

## ACTION RESEARCH FOR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE – COULD A DATABASE OF APPROACHES HELP?

*William D. Cousin*  
*University of Tolima*

### ABSTRACT

In an earlier paper (Cousin 1997 a) the use of action research in a postgraduate programme of “Specialist in Education with emphasis on the teaching of English” of the University of Tolima was described and attempt made to justify the constraints on researchers imposed by the institutional conditions. The construction of a database of the work undertaken in the University of Tolima and its presentation to an international audience during a visit to Moray House Institute of Education in Edinburgh, Scotland enables this work to be seen in a wider context. Limitations on the inputs to the database are described and some tentative findings from the search of the database are presented. It is suggested that the input to the database of records of work undertaken within different frameworks might help to build up a useful resource for would-be researchers in the area of TESOL.

#### 1. The establishment of action Research within TESOL

The adoption of the methods and procedures of action research within teacher training for TESOL as suggested by Wallace (1991) can be seen as fairly well established at the time of writing and the approach receives support in a number of sources (e.g. Richards and Nunan 1990, Richards and Lockhart 1994). Indeed, the inclusion of the approach in the COFE document on in-service training of teachers

(COFE? 1993) and the publication of Wallace’s new book on the subject (Wallace, forthcoming) might indicate that the approach is currently fashionable and the review of the development of action research with which Mueller (1994) prefaces the report of her and her colleagues’ work in Hong Kong, could be seen as scarcely necessary. However, as indicated in my earlier paper on this subject (Cousin 1997 a) the approach taken in the University of Tolima may have its particularities, while recently Nunan (1994) has cast more general doubts about Action Research. In this paper I would like to clarify some methodological issues underlying the approach taken in the University of Tolima, describe the creation of a database of that work and outline the way in which the use of such a database could be of service to developments in the area in the future.

#### 2. Problems of methodology/principle

2.1. A consultation of the growing literature on actual examples of the application of action research to problems of teaching in TESOL does suggest that the development is not unaffected by the problems of concept and principle that have been identified in action research almost from its inception with the proposal of Lewin (1946). A degree of scepticism might be detected in Nunan’s 1994 contribution. Nunan is at pains to emphasise that his title “The more things change the more they stay the same, or

why Action Research doesn't work" is not to be taken as a total dismissal of the approach. Rather, he wants to explore some of the things, very often lack of administrative support, that can stand in the way of the realisation of action research projects. Here one must note that the experience that he cites is symptomatic of a prevalent problem in the development of action research. Because its methods are comparatively unknown, unknown, that is, in comparison with what is often referred to as "historical, positivist" research, (usually interpreted as research that conforms to the models drawn from the natural sciences- Cohen & Manion 1994) after an initial period of enthusiasm, administrators become disenchanted with the lack of "positive outcomes" (i.e. weighty research reports) and tend to withdraw support. However, one can also surmise that one of the problems threatening the achievement of valued outcomes by the methods of action research is a lack of clarity about the procedures and the methods that the particular researcher wishes to adopt.

2.2. The problems are usefully reviewed in Ebutt (1988) and Whyte (1991) where it is interesting to note that much of the work on "participatory" action research is based on industrial applications in which changes in industrial relations and practices are pursued. However, the basic problem might be summarized by viewing the researchers and their researches as falling into one of two fields. Either they emphasise the action aspect of the research and claim the development of social competences within individual practitioners, or they try to come to terms with the research element with elaborated exploration of just how the action is to be related to theory, and "results" established.

3. The approach to development of action research within the University of Tolima.

3.1. As outlined in the previous paper, at the University of Tolima Action Research was adopted for the dissertation stage of a postgraduate degree of "specialist" in education with emphasis on the teaching of English. This approach was taken in accordance with the commitment of the whole programme to the development within individual participants of the concept and realization of "reflective practice" in the way envisaged in Wallace (1991). (See also Cousin 1977b). In this way it could be said that the approach was concerned rather with the "action" side of the dichotomy suggested above, and was concerned with the development of practice in the way contemplated for participative action research by Whyte (op.cit.)

3.2 Role of the Research project and effects of the Action Research guide in controlling and limiting research options.

On the other hand, as outlined in the previous paper, two aspects of the approach in the University of Tolima can be seen as trying to grapple with the more "research" aspect.

