Introduction

Recent publications in action research show a growing interest in the dissemination and conduct of teacher research and action research (e.g., Bai, 2018; Banegas, 2018a; Rovegno & Pintos, 2017; Yuan, Sun, & Teng, 2016). As a research methodology, action research is about transformation of social practices. Such transformation is inherent to the research process, as those interested in action research wish to intervene in their professional practices by changing something about them and to examine the extent to which their intervention produces positive changes in the educational context under investigation. Within the overlapping fields of applied linguistics and language education, action research is conceived as a manifestation of teacher/practitioner research, professional development, and collaboration between higher education institutions and other institutions in a given community (Borg & Sanchez, 2015). It situates itself as an “interventionist and subjective” methodology developed by teachers who “deliberately change, modify and improve” their professional practices, teaching and learning processes (Burns, 2005, p. 60). Since it seeks to empower teachers and learners, action research is best understood as an integral part of the complexity of teaching and learning processes.

In this chapter we conceptualise action research within the field of language education. We centre our discussion upon the dimensions of action and reflection, and the triad context, agents, and issues as core elements in action research. We also discuss features of action research and target ethical issues and the dissemination of action research outcomes.

Conceptualising action research

In our introduction we gave an indication of what action research is by using terms such as transformation, empowerment, and development. These words and notions suggest that the adoption and implementation of action research often entails a change, and that this will require agents who are willing to change and be changed. For change to be meaningful and sustainable, it should be based on careful, well-thought-out action and reflection, and it should respond to context, agents, and issues which trigger such transformations. In sum, action research can be defined as a research approach which frames teaching and learning as situated
social practices wherein reflection, on the part of the main teaching and learning actors, is crucial to identify issues that affect such practices. These issues are addressed with the introduction of changes which are ultimately examined with the aim of generating empowerment, development, and social justice to those involved in the language education praxis.

**Action and reflection**

Definitions of action research in the extant literature usually stress the concomitant effects of action since it embodies the interventionist nature of action research. This raises the question: Why do teachers wish to act and to investigate their actions? Perhaps it is to generate change which will shape themselves as well as others within the wider institutional context of their own practice and, ideally, within the language teaching community at a more global level. This answer is problematic since each teacher researcher’s motives may be different, while the core aim still remains aligned with the notions of transformation and change. In their introduction to action research, Dikilitaş and Griffith (2017) suggest that action “implies . . . some kind of active investigation of whatever is seen to be the problem to be fixed, the puzzle to be considered, the question to be answered, or the issue to be addressed” (p. 1). In his book on mixed methods research for TESOL, Brown (2014) acknowledges the powerful drive of action and links it to what we may call the practical and direct application of research in language education. He states that “in the ELT world, action research is often used to solve local problems that teachers want to address” (p. 30). However, we cannot talk of action for its own sake; action is twinned with reflection. In language education, Burns (2010) regards action research as “a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach” (p. 2). More recently, it has been stated that action research “offers a form of systematic inquiry that is usually appealing to teachers as it allows a focus on areas of their own practice that they consider worth investigating” (Burns & Westmacott, 2018, p. 16).

By concentrating on the notions of *action* and *reflection*, we recognise three central interrelated elements of action research: (1) context, (2) agents, and (3) issue(s). We now unpack and discuss these three elements.

**Context, agents, and issues**

In action research in language education, context is understood as the overall complex and holistic socio-educational landscape in which teachers’ educational practices are embedded – a landscape which, with its local, multifarious characteristics, has strong potential to shape and dynamically influence the practices of teaching and learning. Thus, under the umbrella term of *context* we include the institution, the curriculum, the regulations, authorities, administrators, and the geographical, cultural, and financial conditions that exert different levels of influence on teachers and learners. More crucially, the local, multifarious characteristics of context are of primary importance when it comes to teacher research: such diverse factors, inherent to each local educational context, determine the actions taken by language teachers engaging in action research. Factors such as time availability; peer and institutional support; national, regional, and institutional policies; and access to resources (among others) operate in ways which can make the context more or less conducive to teacher research being carried out and producing change (Aga, 2017; Banegas, 2018a). Context is also key in action research because, for teachers, it is the source that generates impetus for change and the ultimate arena where such change may be enacted successfully. In action research, teachers identify an educational issue emerging from their unique context and navigate it as reflective
insiders with access to their own classrooms. In their journey, teachers will aspire to generate contextually appropriate pedagogies with their learners and other actors at the institutions where they work.

