

4 Supporting and empowering language teachers through action research communities

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Abstract

This chapter will introduce Action Research Communities for Language Teachers (ARC), a project funded by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) of the Council of Europe (2015-2018). The project aims to make action research techniques widely available to language teachers across Europe and to provide them with development opportunities which support them in conducting action research. The chapter provides an overview of the project and the training and development events organised, and highlights examples of action research projects undertaken by participating practitioners in schools and universities. It concludes with details of challenges and successes experienced by participants, and considerations of future steps.

Keywords: action research, professional development, language teaching, collaboration.

1. Introduction

ARC is a project funded by the ECML of the Council of Europe. The project aims to raise the profile of action research for language teachers across Europe

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and to show how undertaking action research can both empower teachers and benefit learners. This is being achieved by making techniques for action research widely available to language teachers; strengthening professional networks by linking academic expertise on action research and good practice in language classrooms and by enabling teachers to reflect on practice and to test innovations within a community of practice (Gallagher-Brett & Lechner, 2017). Within these broader aims, the ARC team has also set out to design action research tools to support teachers in different educational sectors in conducting their own action research and to create European models for peer learning.

Action research puts teachers at the centre of creating educational change and developing increased knowledge and understanding of their own practice (Elliott, 1991, 2011). It starts from practical questions that teachers may have about their teaching and offers them a range of research tools and techniques that they can employ to investigate these questions, including research journals, observations, interviews, photography, video recordings, and dossiers (Feldman, Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 2018).

Action research involves a continual cycle of action and reflection and has the potential to empower teachers to act autonomously in their own classrooms and to bring about improvements to teaching (e.g. Altrichter & Posch, 2007; Elliott, 2011). It also supports them in developing the skills of systematic inquiry into their own practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982). The ARC team therefore considers that action research is a significant professional development tool for language teachers. Its collaborative nature also means that it can help teachers feel less isolated (Burns, 2005), which we propose could be important for language teachers who often work as individuals, sometimes as the only language teacher in a school (Borthwick & Gallagher-Brett, 2014).

In this paper, I provide an overview of the project, which is a work in progress, and the training and development opportunities organised by the ARC team. My focus is on outputs from the main project workshop held in Graz in November 2016. I also highlight examples of action research projects undertaken by participants and discuss project challenges and successes.

2. Method

As one of the central aims of the ARC project has been to encourage classroom practitioners with differing levels of expertise to engage with action research, we were particularly keen to adopt a practical approach and therefore utilised [Altrichter and Posch \(2007\)](#). We believed that this accessible text, which is also available in English (e.g. [Feldman et al., 2018](#)) would be helpful to teachers as it can support them in carrying out and reporting on classroom projects. It provides detailed practical guidance on finding starting points for research, formulating research plans, collecting and analysing data, developing action strategies, and making practitioners' knowledge public.

We began by organising a series of conversations between partners with the aim of bringing together our diverse European action research traditions and ensuring that these were included in our approach. We then conducted discussions with language teachers in different educational sectors to obtain a range of perspectives on action research and on the likely training and development needs of teachers interested in carrying out this approach. We held action research workshops for teachers in different European countries where they were introduced to action research tools and techniques and invited to explore aspects of interest in their own practice and to develop collaborative plans for projects. Key project events held to date are listed in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Key professional development events organised by ARC

Event	Participants	Event aims
April 2016: International Week Pedagogical University Tirol, Austria	Higher education language teacher educators and pre- service teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions on quality and enhancement in language teaching at tertiary level across Europe and on the role of action research in enhancing quality
October 2016: Action research CPD workshop in Sibiu/Hermannstadt, Romania	German teachers from different educational sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to action research tools and techniques • Discussions on finding a starting point in investigating classroom practice • Planning collaborative action research projects

November 2016: Main project CPD workshop at ECML, Graz, Austria	Language teachers from different sectors, teacher educators, language advisory teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to action research tools and techniques • Discussions on finding a starting point in investigating classroom practice • Planning collaborative projects
May 2018: Action research network meeting at ECML, Graz, Austria	Selection of language teachers from previous Graz workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of action research projects undertaken and feedback
June 2018: Action research CPD workshop Reykjavik, Iceland	Language teachers from different educational sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to action research tools and techniques • Discussions on finding a starting point in investigating classroom practice • Planning collaborative action research projects