3.2.1. As already described, in order to give guidance and support to the participants which would enable them to complete their research work within a tight time-scale, they were required to devise and approve a research project in accordance with an Action Research Guide (Cousin / Arias 1996, 1997). The approach to be taken was then pre-formulated, and, in keeping with the principle of relating theory to practice, the research projects were largely devoted to topics suggested by

the applied linguistic framework of the rest of the degree (Cousin 1997b). In this way, unlike in the case of participative action research, the participants were in effect investigating the relevance and realism of topics suggested by a body of existing theory rather than being able to formulate research topics on the basis of things that they found problematic in the classroom as suggested by Allwright and Baile (1991). It is argued in the Action Research Guide (Cousin & Arias 1996, 1997) that this can be looked on as a way in which the research problems identified can share in a degree of generalization, but it cannot be denied that the participants were constrained to formulate and conceptualise their research efforts within this framework with a resulting loss of freedom to develop professional independence and some form of "empowerment" as envisaged by Stenhouse (1974) (cf. Cousin 1997 a)

3.2.2. The other aspect of "research" orientation secured by working with the Guide was that within the project participants were required to define their research methodology. Here, with a view to emphasising the "finding out" aspect of any research participants were required to achieve some form of "triangulation". Cohen & Manion (1994 p 233) define triangulation as "the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour". The technique is not confined to action research, but seems particularly to suit the more informal approach of such investigations. So the most common "confrontation" of data encountered in the projects constructed on the basis of the Guide was that of between a teacher's diary and an observer's account of the teacher's class. However, resource was also added to recordings both audio and video, to student questionnaires and

diaries, and to the collection of examples of the student's work. One aspect of such work that perhaps marked it out as belonging within the action research tradition was that participants were encouraged to reflect on the effectiveness of their chosen methods in providing the data they required during the cycles, and, if they proved defective in any way, to modify them.

#### 4. Construction of a database and entry of data on the work of the University of Tolima

With a view to investigating the realizations of these various projects it was proposed to make up a database of all the work published within the framework of the Postgraduate degree to date. This work was very much assisted by the helpful provision of facilities by Moray House Institute of Education, Heriot-Watt University Edinburgh, in a collaboration between the TESOL Section of the Arts and Humanities Department and the Computer Services Section of the Science Technology Maths and Computing Departments. It was also made possible by a grant of time from the Committee for teaching development and the Rector of the University of Tolima. The formulation of the database and input of the initial and necessarily limited quantity of data was carried out at Moray House during the months of May to July 1997.

#### 4.1. Limitation of the Structure of the database – assumptions in the selection of fields.

It has to be said that in this initial effort to evaluate the action research work of the University of Tolima many of the constraints mentioned above in connection with the formulation of the research

projects can be seen to be conserved in the construction of the database. The fields selected for the composition of the database can be seen in the examples of records presented below in the appendix. The first fields are concerned simply with the routine matter of identifying the research and the only matter in need of comment is that, due to restrictions on the use of individual identities in electronic data imposed by current legislation, it was necessary to delete the names of the researchers and, in most cases, their supervisors. The Researchers then appear in alphabetical order as Andres, Blanca and Carlos while the Supervisors figure as Ulises, Vera and I suppose it could be Ximena!

#### 4.1.1. Classroom based

As the degree of specialist was aimed at the in-service training of secondary teachers, all of the projects were drawn up within this context and further constrained to be concerned with actual teaching within the classroom. This aspect of restricting the "Research Question" was commented on in the previous account of this work (Cousin 1997 a).

#### 4.1.2. Applied Linguistic Theory

The other aspect commented on was that the action and intervention in the classroom that the participants made the subject of their research were for the most part defined by fairly traditional concepts drawn from applied linguistics. So, for example, fields were set up for "language skill area", for "Technique used", for "Topic" (sc. of the language contained in the lessons), and the entries in these fields were such shorthand references as "oral interaction skills" for Skill Area, "group work", or "teacher pre-questioning" for

Technique used and, for Topic, "The Home"

4.2. It is assumed that such terminology can be, or perhaps, rather, had been traditionally defined by the input of the course in which the related concepts had been introduced. The way that techniques were associated with language skill areas and the concepts of applied linguistic theory and even professional development is the subject matter of an earlier paper delivered to the conference in Pasto (Cousin 1997 b) But it must be observed that this does not make use of the capacity of Action Research to define and redefine the object of its enquiry in an almost ethnomethodological way. Educationalists might regret the lack of learning theory terminology in the analysis of teaching presented by the database, but still more, the current presentation of the work at the University of Tolima does not move towards an examination of whether the concepts of the terminology traditionally used to discuss teaching matters in courses of teacher training have any real relevance to, or occurrence in the classroom, which might be thought to be made possible through the use of Action Research.

