research	Problems or goals currently faced
Procedure for literature review	Extensive, using primary sources	More cursory, using secondary sources
Sampling approach	Random or representative sampling	Students or clients with whom they work
Research design	Rigorous control, long time frame	Looser procedures, change during study; quick time frame; control through triangulation
Measurement procedures	Evaluative and pretesting measures	Convenient measures or standardized tests
Data analysis	Statistical tests; qualitative techniques	Focus on practical, not statistical significance; present raw data
Application of results	Emphasis on theoretical significance	Emphasis on practical significance

### 5. Steps for classroom action research

• Decide on a question considered meaningful and important to you.

- Read literature on your topic
- Plan your overall research strategy and data collection strategies

• Collect data (refine methods as needed)  
• Make sense of the data (qualitative and /or quantitative)

- Reach conclusions about your question.

What is the practical significance of your findings?

- Take action based on your conclusions

- Share your findings with others

These steps are not always completed in this sequence and you may loop back through some steps several times.

### References

- [1] S. Corey, *Action research to improve school practice*, New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, 1953.

## Nghiên cứu tìm giải pháp: Một cách nhìn tổng quan

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Nghiên cứu tìm giải pháp (action research) là một loại hình nghiên cứu phổ dụng, có ý nghĩa thực tiễn cao trong dạy tiếng (language teaching). Việc hiểu thấu đáo bản chất và quy trình thực hiện các nghiên cứu theo đường hướng này là hết sức cần thiết trong giảng dạy và nghiên cứu. Trên khối liệu từ nhiều nguồn khác nhau, với cách trình bày dễ hiểu, cô đọng và mạch lạc, bài viết này cung cấp một cái nhìn tổng quan về các vấn đề sau:

Thế nào là “Nghiên cứu tìm giải pháp”

Mục đích của nghiên cứu tìm giải pháp

Tầm quan trọng của nghiên cứu tìm giải pháp

Hiệu quả của nghiên cứu tìm giải pháp

Những khác biệt giữa nghiên cứu tìm giải pháp và nghiên cứu theo quy thức (formal research)

Các bước tiến hành một nghiên cứu tìm giải pháp