

Editor's note: This year, we introduce a new feature, Voices from the Academy. These non-peer-reviewed editorial articles will be casual chats with academics in the ESL/EFL field.

Evolution and Future Directions of Action Research in TESOL: A Coffee Chat with Anne Burns

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Anne Burns is an Honorary Professor at the University of New South Wales and Professor Emerita at Aston University. Her research focuses on language teacher education, written and spoken discourse analysis, curriculum development and change, and language teacher cognition. She is the author of the books *Collaborative Action Research for English Language Teachers* published by Cambridge University Press in 1999 and *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners* published by Routledge in 2010. Her work has appeared in various international journals including *Language Teaching*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *The Modern Language Journal*, and *Applied Linguistics*. The current interview delves into Anne's profound expertise in empowering teachers for action research, illuminating pivotal considerations for teacher educators. Her insights spotlight the evolving perceptions of TESOL practitioners towards action research, showcasing its transformative impact on teacher development worldwide. She underscores the significance of fostering a positive teaching environment and understanding students' perspectives while advocating for greater institutional

support. Her reflections offer invaluable guidance for TESOL professionals, inspiring meaningful change in language education through action research. This interview serves as a beacon for educators navigating their journey towards transformative teaching practices.

Introduction



I approached Anne Burns to chat with her about action research on January 10, 2024, and she accepted my invitation. I think learning action research during my teaching in Turkey a decade ago was a valuable experience for me as it gave me new questions about classroom research and reflective inquiry to chew on. On February 13, 2024, I conducted and audio-recorded a 30-minute interview with her virtually. I had the opportunity to ask numerous questions about the trends in the field of TESOL and how action research can be instrumental in addressing some challenges for teachers. Given my recent interest in advocacy in English language teaching, our conversation was organically directed towards the role of action research in supporting teachers' agency and advocacy efforts. I left the conversation with excitement to share her insights with the readership of *INTESOL Journal* and spent the whole day transcribing the interview.

Anne's responses provide a glimpse into the depth of her expertise in preparing and encouraging teachers to conduct action research. They touch on issues that teacher educators should consider

with the mission of advancing the field. Her insights shed light on the evolving perceptions and attitudes of TESOL practitioners towards action research, highlighting its transformative potential in teacher professional development. Moreover, Anne discusses notable examples of how action research has been applied in real-world teaching contexts, demonstrating its impact on language education globally.

In her scholarly perspective, Anne identifies pressing challenges confronting the field of TESOL, emphasizing the importance of fostering a positive teaching environment and understanding students' perspectives. She underscores the role of action research in addressing these challenges by promoting critical reflection and empowering teachers to adapt their practices effectively. Furthermore, Anne reflects on the evolving landscape of action research in TESOL. She discusses potential revisions to her 2010 book, emphasizing the emotional experiences of teachers engaging in action research and advocating for greater institutional support for grassroots professional development.

Anne's insights offer valuable guidance for TESOL professionals seeking to engage in action research and advocate for meaningful change in language education. I hope that the readers will find this interview insightful and inspiring as they navigate their own journeys in action research and teaching practice transformation.

Interview

Huseyin: Your extensive career at the intersection of action research and English language teaching has been distinguished by influential contributions and groundbreaking insights. As we delve into your remarkable journey, I am eager to explore specific instances of your experiences in conducting action research. Could you please share details about a particularly memorable

action research project that you have conducted or supervised? I am specifically curious about how the project efficiently utilized action research methodologies. Moreover, I would love to hear about the tangible benefits it brought to the practice of teaching in the context where it was implemented.

Anne: I have done two major action research projects in Australia. One was with a university-based research center from the early 90s up to about mid-2005. That was with the adult migrant English program here in Australia where the teachers were located all over the country, and they were teaching immigrants and refugees. At that time, I was working with the research center dedicated to this program, and it was important that we worked closely with the teachers. We were asking teachers to identify research topics and issues that they thought were important in the classroom. That is what got me started in the early 1990s with action research (see Burns, 2016).

At the time, I was sort of new to the concept of action research. I was also learning about it as I was doing the program with the teachers. I was learning about what it meant to help the teachers understand, first of all, action research, and secondly the process of doing action research and then analyzing their findings and how it was amending their teaching. For me, my kind of action research on that project was to work out how I could best support the teachers. I quickly realized that while action research has a philosophy of allowing people to be very self-reflective and autonomous, because teachers are not trained necessarily to do research, they were also looking for guidance.

I came to realize that there needed to be a balance between structure, guidance, and autonomy to do the research yourself. That was a very important learning process, and I was then able to understand how to set in-process support for teachers along the way. It needed to be support that

was attuned to their needs at the time when they needed it. In-time support, not directive support... That was a very important lesson for me, and I have built on that ever since in my projects with teachers.