Because action research is for and from teachers, we view teachers and their learners as agents, regardless of their age or personal/professional trajectory. In action research, words such as “teachers” or “practitioners” refer to a range of educators from primary school teachers to university lecturers and the aim of action research is to emphasise that they are investigating their own practices for reasons which have emerged from their own reflection on action and/or in action (Schön, 1987) as well as motivations. In a similar vein, “learners” may refer to young and teenage learners as well as learners in higher education; for example, trainee-teachers or in-service teachers. Learners are sometimes included as co-researchers (e.g., Moran, 2017) thus giving them a decisive role in the design and implementation of action research. The word “agent” positions teachers and learners on a horizontal plane as there is no clear-cut distinction between the researcher and the researched and there may be a need to negotiate identities in the processes of teaching and researching (Galloway, 2017). Locke, Alcorn, and O’Neill (2013, p. 107) state that action research “often blurs the distinction between participant and researcher, particularly when an element of self-study is included.” This element of involvement of teachers and learners in the action research enterprise is one which would support the idea of subjective research which, by meshing the researcher and the researched within the same research paradigm, allows for a myriad of opportunities which can generate “knowledge about curriculum, pedagogy or educational systems” (Burns, 2005, p. 63). This approach resonates with Ushioda’s (2016) small lens perspective to research which seeks to encourage teachers to research their own practice within their immediate context. Such a perspective aims to generate fine-grained and relevant pedagogic findings that only those directly connected with the classroom life investigated can holistically understand, and ultimately share by painting complex pictures of classroom insights which “external researchers” may otherwise fail to capture.

However, while we support the notion of teachers and learners working as co-researchers within the action research framework, our experiences and understanding suggest that power imbalances within this research paradigm may still exist. After all, learners may feel, to some degree, elements of teacher influence which, in turn, may lead to learner behaviour that is only partly authentic. This is normally due to the learners’ wish to please the teacher or simply ensure that their status as students is not compromised. By the same token, some teachers may be keenly conscious of the learners’ presence in the action research processes and therefore alter their behaviour accordingly. This is inevitable, and we would thus advise that teachers embrace, and even capitalise on, such student–teacher synergies in order to produce genuine, relevant findings that may transform and affect the learning and teaching life of those within the immediate action research project, and through resonance, the life of those in cognate context(s).

Agents are, by definition, active participants who determine the course that action research will take. Within an action research paradigm, teachers are usually referred to as teacher researchers to highlight that their reflective practices and decisions are informed and supported by empirical data which they have generated and analysed themselves (Xerri, 2017). Several scholars (e.g., Burns & Westmacott, 2018; Wang & Zhang, 2014) have articulated insightful arguments about the transition that teachers undergo when they shift from being professionals exclusively concerned with teaching (i.e. teachers) to becoming teachers who actively engage in research (i.e. teacher researchers), and how this transition shapes their identity. In this transition, collaborative work, effective mentoring, autonomy development through agency and ownership (Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2018), and the possibility of presenting their work at conferences and events held by teacher associations and writing for in-house publications
Action research in language education

has a positive effect on teachers’ identity as teachers and researchers of their own practices. Regarding roles and transitions, it has been argued that language teachers are researchers by default given the processes involved in their profession (van Lier, 1994). However, it is perhaps important to recognise that the proactive and dynamic engagement in research practices such as action research may result in profound change(s) which will affect the individual teacher in various ways, such as feeling connected to the language teaching community or seeing themselves as more professional.

