## Book Review

''Developing language teacher autonomy through Action Research''

Erzsébet Ágnes Békés (iD)

Volunteer teacher-research mentor (affiliated to the Universidad Nacional de Educación, Cañar, Ecuador), ebekes@yahoo.co.uk

Developing Language Teacher Autonomy Through Action Research, Kenan Dikilitaş & Carol Griffiths. Palgrave Macmillan. (2017). 304 pp., Paperback: € 99.99, ISBN: 978-3-319-50739-2.
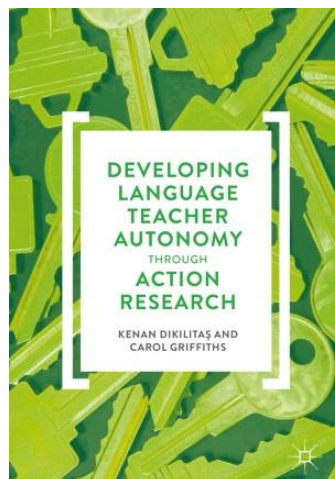
Action Research, as a form of teacher research, has gained more ground in English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts in the past several decades. Thanks to authors who have been working on propagating Reflective Practice (RP) and Action Research (AR) consistently for many years now (Burns, 2010; Freeman, 1998; Wallace, 1991) and a number of initiatives run by institutions, such as the British Council (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018), there are now a growing number of publications that are available for teachers, teacher educators and mentors on how to start and sustain classroom research for the benefit of teachers and learners. The dissemination of teacher research reports and accounts has also risen exponentially owing to, among others, the consistent efforts of IATEFL's Research Special Interest Group (see especially the freely downloadable books published between 2015 and 2020 at http://resig.weebly.com/books.html).

The volume written by Kenan Dikilitaş and Carol Griffiths stands out from the wealth of such resources in two aspects. One is the depth and breadth of presenting the concept of AR

✉**Corresponding Author:** ebekes@yahoo.co.uk

among the various kinds of research that practitioners may conduct, and the other is the focus on one specific aspect, namely, how AR can develop teacher autonomy. The book is innovative in the sense that it encourages teachers to start engaging with AR while reading the book since the authors supply examples, list down questions for discussion and reflection, and set specific tasks related to each stage of the AR process.

The authors themselves have long been involved in Action Research, teacher education and support, with their professional pathways leading to ever-extending teacher-research mentoring activities. The material for the book itself was collected and subsequently written up at a time when both Kenan Dikilitaş and Carol Griffiths were based in Turkey and were actively engaged in AR projects mentored by the first author in collaboration with IATEFL's Research SIG. They identified a gap for a resource that could guide and empower language teachers to engage in AR to develop their autonomy in doing research and, as a result, in teaching English. A quick note might be required here: even though the title says, "language teachers", the authors' professional background and experience are firmly rooted in and pertain to English Language Teaching (ELT).

The book is especially relevant in the context of Turkey because it was the first publication that emerged from local experiences, which were then successfully transformed into formalised knowledge. The volume builds on many teachers' voices from the Turkish local context and encourages English teachers to gain the confidence that they can conduct research into their practices and have the means to disseminate the results even under circumstances when such goals do not appear to be easily reachable.

So, let us now have a look at how the book, which is divided into 11 chapters, provides a step-by-step practical approach and an array of hands-on activities for (English) language teachers on their journey to develop autonomy.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to AR, presenting it as a kind of "active investigation" (p.1) that focuses on examining issues that teachers might perceive as problems or puzzles, or may be uncertain about. AR is treated as a "cyclical and spiral-based process" (p. 3) that consists of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. An important part of this chapter is the clear and detailed explanation of how AR is different from academic research. As a teacher-research mentor myself, I am aware why this issue is highly relevant, especially in tertiary education contexts, where teachers tend to be more familiar with academic research. Another element that I found useful was the description of Collaborative AR including its advantages and disadvantages. In many contexts, working collaboratively can benefit teacher researchers for "a healthy co-construction of new knowledge" (p.15), but working collaboratively can create tensions and lead to fraught relationships as well.

This introductory chapter also lays out the authors' thoughts about teacher autonomy. They emphasize that there are various activities that create opportunities for teacher development. These can, in turn, lead to autonomy, which is understood as "a teacher's capacity to engage in self-directed teaching" (p.35). Dikilitaş and Griffiths stress that AR is eminently useful in this regard, since "it has the potential to help teachers build … self-confidence to deal with critical questions and problematic issues in the classroom through going deeper into the issue on the basis of data collection and analysis" (p.36).

Chapters 2-7 describe the various stages of AR starting with how research questions can be clarified, and hypotheses formulated. Chapter 3 provides a detailed presentation of research methods describing the options that teacher researchers may have and discussing the issues that

often arise in classroom research contexts. Such is the explanation of how and why quasi-experimental forms of research can be more appropriate in teaching/learning situations where 'true' experiments would be difficult to set up and might raise ethical concerns.

Chapter 4 deals with how the research context, namely, where the research is carried out and who the participants are, will define the way the AR project is designed. A particularly meaningful section is the description of how teachers may develop new roles while carrying out their classroom research. These emerging roles highlight how teachers researching their practice can build rapport with their students (involved as co-researchers), which can lead to enhanced interaction and collaboration in their future classrooms.

