

Anna Bączkowska

Action research in applied linguistics



### 1. Action research and applied linguistics defined

Action research (AR) is a methodological programme which, although gaining in popularity fast, is not a commonly known or well rooted term and concept. A more readily recognized concept is the second term in the title of this paper – Applied Linguistics (AL) – but again, only superficially. When it comes to a more specific characterization of AL, it is equally as ‘hazy’ as AR. In order to present a satisfactory explication of the above issues it is necessary that both terms, which strive for legitimacy, be concisely defined.

AL, as already noted by Bączkowska and Świącicka (in press), is a multifaceted notion which can be accounted for on several plains. On the horizontal plain, AL is realized by applying linguistics to other sciences when solving non-linguistic problems (then we are talking about Applied Linguistics); or by employing other sciences in order to solve linguistic problems (then we are talking about Linguistics Applied). The *applied* characteristic is thus reflected in the interdisciplinary bias, wherein one science is subordinate (applied) and provides information and tools for another, core science. The output of research pursued on this plain is thus, despite the term *applied*, rather theoretical.

On the vertical plain, the term *applied* is understood in a practical sense, i.e. as the application of some theory to praxis. Three areas where theory is applicable to practice have been recognized by Bączkowska and Świącicka – language teaching and learning (educational linguistics or applied linguistics with small letters), translation, and communication – although, naturally, there are more possible areas of applicability (e.g. lexicology, computational linguistics). The term Applied Linguistics is also understood

to indicate the most general notion which engulfs Applied Linguistics (proper), applied linguistics (educational linguistics), and Linguistics Applied, and is the most popularized and easily recognizable term. All the above terms and notions are presented graphically in Figure 1.

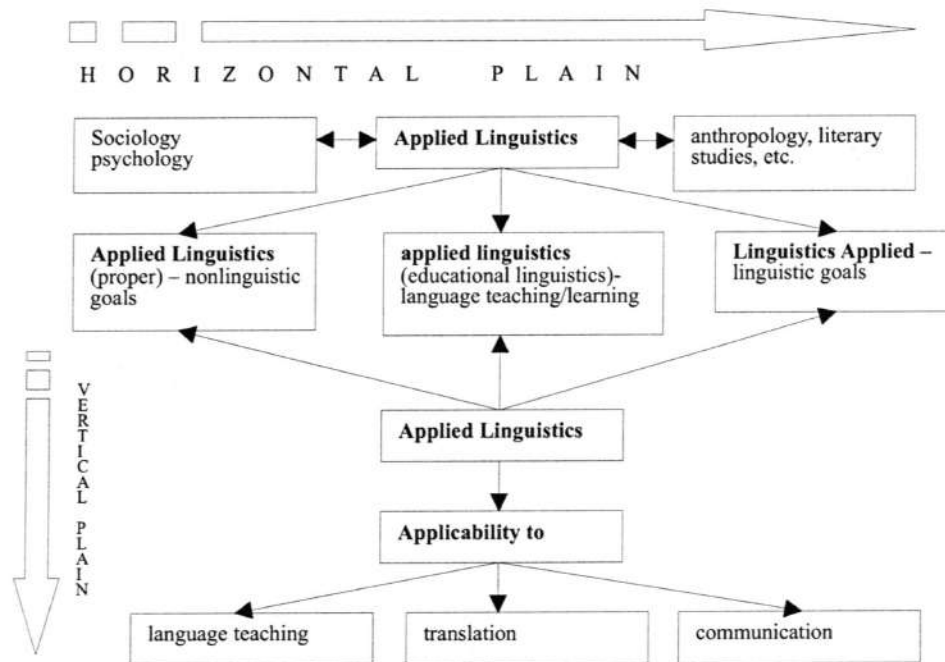


Figure 1. The scope of Applied Linguistics

Now, let us turn again to the term ‘action research’. Generally speaking, AR is a term coined by Kurt Lewin in 1946 and it is used in social scientific enquiry. It is about changing a present habitat into a more friendly environment for social benefit. When used in educational terms, its goal is a purposeful initiation of practice-driven changes which are beneficial for an educational environment in which both a researcher and participants are involved. These actions thus include the facilitation of learning for the benefit of learners, as well as – more importantly – improvement of skills by a self-developing, reflective teacher. Since the researcher learns himself, he is also a participant, as well as a practitioner. It is believed that “the practitioner is someone who is a professional with a portfolio of skills which includes, most notably, an enquiring mind”. Actions are based on an on-going self-study which aims for renewal on a personal and social level, i.e. learning about something, using it in (teaching)