A word of warning may be worth sharing in relation to the contexts in which teachers conduct action research. Edwards and Burns (2016a) assert that while teachers may identify themselves as agents of change, sometimes their action research projects are not supported or valued in their institutions or by their peers, and therefore, frustration may become stronger than the need for change.

Last, a crucial issue refers to the object of scrutiny in action research. This is what prompts teachers to engage in preliminary reflections and develop their curiosity. According to Burns and Westmacott (2018, p. 16):

Teachers may want to address classroom topics or questions that have perplexed them for some time, or understand more comprehensively what they need to change in their thinking and practices as they develop a new curriculum or course, or adopt new forms of assessment. Alternatively, they may wish to evaluate the outcomes of introducing new materials, resources, or technology to their students, or to experiment with different kinds of tasks to discover which lead to more effective learning.

The issue does not necessarily have to emerge from a negative situation as it could be based on the need to change or maximise a practice even when this works well. What is essential is that the issue departs from a genuine and meaningful need that teachers have. This element and the nature of such an element reminds us of the bottom-up nature of action research (i.e. it emerges from teachers’ own volition). The issue cannot be imposed or constructed by others, and it can change. Perhaps a teacher begins with a question, but then, after some scrutiny and time, the question is refined or replaced by another question.

Generally, the issues approached through action research in language education relate to two broad areas: learners’ (language) development (Banegas, 2017) and teachers’ professional development (Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016). Table 15.1 illustrates the elements outlined so far and refers to recent action research studies.

The interaction between context, agents, and the issue under consideration gives rise to a research framework with context-specific features.

**Features of action research**

Drawing upon the literature and our experience as teacher researchers, action research as a methodology differs from other forms of inquiry in language education because it is context-driven, practical, collaborative, cyclical, ecological, and transformative (Figure 15.1).

Our point of departure is that action research is carried out by teachers. It is a form of inquiry that teachers can employ to respond to an issue in their context within the possibilities, affordances, and resources available to them. In this regard, action research follows a bottom-up approach, and the processes and outcomes of action research are specific to one setting. Since teachers may carry out action research with whatever they have at their disposal and with an issue born out of their own practices, action research is practical because the answers generated
by the research experience return to the classroom while the process is unfolding. Thus, we may say that action research is processual by nature. In addition, teacher researchers do not need to wait until data are analysed to see what may work in their classrooms to generate change. The features mentioned so far resonate with Kumaravadivelu’s (2001) post-method pedagogies and

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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Agents</th>
<th>Issue(s)/Question(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vaca Torres and Gómez Rodríguez (2017)</td>
<td>A public school in Bogotá (Colombia)</td>
<td>One teacher, a university-based researcher and a group of year nine learners</td>
<td>How could project-based learning influence a group of year nine English as a foreign language students’ speaking skill development?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Altındag and Özmen (2016)       | Preparatory School of Gediz University (Turkey) | Two tutors and their B1-level students studying English | 1. How does using a Facebook platform for using known vocabulary influence B1 level students’ sentence production skills?  
2. What are the students’ perceptions about using Facebook for vocabulary acquisition? |
| Dissington (2018)               | English language courses in language teacher education programmes at a small private university in Santiago (Chile) | One teacher educator and his two groups of university learners | 1. Would a sustained, explicit, systematic approach to addressing the transfer of L1 lexical errors reduce the production of this type of error by students?  
2. How would students respond to a sustained, explicit, systematic approach to addressing the transfer of L1 lexical errors? |
| Chacón (2017)                   | A teacher education programme at a university in Venezuela | A tutor and four cohorts of prospective teachers taking a class for oral expression in English | How does one use films in project work to foster critical language awareness of future teachers of English as a foreign language? |
| Yan (2017)                      | A Professional Development of School English Teachers course at a university in China | A lecturer and her group of 23 student teachers with varying degrees of teaching experience | 1. How do student teachers perceive the meaning of teacher research  
2. How does the teacher educator who undertook the action research perceive the meaning of action research? |
| Calvert and Sheen (2015)        | An English for Occupational Purposes course at a midwestern university (USA) | A tutor and a group of learners, refugees and asylees with different levels of formal education | How would a classroom teacher design and evaluate a task? |
the parameters of *particularity*, *practicality*, and *possibility*. What action research and post-method pedagogies share is the intention of developing pedagogies which are context responsive and driven by the needs and interests of teachers and learners in a given setting.