Chapter 5 describes the data collections process starting with the basics of research ethics and then presents the types of data, (often from multiple sources for triangulation), and the tools for data collection. There is an especially useful list of questionnaires that action researchers may wish to administer, proving that beginning teacher researchers do not need to reinvent the wheel and can rely on trusted surveys whose use has been replicated over the years in different contexts.

Chapter 6 dwells on the analysis of the data gathered. The methodology employed for processing and analysing the data is probably one of the most challenging parts for teacher researchers, but the authors contend that familiarity with some of the statistical procedures adds to the validity of the research, since it is teachers themselves that have the deepest understanding of their data. I must confess that this part of the book seemed quite daunting to me, but the data analysis processes are broken down to steps (commands in software programs), and are bound to reveal findings that can help interpret the data with a high degree of validity. The same applies to the coding of qualitative data, a process I find both engaging and compelling.

Chapter 7 looks at the discussion phase, namely, the interpretation of the data the teacher researcher has gathered, as well as the limitations that may need to be taken into account. One limitation in the case of Action Research is the issue of generalizability, since in AR the number of participants is usually relatively low, but this can be helped by stating that "the generalization is … confined to a particular sampling group" (p.165). In the section on the implications of AR projects, the authors emphasize that these can lead to practical and pedagogical considerations resulting in improved instructional practices. This takes us back to the issue of teacher autonomy, because "rather than teaching with the results of professional researchers' recipes or top-down curriculum decisions, or coursebooks, teachers can enjoy taking the control of their own learning and teaching process" (p.166).

The rest of the volume takes a different turn: there are example studies included a chapter on how to present and write up action research followed by researcher narratives. The four example studies (quasi-experimental, a case study, a questionnaire study, and a mixed-methods study) provide clear guidance as to how rigorously conducted AR "… can add … to the depth and breadth of accumulated knowledge" (p.172). The authors encourage teacher researchers to replicate these studies, for which they provide two reasons: first, replication studies constitute a helpful way of allowing teacher researchers to gain confidence in conducting research and second, their findings "could add to or reduce the generalizability of the conclusions" reached in previous studies (p.172).

In my understanding of how the findings of AR projects can be disseminated, the layout (headings) of the example studies largely follows the 'classic' structure of academic research papers in Second Language Acquisition, which is justified, because most journals in Applied

Linguistics or ELT require this format (often even supplying a template and strict word limits). However, in my experience, such write-ups might be more ambitious than what many teacher researchers would commit to. Nevertheless, it is a bonus to have such high-standard examples that one might wish to emulate.

Chapter 9 is closely related to the dilemma of whether teacher researchers have the support and the resources to write up their AR in the form of fully-fledged academic research articles. The authors are careful enough to 'start small', namely, mentioning a number of ways how the results can be reported by using small-scale and non-threatening ways of dissemination, such as presenting the results in a staff meeting or giving a poster presentation. For the less faint-hearted, this chapter provides detailed and useful guidance for formal write-ups, including journal articles or even a book chapter. How formal and informal ways of writing up research can differ is neatly summarised in two Tables (pp. 231-232), which make it easy to grasp the level of complexity (of structure, not necessarily depth of thinking) that sets research articles and AR reports and accounts apart.

Chapter 10 contains several narratives provided by researchers on their attitudes and opinions regarding Action Research. This is a very engaging part and I thoroughly enjoyed the 'stories', which provide a glimpse into the teacher researchers' way of thinking. Mumford's narrative, for example, shows that AR is often not linear, that there might be dead ends and one can gain unexpected insights by exploring a topic such as spoken grammar. I found the inclusion of narratives about why teachers are reluctant to engage in AR especially enlightening. These three short narratives summarize the arguments that are most often heard with regard to AR, for example, that teachers should not be obliged to do research, that AR cannot be of a quality that is required in academia and, therefore, it is not worth pursuing. The issues raised are such that any self-respecting teacher researcher or mentor would want to do an AR project on it!

Finally, Chapter 11 contains the authors' conclusions with special regard to how AR can develop teacher autonomy. They discuss the cognitive impact that may result in changes in the mindset of teacher researchers, such as growing self-confidence, knowledge increase and widening perspectives. The practical impact can bring about the employment of new teaching practices, the generating of new materials and modifications in one's instructional decisions. Last, but not least, AR can have an impact on interactions between teachers and learners, teachers and other teachers, and teachers and the administrative bodies, the latter leading to new perspectives and improved effectiveness of the institutions where the teacher researchers have conducted their studies.

As a practicing teacher-research mentor, I found Kenan Dikilitaş and Carol Griffiths' book invaluable because everything one wishes to know about AR is included with sufficient guidance and detail to help beginning teacher researchers and their mentors to start on an AR journey. Irrespective of its focus on AR and teacher autonomy, the volume could easily function as a course book at tertiary level ("Introduction into Educational Research") since it provides sufficient direction for conducting academic research, too.

However, the greatest benefit is that the book goes far beyond the theoretical tenets of Action Research. It functions as a practical guide for beginning teacher researchers and their mentors, for whom plentiful 'grounded' theory is provided to get started – and act.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

Dikilitaş, K., & Griffiths, C. (2017). *Developing language teacher autonomy through action research*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Copyrights