#### 4.3 Interpretation of the input data

A further limitation of the existing database is that it was felt that in reducing whole chapters of a research report to a few words to include them in a field, the constructor of the database was making a number of ad hoc decisions that ought really to be logged and justified. For example, a very popular classroom technique adopted by this group of researchers was the handling of their classes by "group work". Were all these concepts and realisations of "group work" really the same or were there important

differences? In its present form the database does not capture enough information to enable the person interested in accessing the information to form an opinion, though it has also to be said that the reports of the researches that were the source of the data are often deficient in this respect. For example, some claimed that the group work that they described, constituted "cooperative learning", but the description of their procedures suggests that the work could not constitute cooperative learning in the Johns Hopkins sense and for this reason it was decided simply to describe it as "group work". However, important differences in what was attempted and realised under this heading may well end up being lost from the database. It is proposed to give browsers of the database more information in a field containing an abstract of the original researches, but deficiencies in the source reports may mean that even this will not improve the situation.

5. Results of trawling the Database of the University of Tolima Action Researches.

In the light of these deficiencies in the constitution and functioning of the database as currently realised some caution may have to be exercised in interpreting results. However, one interesting finding, in the light of the introductory discussion of this paper above, was that a trawl through the field entitled "results observed/reported" reveals that few of the participants observed outcomes inconsistent with the pre-suppositions inherent in the formulation of the problem and their planned intervention to solve the problem, both, as commented on before, influenced by a degree of Applied Linguistic theory. Nor, despite the basis of their course in

reflective practice, did the formulation of results, with few exceptions, comment on the development of the personal view of these concepts as a result of the action research

Two comments may be made on these observations:

5.1 With regard to the lack of critical findings, it may be that participants make use of the cycles of their research to adapt themselves to a defined outcome in such a way that any lack of success is already discounted in the adaptation of the cycle. One has perhaps to imagine that the outcomes are pre-defined by the Applied Linguistic theory used to define the Research Question in the Research Project, and the Action Research is conceived of by the participants as a continuous process of progress toward a successful outcome which is built into the notion of Action Research. This would seem to be regrettably "positivist" in the way criticised in Carr & Kemmis (1986). In the light of these findings, perhaps more attention needs to be paid to the area of critical evaluation in the Action Research Guide.

5.2 With regard to the lack of self-awareness and reflection on the development of the concepts, it might well be that participants had not understood this to be an important aspect of their results. They simply commented on what in their judgement, happened in their classroom despite the fact that they were specifically asked to reflect on the value to them of carrying out the Action Research. It would seem that this, too, should be addressed in the advice given to participants in the Action Research Guide.

6. Summary and projections for the future

On the basis of the experience of the operation of the programme to date, one can tentatively propose that the database can serve to provide interested users with an idea of the range of approaches taken in the University of Tolima, and the implementation of the programming in Filemaker Pro allows searches of the database from which users can discover what has been the experience in the University of Tolima with different techniques both of teaching and researching. It would obviously be interesting if the database could be extended to include work in the Area of Action Research applied to TESOL undertaken in other institutions, perhaps with very different approaches and assumptions. An interesting possibility, floated with Moray House Institute of Education, is that the database could be made available on the internet and that teachers interested in undertaking Action Research in the area of TESOL should have the opportunity not only of consulting what could be a growing body of information of research undertaken, but also of inputting results of new researches. It is to be hoped that this work can be accommodated within some programme of developmental research.

## REFERENCES

- Allwright D & K Bailey (1991) *Focus on the Language Classroom* Cambridge U.K. and New York, Cambridge Univ Press.
- Bird, Norman et al. (Eds) (1994) *Language and Learning: papers presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual international language in education conference*. Hong Kong, Institute of Language in Education, Department of Education.
- Burgess, R G (Ed) (1985) *Issues in Educational Research: Qualitative Methods* London U.K. The Falmer Press.
- Carr, Wilfred & Stepehn Kemmis (1986) *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research* London U.K. and Philadelphia PA Falmer Press/Deakin Univ Press.
- COFE (1993) *Colombian Framework for English, Working Document 3: Action Research* London U.K. Thames Valley Univ. (Mimeo).
- Cohen L & L Manion (1994) *Research Methods in Education (Fourth Edition)* London U.K. and New York, Routledge.
- Cousin, W D (1997 a) "Action Research for Reflective Practice – But whose action? (The role of the Research Project)" University of Nariño, Pasto How – the Journal of ASOCOPI 1.1. (1997) pp 18-27.
- Cousin, W. D. (1997b) "The design of INSET courses – a constructivist interpretation of reflection-in-action" University of Nariño, Pasto How – the Journal of ASOCOPI 1.2. (1997) pp 52-60.
- Cousin, W D & D A Arias (1996, 1997) *Especialización en Educación con Enfoque en Docencia del Inglés: Módulo de Enfoque e Investigación: Action Research Guide* Ibagué, Colombia, University of Tolima Postgraduated Programme.
- Ebutt D (1985) "Educational Action Research : Some General Concerns and Specific Quibbles" in Burgess (Ed) (1985).