To produce appropriate pedagogies, action research cannot be done in isolation. As discussed earlier in this chapter, teachers engaging in action research need the involvement of their learners and colleagues depending on the aims they aspire to achieve. Often, authors (e.g. Castro Garcés & Martínez Granada, 2016; Villacañas de Castro, 2017; Wang & Zhang, 2014) situate their action research studies in collaborative or participatory action research to emphasise the collective nature of their endeavours and the varying degrees of involvement that agents may experience along the research process(es). Due to the contextual nature of action research, teachers’ research projects constitute a social practice, and the dynamics of their explorations establish dialogic encounters with different actors/agents in the processes of teaching and learning. In other words, the engagement in action research becomes a form of social performance within the confines of the educational context under investigation, and therefore, one (whether teacher or learner) needs to be aware of the social norms that are inherent to the specific field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) where teaching, learning, and action research may be situated. Becoming aware of the specific features of the educational field is useful for teachers and learners to understand each other’s roles, their duties, and the limitations and opportunities within the specific educational context. This perspective allows us to accept the limitations derived from contextual conditions, and, at the same time, seek and embrace the rewards of any action research endeavour within any educational setting.
When teachers engage in action research, in the planning stages, they consider the course of their actions and develop a map of their progress, intentionalities, and aims. However, because such a map may change, a degree of flexibility is required throughout the action research process. Usually, action research begins with a question, centred upon a specific issue of practice, and it is organised around cycles containing stages. The cycles indicate the recursive and spiralling nature of action research. In a cycle, teachers observe, plan, act (this is the interventionist stage in action research), and evaluate a course of action. Based on their evaluation and ongoing reflection, they may engage in a new cycle to refine their actions. Finally, the reporting stage comes to socialise the experience with all the agents involved in the action research endeavour, as well as those within the institution and wider professional community. For example, in an action research study aimed at supporting teacher research and student learning with a group of teachers in Australia, Edwards and Burns (2016b) designed a four-cycle action research project (Figure 15.2) that included built-in initial reporting stages (Edwards, 2013).

In a more recent study, Banegas (2018b) sought to study how geography student teachers’ lack of motivation for taking English for specific purposes modules could be reverted by enriching the lessons with subject-matter knowledge. In his description of the action research project, he explains that the project consisted of four action research cycles with a stress on reflection and intervention.

In relation to cycles and stages in action research, it has been noted that sometimes planning and acting may start rather too early, and that more time is needed to identify and understand the issue(s) at hand. In response to this concern, a new line of inquiry has emerged under the name of exploratory action research, which seeks to encourage deeper reflection to explore teachers’ puzzles or research questions before they set out to plan and act to generate transformative change (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017; Smith, 2015; Smith & Rebolledo, 2018).

The features discussed so far reflect the ecological dimension of action research. In an ecological approach, individuals interact through meaningful relationships between each other.

Figure 15.2 Sample of cycles and stages in an action research project (adapted from Edwards & Burns, 2016b, p. 110)
and the context in which they are located (van Lier, 2000). This research perspective allows us to capture the reality of a specific educational context with a view to uncovering the complex and dynamic patterns which emerge between teachers’ and learners’ practices. In other words, by couching the action research processes of data collection and analysis as *ecological* (Arcidiacono, Procentese, & Di Napoli, 2009), we leave behind the notion of cause–effect as a framework with which to understand classroom reality, and instead, place the emphasis on the patterns of human behaviour which emerge from the intricate relationships between the educational agents and their context as a whole.