That was one major project which went on for about 15 years. Then when I did not work with that program anymore, I was approached by another sector in Australia, which works with international students. It is called the ELICOS sector, that is English language intensive courses for overseas students. I was approached by their national organization, English Australia, and they asked me if I would run a similar program for their teachers. I have been running the Action Research in ELICOS program now for 15 years, which is also sponsored by Cambridge English. There are about six projects each year where sometimes pairs of teachers are working together. They will do action research for a period of nine months and then they write the research for publication, as well. So, over all these years, I have been learning how to facilitate support for teachers when they need it. One of my principles is that teachers should be volunteering to do action research and should not be forced to do it. And, teachers are not necessarily given extensive research training, as I said. For many teachers, it is a process of learning about research, as well. So, I suppose those are the two big things I have learned myself.

Huseyin: In your extensive experience, what observations can you provide regarding the changing perceptions and attitudes of TESOL practitioners as they embrace and integrate action research into their teaching practices? Additionally, could you highlight any specific studies or research endeavors that have been conducted to comprehend these evolving perspectives and practices?

Anne: That is a really interesting question because I started doing action research in the early 1990s, that is almost 25 years ago. At that time, action research was not well recognized at all in

TESOL, and it was not understood either by the research community, particularly the more scholarly academic research community. It was seen as an inferior form of research, one conducted by people who were not trained to do research or skilled in research techniques and skills. In addition, the field was very much dominated by more psycholinguistic than sociolinguistic or socio-constructivist research. The framework for teacher education was not necessarily one that gave teachers agency of their own to do research.

The thing that I learned very quickly when I started doing research in the projects that I was telling you about was that the teachers I was working with here in Australia were very interested in research, first of all. It was not necessarily recognized as something the teachers wanted. But they also wanted a chance to do research that was relevant, accessible and related to their classroom contexts, very contextualized research which was going to meet their needs and answer their practical questions. Over the years, the approach to action research has really changed. People have begun to recognize it more because of the work that has been done by me and by other people.

Professor David Nunan started the idea of research by teachers very early on and he was one of my colleagues at the center where I worked, and also my PhD supervisor. I was influenced by his ideas and by the ideas of other colleagues in the center where I was working. The whole framework of teacher professional development changed towards more transformative rather than transactional professional development. Over the years, the number of publications in the field has grown enormously. Now there is quite a strong body of publications from people who have done action research with teachers in many different parts of the world. People like Richard Smith from the University of Warwick have done a lot of exploratory action research. Judith Hanks has also done a lot of work in exploratory practice, which is a branch of practitioner

research. Thomas Farrell has contributed to work in reflective practice. All these influences came together to say that this is worthwhile study and worthwhile research.

I could mention here also that I am currently editing a handbook of language teacher action research, which will be the first in the field of language teaching. I am editing it with Kenan Dikilitaş, who is currently in Norway. He has also done a lot of action research in Turkey. Kenan and I are now editing this handbook, which will have about 30 or so chapters in it, looking at the impact of action research in the field of TESOL over the last 30 years that these developments have been taking place. We have asked various authors who have had a lot of experience in action research to contribute to that handbook, which will be published by Routledge. We hope that it will be a very significant collection that will bring together a lot of the work in the field which has been dispersed across different publications up to this point.

Huseyin: Could you share examples or insights into how action research has been applied in real-world teaching contexts, and what notable impact or improvements it has brought to language education either globally or in the specific contexts you have worked in?

Anne: I think one of the things I have noticed when language teachers do research is that they like to focus very much on the immediate issues, skills or areas that they deal with in their classroom on a daily basis. Teachers are often very interested in researching things like the four skills, reading, writing, speaking, and listening because they have to teach those skills in the classroom. Many of the questions that teachers ask are focused on how they can teach those skills better or how they can get students to develop specific sub-skills under those skills. The

other aspects would be pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. There are often studies done in those areas to look at how things can be changed.

I think that there have been some amazing studies done by teachers in secondary school contexts. I have recently been working with a group of teachers in Thailand to publish their work and they were located in secondary schools. Of course, I am also continuing with groups of teachers in Australia, who work with international students. Many of them are working in language centers, universities, or private language colleges where students have to develop academic literacy and academic skills. I think there has been quite an impact from those, many of them researching aspects of teaching English for academic or specific purposes, including improving specific skills, such as writing or listening, or investigating the use of teacher or peer feedback.

If you want to look at a whole collection of publications, the teachers I have worked with in Australia have all had their research published through *Research Notes*, which is the journal of Cambridge English and is free to download. Anybody can go to the website, and they can see all the articles that have been done in the Australian context. You can read many different examples of really effective action research conducted by teachers there. The one that I mentioned in Thailand (see Burns, 2023) is a recent one which is published by the British Council. You can go to the British Council of Thailand website and get the report from the teachers which will show fabulous examples of work that has been done. I know that Richard Smith has published a lot of examples of exploratory action research in Chile and many other different countries where he has worked with exploratory action research. Also, my co-editors and I have published a collection of work by teachers (see Burns et al., 2017). This publication, which is also free to download, was conducted through the IATEFL's Research SIG.