- Elliot, Jhon (1991) *Action Research for Educational Change* Milton Keynes U.K. and Bristol PA, Open Univ. Press.
- Kemmis S & R McTaggart (1983). *The Action Research Planner* Geelong, Australia, Deakin Univ. Press Translated as:  
Kemmis S & R McTaggart (1988, 92) *Cómo Planificar La Investigación Acción* Laertes S.A.
- Lewin, K (1946) "Action Research and Minority Problems" *Journal of Social Issues* 2 (1946) pp34-46
- Mueller (1994) "Action Research contributes more to teaching than just solving discrete problems in the classroom". In Bird et al. (1994)
- Nunan D (1994) "The more things change the more they stay the same: or Why Action Research doesn't work" Paper presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> ILEC conference at the Institute of Language Education, Department of Education, Hong Kong.
- Nunan D (1990) "Action Research in the Language Classroom" in Richards & Nunan (1990).
- Nunan D (1992) *Research Methods in Language Learning* Cambridge U.K. and New York, Cambridge Univ Press.
- Richards JC & C Lockhart (1994) *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms* Cambridge U.K. and New York, Cambridge Univ Press.
- Richards JC & D Nunan (1990) *Second Language Teacher Education* Cambridge U.K. and New York, Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Schön Donald A (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner* New York, Basic Books.
- Schön Donald A (1987) *Educating The Reflective Practitioner* San Francisco CAL, and London U.K. Jossey Bass.
- Stenhouse L (1975) *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* Oxford U.K. and Portsmouth NH, Heinemann.
- Wallace MJ (1991) *Training Foreign Language Teachers* Cambridge U.K. and New York, Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Wallace, M J (Forthcoming 1997) *Action Research for Foreign Language Teachers* Cambridge U.K. and New York, Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Whyte, William Foote (Ed) (1991) *Participatory Action Research* Newbury Park, CA and London U.K. Sage.

## Appendix

### Examples of Records from the Database

Title: How can the teacher make use of Ludic Activities to reinforce Vocabulary

Principal researcher: Andres

Other Researcher:

Sponsoring Institution

Supervising Institution: Univ. of Tolima

Supervisor's

Name: Ulises

Host Institution Type: -colegio (High School)

Target population: Mixed about 12 years old

Problem: Vocabulary recall with short attention span

Language Skill Area: Oral Skills

Techniques: Games, Group work

Topics: Home, Farm animals

Intervention/action: Motivate, emphasise ludic

Theoretical justification:

Research Area: participation, recall

Research methodology: Teacher diary; colleague observer

Results: Ss motivated to participate

Divulcation: Presented to peer group of teachers

Title: How can the teacher make use of pre-reading questioning to activate Ss previous knowledge about reading

Principal researcher: Blanca

Other Researcher:

Sponsoring Institution:

Supervising Institution: Univ. of Tolima

Supervisor's Name: William D Cousin

Host Institution: Colegio Alberto Santofimio Caycedo.

Host Institution Type: Colegio (High School)

Target Population: 8<sup>th</sup> grade boys and girls of 14-16

Problem: Ss read mechanically without comprehension

Language Skill Area: Reading

Techniques: Pre-reading Q-ing: Use of mother tongue

Topics: Alimentation in Pregnancy; in vitro fertilization; the family

Intervention/action: T questioning in L1; group work theoretical justification:

Activation of schemata of previous knowledge

Research Area: Ss formulate relevant Qs; Ss attitude to activities

Research methodology: Audio recording; Peer observation; data on Qs formulated

Results: Improved motivation towards FL reading;

Divulcation: Oral presentation to group of peer teachers

Title: Can role-plays encourage an active participation of all class members in activities directed to improve speaking skills?

Principal researcher: Carlos

Other Researcher:

Sponsoring Institution:

Supervising Institution: University of Tolima

Supervisor's Name: Ulises

Host Institution: Colegio Integrado San Pablo, Victoria, Caldas, Colombia.



Host Institution Type: Colegio (High School).

Target population: 11<sup>th</sup> grade 16-18 yrs mixed sex and ability.

Problem: poor motivation for oral interaction.

Language Skill Area: Oral interaction.

Techniques: role-playing; group work.

Topics: domestic; discussion of "peace" sex education" "sex before marriage".

Intervention/action: role-plays; group work.

Theoretical justification: gives opportunity for participation.

Research Area: Ss motivation towards oral interaction.

Research methodology: audio recording; teacher diary; self analysis of recordings with protocol.

Results: SS disclose hitherto unrecognised ability; Ss motivation and collaboration.

Divulcation: oral presentation to group of peer teachers.