We have stressed that action research emerges, develops, and ends in the classroom, starting from teachers’ puzzles/questions about certain issues, reflections on their practices, and learners’ development. Action research has a practical end: to transform practices. Since this process can neither be random nor solely focused on action (that would make it an intervention project rather than a research project), organisation and systematisation are paramount to ensure success and sustainability of research findings. Action research takes place in a specific context: the classroom (although it could also include an institution as a whole, or a virtual environment). Thus, the data gathered from an ecological perspective must derive from the processes and outcomes involved in the whole teaching and learning enterprise. This means that our research instruments must not be seen as alien, but they need to be part of what already belongs to, and unfolds in, the educational context under investigation. Teachers can therefore collect data by means of different research methods. The following list represents a non-exhaustive but varied range of instruments used in recent action research studies in language education:

- Reflective journals: diaries kept by teachers and learners (e.g. Banegas, 2018b).
- Observation and note taking (e.g. Yan, 2017)
- Visuals: video recordings and photographs of lessons, learning and teaching spaces, or learners’ work (e.g. Basallo Gómez, 2016; Salinas Vacca, 2014)
- Learning artefacts: learners’ answers to a task, in-class completion of activities, assignments (e.g. Yan, 2017), exams, portfolios, videos (e.g. García-Sánchez & Santos-Espino, 2017; Villacañas de Castro, 2017), recordings made by learners while completing, for example, a pair work activity (e.g. Salinas Vacca, 2014).
- Teaching artefacts: syllabi, course books, or teacher-made materials (e.g. Banegas, 2017; Chacón, 2017).
- Interviews: individual or group interviews and discussions in class and/or out of class (e.g. Dissington, 2018).
- Survey questionnaires: paper-based and/or online surveys connected to the topic lesson or overall module and programme (e.g. Abad & Alzate, 2016).

Data analysis may involve a combination of quantitative and qualitative traditions. The possibility of having more than one source of data allows teachers to engage in triangulation (e.g. Abad & Alzate, 2016; Yan, 2017) or crystallisation (e.g., Ellingson, 2008). Deeper analysis may involve interactions with and elicitation of reflective comments from colleagues to support the interpretation of the data (e.g., Burns, 2010).

Finally, action research is transformative. The change that agents seek through action research aims to generate, at a surface level, practical changes that have an impact on learners’ language proficiency and teachers’ professional development (Cain & Harris, 2013), as well as, at a deeper level, intercultural citizenship education, defined as education for empowerment, democracy, equity, and social justice in all domains and contexts (Porto & Byram, 2015). Action research is thus a political act in which empowerment, critical education, and social
change run deep. By developing interactions among agents in context, action research becomes a catalyst for democratic undertakings where all voices can be heard and represented in a quest for social emancipation to challenge top-down policies and capitalist oppression (Villacañas de Castro, 2017). In action research, teachers and learners establish, to some extent, an unspoken partnership which needs to be cemented in clear ethical understandings (Locke et al., 2013). Nevertheless, Doyle (2007, p. 77) warns that “while research may be part of the teacher’s professional development, the children are not there for the teacher’s development. The opposite is the case. The teacher is there for the development of the children.”

**Ethical issues**

Given that such transformative power may have rippling effects over other areas of experience among the agents involved, ethical issues need to be thoroughly discussed; the emancipatory practices which may be generated must be sustainable, democratic, and fair (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2015; Mitra & McCormick, 2017; Zeni, 1998). Ethical issues and questions to prompt reflection are summarised in Table 15.2.