Our main project workshop in Graz in November 2016 attracted school and university language teachers and teacher educators from 31 European countries. Participants were invited to present on an aspect of language teaching practice in their own contexts and to gain a deeper understanding of the issues involved using the methodology of analytic discourse. We also introduced action research methods and the concept of action research cycles (Altrichter & Posch, 2007). Participants then formed into groups with those of similar interests or contexts and developed plans for small collaborative classroom projects. They subsequently returned home to begin work on their projects and members of the ARC team acted as critical friends, providing advice and feedback during the process in line with Stenhouse's (1975) ideas (as cited in Kember et al., 1997). Initial results were reported in either English or German and were shared with the wider project community via Padlet. Participants were then invited to present their findings and to discuss next steps for their research at a network meeting in Graz in May 2018.

3. Results and discussion

The main project workshop in Graz resulted in project plans spanning a wide range of topics and interests including critical thinking (involving participants

from Albania, Latvia, Netherlands, Malta), the use of social media in language teaching (Iceland, Croatia), and teachers as co-constructors of knowledge (Bulgaria, Germany, Norway, Slovenia, Switzerland) among others. Several projects included cross-sector partnerships involving school and university teachers and almost all included collaboration between teachers in different countries. The only exception to this was a project on teaching vocabulary strategies in Ireland which involved participants from different sectors – English as an Additional Language (EAL) and primary Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) – working together.

Although a small number of participants withdrew from engagement, ten of eleven proposed projects were completed, which seemed to us to demonstrate a high level of engagement with the process. Examples from completed projects are described below.

Participants from Finland and France investigated the role of a range of student-centred activities in the language classroom among university learners of German (Finland) and English (France). They found that students were very motivated by these activities but that they needed to be carefully planned and scaffolded. They concluded that action research is an effective means of supporting teachers' professional development (Majjala & Pagèze, 2018). In Ireland, our participants trained EAL and MFL teachers to teach vocabulary-noticing strategies. On their return to school, the teachers trained learners in language support and MFL classes in using the strategies. Data collected from students by means of questionnaires showed that they felt better able to cope with learning after being introduced to the strategies. Questionnaires and interviews with teachers revealed that they found the experience of doing action research empowering, (Kenny & Puig, 2018) in line with suggestions in the literature (Elliott, 2011). In Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, research was conducted by our participants into the attitudinal and motivational impact of embracing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as a teaching methodology in vocational schools. Using student questionnaires and interviews, Manic and Gjoreska (2018) found that students reported greater confidence and enjoyment from attending CLIL classes than standard language classes.

There were challenges along the way both during the professional development events and in participants' project outputs. As members of the ARC team, we found it difficult to cover all the required ground on action research methods in our workshops and had to improvise and provide additional advice to teachers once their action research was underway.

Several of the proposed collaborations did not work effectively and teachers reported instances of co-collaborators agreeing to do the action research, but then finding themselves unable to commit to it or find the time.

As we expected, university participants were more familiar with conducting and writing up research than school teachers. A group of four school teachers from the main Graz workshop in 2016 experienced difficulties in following the action research cycle and in reporting on their research. It became clear when they presented their findings at our network meeting in May 2018 that they had carried out investigations into aspects of lesson planning using research tools, which they had found valuable but that their reports did not constitute action research. The ARC team therefore subsequently devised a checklist of detailed steps in the action research cycle to enable these teachers to move on from their exploratory results and to report more explicitly on the different stages of their action research. Two of these teachers have succeeded in doing that and we are hopeful that the others will complete their research successfully.

4. Conclusions

Overall, we believe that the ability of participants to conduct and complete their projects has been successful, as evidenced in the high levels of engagement and project completion. Examples highlighted show that action research has supported professional development and has empowered teachers. We are also gathering feedback on the impact of the broader community of practice as participants have reported that they gained encouragement from each other and from the ARC team.

We are continuing to work with participants to finalise their results and to explore with them the next steps in their action research journeys. This remains ongoing work. Whilst we are greatly encouraged by the successes experienced, it remains to be seen whether teachers will continue with action research once the project is over.

The ARC team is also working on an annotated action research spiral which can be used as a tool for language teachers who would like to do action research and on open resources for action research. All project results and resources will be shared on the website (www.ecml.at/actionresearch) and it is hoped that these will be useful for teachers from across Europe.

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