One more thing I should mention is an open-access journal that was started in Colombia. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development* has been publishing action research from teachers over about the last 15 years. People can look at examples from many different teachers who have conducted research in their classrooms, and these are freely available.

Huseyin: In your scholarly perspective, what do you identify as the most pressing issues or challenges confronting the field of TESOL at present? Furthermore, how, in your view, can action research serve as a valuable instrument in addressing and mitigating these challenges?

Anne: Those are very big questions. I will do my best to address them. I think one of the big challenges from my point of view is helping teachers to teach positively in the classroom and not see students as demotivated, uninterested, or reluctant to learn. I have come across a lot of discussions with teachers where it is almost like they are not able to put themselves in the position of their students. One of the big things that often comes out of action research—it was remarked on in the presentations by the Thai teachers I mentioned at the *43rd Thailand TESOL International Conference*—is that teachers understand their students' perspectives, needs, and voices more when they conduct action research. They become a lot closer to their students. In teacher development, we really need to help teachers see that they are not a delivery system. They need to learn how students develop learning strategies and facilitate their students' learning. The job of the teacher is not to deliver information to students and expect that they will just learn it. The job is to draw out from them what learning skills, abilities, and talents they already have and to make these as effective as they possibly can.

I think that is one of our big challenges in the TESOL profession because many of the curricula the teachers have to work with are highly structured and compulsory. We have to do our best as teachers to make the experiences in the classroom as effective as we possibly can. Action

research contributes enormously to giving teachers that ability. Not only does it help teachers to understand their students better, but it also helps them to think critically and more reflectively about the kind of materials that they are using, the teaching strategies that they are taking for granted, which need to be modified or changed. Doing action research actually allows you to do that. It allows you to problematize what might be something that has become routine in the classroom and to turn it around so that it has more positive benefits, not just for you as a teacher, but also is enormously positive for the students. I might leave that question there, but I think that will be the crux of my answer.

Huseyin: Many educators, me included, were introduced to action research through your influential Routledge book, *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners*. If you were to write a revised edition of this book in 2024, what new aspects or developments in the field of action research in TESOL would you take into consideration? How has the landscape evolved since the publication of your earlier work? What are the emerging trends that TESOL professionals should consider when engaging in action research?

Anne: I enjoyed writing that book and I have observed that a lot of people have used it. Thank you for your comments about that. I think what I would do in that book to change it a bit is to talk more about how, for many teachers, action research is a ‘roller coaster’ ride. Coming to research and learning how to do research is not a straightforward linear process. So, I would spend some more time on emotional experiences that teachers have when they become action researchers, talk about the ups and downs, and provide more examples and case studies of how you go backwards to come forwards, how you can get over the barriers or the challenges, and how working with other people as colleagues possibly and hopefully within your school in a

larger group might be really helpful for taking things further forward. I would do a little bit more of that, I think.

I would also provide more case studies of work that has been done by teachers in different parts of the world because there is now a much bigger body of research and examples to provide. I would probably have many more case studies than I put in the original book, with perhaps scenarios that teachers could use to discuss their own professional development. Also, the notion of emotional roller coaster that I was talking about earlier comes from a chapter that I wrote (see Burns, 2017) for a book edited by Gary Barkhuizen on language teacher identity. A lot of teachers described it to me in that kind of way. I think looking at identity and agency have become much more important in thinking about the empowerment aspects of action research. More on that would be very helpful in that book in terms of advocacy and the greater ripple effect from action research out into the profession.

My more recent book is the one that I published two years ago with Emily Edwards and Neville Ellis (see Burns et al., 2022). In that book, we have tried to bring together all the research that Emily and I particularly have done, looking at the impact on teachers. One of the big realizations that we came to was that having teachers work individually is very hard for advocacy more broadly for the profession. But when you have institutions that support action research, it can make a big impact. This book is for institutional development, not just individual teacher development.

One of the challenges in terms of where things should go is that action research should be permeated much more into institutional development because a lot of money is spent on professional development for teachers, by ministries of education, schools, district offices, and local organizations. If it is of the top-down variety that does not make a difference to a teacher's

life or a teacher's practice, it is a huge waste of resources. Sadly, a lot of professional development is still done that way, whereas I would like to see much more grassroots professional development where teachers are given time, opportunity, and mentoring in order to grow their agency and identity, and support empowerment. I would be very happy to see the growth of institutional development of action research, not to force teachers to do research but to give them opportunities to become thoughtful practitioners of their own teaching and their students' learning. The other issue that Kenan and I have just been talking about is action research involving students more so that they can gain skills of empowerment and agency through research, too. That would be my wish list.

About the Author

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