**Sharing action research outcomes**

The transformative force underlying action research stresses the social dimension of this research methodology. Transformation is possible if the processes and outcomes of action research are shared within the community of practice where action research is located. Furthermore, dissemination of the action research outcomes becomes the act par excellence whereby the sharing and discussion of such findings is enriched, and this forms part and parcel of the action research enterprise. Dissemination may take the form of a research article published in an academic or professional journal or newsletter. It can also take the form of a poster or paper presentation at a professional conference or in-house event. The ultimate underlying aim is the creation of a research culture among teachers which raises awareness about the challenges and benefits of conducting action research. Findings are not expected to be generalisable or replicable, as they are context-bound, but action research experiences may resonate with other settings and teachers’ professional trajectories thereby fostering a sense of membership to a community with shared values, concerns, and interests. Moreover, sharing action research experiences bolsters the argument that action research is doable, and therefore something teachers can practice in their own contexts to generate change and new knowledge. Perhaps it may not be original to the academic community, but it may be original and meaningful to the practitioners in their context and therefore constitute a personal or institutional discovery.

**Concluding remarks**

Action research is a methodology which rests upon the aim of generating carefully planned transformation embedded within the complex and fluctuating dynamics of educational institutions and society at large. Action research is distinctively characterised by its focus on systematic action and reflection and by three interrelated elements: context, agents, and issues. The interaction of such elements makes action research context-driven, practical, collaborative, cyclical, ecological, and, ultimately, transformative.

Furthermore, action research affords language teachers the opportunity to discover, develop, and establish a teacher researcher identity and engage in research which comes from them and their learners and directly returns to them and their peers. This, in turn, gives educational practitioners a sense of empowerment. Finally, action research may foster a sense of community
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Are learners and teachers participating out of their own volition? Are they really free to opt out at the start or during any point of the action research project? Have they been informed that action research will be carried out with them throughout a certain period of time? Has action research been imposed on teachers or learners?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Do learners and teachers know what is expected from them? Have there been discussions and decisions agreed about their roles and levels of engagement in the action research project? Who are the co-researchers? Who are the participants? Is there a researcher–researched relationship? Are the participants given the space to have a critical voice and suggest changes throughout the action research project?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Are ideologies and political views being imposed on others? Is the project somehow assessing other teachers’ professional practices against a teacher researcher’s own practices and expertise? Are the relevant agents of the action research project open to negotiation and compromise?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Who will have decision-making power throughout the action research processes? Will some participants feel vulnerable? Is there coercion to participate or engage? Have teacher researchers identified and discussed power dynamics in their wider context and own classrooms?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality and anonymity</td>
<td>Has informed consent been addressed? Can participants be open to share their views but refuse to have them used publicly? Has individual and collective/group anonymity been discussed in cases of focus groups, group interviews, or whole-class interaction? Can participants choose their pseudonyms? Can participants decide to appear under their real names? To what extent does anonymity affect context understanding? In case of wider dissemination, is the institution where action research takes place interested in featuring with its real name? To what extent can participants and institutions be realistically traceable through the disclosure of some descriptive/biographical information?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authorship and ownership</td>
<td>Who are the authors of the action research project and potential outlets for dissemination (articles, reports, conference talks)? Who owns the action research project and outcomes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representation and voices</td>
<td>Can participants corroborate data and analysis? Can they request to revisit data interpretation? How are participants represented in terms of identity? In the case of teacher researchers investigating their own practices, do they take in all data or ignore negative/problematic data that may challenge their own professionalism? Are all participants equally and fairly represented?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>What are the benefits an action research project may entail? Are there material and conceptual/abstract benefits? Who will benefit and how? If there is funding, who manages it and how? Have benefits of different nature been discussed with all the people involved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Will the changes achieved continue after the action research project is completed? Who will sustain such changes? How? To what extent have transformations penetrated the contextual fabric? Is it possible to maintain the changes without funding?</td>
</tr>
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of practice which is strengthened by the promotion and development of shared interests, concerns, and opportunities which make language education a meaningful act of social justice.

Acknowledgements

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References