practice, reflecting on it, improving it, and re-implementing it (personal development level), and thus imparting the newly gained knowledge to learners (social benefit level). In consequence, it is not only learners that learn something, but also the teacher/researcher. From this point of view, learning is reciprocal and, so to speak, self-perpetuating. Interestingly, although action research is gaining in popularity in applied linguistics, with regard to translation studies, as noted by Hatim (2001: 7), it “has been slow to react to these developments”, i.e. to action research.

To summarize, on a practical level AR instigates constant modifications and improvements, while on a theoretical level it triggers innovation of what presently exists in the field of theory with the view to enhancing what will occur in the future. AR thus creates a link between theory and practice, as (modified) theory arises out of practical, experiential knowledge gained and incorporated in a theory by a participant-researcher.

On a more specific level, McNiff and Whitehead (2002:15) define ‘action research’ as “a process of learning from experience”, wherein “a final outcome does not exist”, as “we are always on the move”. The outcome thus gives way to learning *per se*. We learn through the process of undertaking research and introducing modifications to the current state in order to enhance our work (teaching), rather than by acquiring mere facts. Knowledge is more often associated with what one can *do* and how open one is to alternations and innovations, as well as how ready one is to learn and develop, rather than what one currently knows.

If research is conducted by a researcher who is a practitioner at the same time, he learns himself through the research, as AR is ‘a kind of self-reflective practice’, which involves gathering some data, reflecting on the *action*, and ‘generating evidence from the data, and making claims to knowledge based on conclusions drawn from validated evidence’. (Observe that AR is thus reminiscent of a reflective teacher approach known from teacher development series). Since it involves *action*, it contradicts ‘arm-chair research’. As such, the outcomes of AR are relatively subjective, as the researcher is ‘closer’ to his subjects. He does not play a role typically found in ethnographic research, notably ‘case studies’, remaining in the tradition of interpretative methodology (i.e. the role of a researcher-observer); nor is he verifying variables in terms of cause and effect paradigms, employed in empirical research. AR has stemmed from a critical theoretic research methodology which allows for contextual conditions (historical, cultural, social, and personal – i.e. the researcher’s experience), believed to mould one’s life and the way one perceives what is being

experienced. As McNiff and Whitehead (2002) put it, it is inadequate to make comments on one's experience if one's own experience is not seen through the prism of 'their own situatedness' (historical, cultural and social).

In terms of methodology, action research should involve a number of procedures. First, a researcher should reflect on the state-of-the-art practice employed and, as a result, should be able to indicate the 'points of interest', i.e. those areas of practice which he wants to improve. Next, a project of how to initiate and enforce changes should be prepared and implemented. A critical evaluation of AR follows this stage, together with certain modifications. The researcher implements the alternations again, and continues with the 'action' until satisfied with that aspect of his work (McNiff et al., 1996). Following McNiff and Whitehead (2002: 72), the following issues could be of concern to an action researcher to help him imagine potential modifications to his work: "what is my concern?, why am I concerned?, what do I think I can do about it?, how will I gather evidence to show that I am influencing the situation?, how will I ensure that any judgements I make are reasonably fair and accurate?, what will I do then?".

## **2. Action research in practice**

Examples of action research applied to English language teaching are many, but most of them, at least in Poland, concern research conducted by students of English Philology for the purpose of their MA diploma projects. Publication of students' action research results are scarce. As a consequence, a number of pre-service teachers are familiarized with the idea of action research yet apart from this experience obtained by individual students, in the academic world practical realizations of action research as a novel methodology paradigm are not frequently discussed. In the world literature on action research in education (not only in TEFL context) there are several studies presented, for example, in McNiff and Whitehead (2002), and in Burns (1999). In what follows, we shall give a brief account of two studies illustrated by Burns.

Anne Burns deals with collaborative AR used by English language teachers. In the practical section of her book she mentions (very briefly) the implementation of AR to (i) professional teacher development (conducted by Jane Hamilton), (ii) contexts outside the classroom (conducted by Janette Kohn), (iii) competencies project (conducted by the staff of Wilkins Intensive English Centre), (iv) strategies for 'non-language' out-

comes (conducted by Lenn de Leon). Individual AR experiences, concerning both teaching and social contexts, are provided by McNiff and Whitehead (2002). Educational contexts are discussed in connection with (i) presentations as a way of self-assessment and identification of students' learning strategies (by C.O. Muimhneachain), (ii) improving computer literacy and the relation between ICT and the quality of learning (by R. O'Neill).

Jane Hamilton's (J.H.) dual project (described in Burns 1999) was concerned with being a facilitator (J.H. as a teacher) of collaborative research of a Technical and Further Education college, Institute of TAFE in Victoria, Australia, on the one hand, and "a research of what this role entails" (J.H. as a researcher) on the other (Burns 1999: 215). Hamilton was responsible for organizing in-service teacher training (short, up to five days workshops) for her colleagues working with her in the Language Studies Department. Along with these sessions, all teachers were allowed to "immerse in their own research activities". This phase meant "observing, monitoring and reflecting" on the implications of their research projects, which involved all teachers and the facilitator. Ideas were exchanged and research data pooled together at joint meetings of the group as well as during individual sessions with J. Hamilton. On the basis of her research Hamilton has concluded that collaborative AR is a positive and a recommended avenue for professional development for the following reasons: participants had an ongoing support, they could observe work-in-progress of their colleagues and reflect upon and validate their own work. On a more general note, both individuals and the institute benefited from AR.

Teaching heterogeneous students of ESL courses was an object of research for J. Kohn (J.K.). Students' progress was facilitated by encouraging them to use English outside the classroom. Her research was concerned primarily with how to motivate students to do so. Kohn's role was thus to teach ESL to a group of 18 students of diverse nationality and to make them use English in real life situations on the one hand (J.K. as a teacher), and to ponder on how to obtain this goal (J.K. as a researcher) on the other. Kohn conducted a survey concerning her students' practices outside the classroom. After two weeks of data collection, Kohn discussed the results with the class as well as with other teachers. The results allowed her to identify the environments in which students did and did not use English and then to present the outcomes to the group. Students learned about their peers' practices concerning contexts where English was being employed and as a result of this awareness-raising action they

started to use English in more situations. This tendency was cultivated by the teacher-researcher by setting tasks which required students' participation in out-of-class events and communicative situations (e.g. gathering information about current local and national events or local community services, such as sports clubs, further education courses, etc.). The results of her research were disseminated and discussed in her teaching center. Thus Kohn achieved two goals: on the practical and 'local' level she motivated students to use English outside the classroom more often, and on the theoretical (global) level she developed a way (a template activity) of facilitating speaking outside the classroom.

### **3. Concluding remarks**

Within the three main educational research paradigms, i.e. empirical, interpretive and critical theoretic, action research is embedded in the last one. AR can represent three main approaches: interpretive, critical theoretic and living theory (McNiff and Whitehead 2002: 58). Regardless of which of the three emerging approaches one adheres to, AR as such is the research paradigm growing fast in popularity in applied linguistics, in particular in teaching English as a foreign language, which sharply departs from traditional 'armchair' philosophy and bravely resorts to *action*, which is conducted "not by some, but by all", as "we are all judged by our actions, especially when action is part of our trade mark" (McNiff and Whitehead 2002: 25).

### **References**

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### Summary

Recent trends in research methodology promote data-driven paradigms which rely on hands-on experiential knowledge of a researcher-participant. Within this framework of research, gaining in popularity are approaches which inscribe in the critical theoretic framework, of which probably best known and currently oftexploited is action research. The present article delineates the role and the working of action research in applied linguistics. The depth of applied linguistics, its subfields, interdisciplinary character and terminological ambiguity are issues discussed in the introductory part of this paper.

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