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Action Research

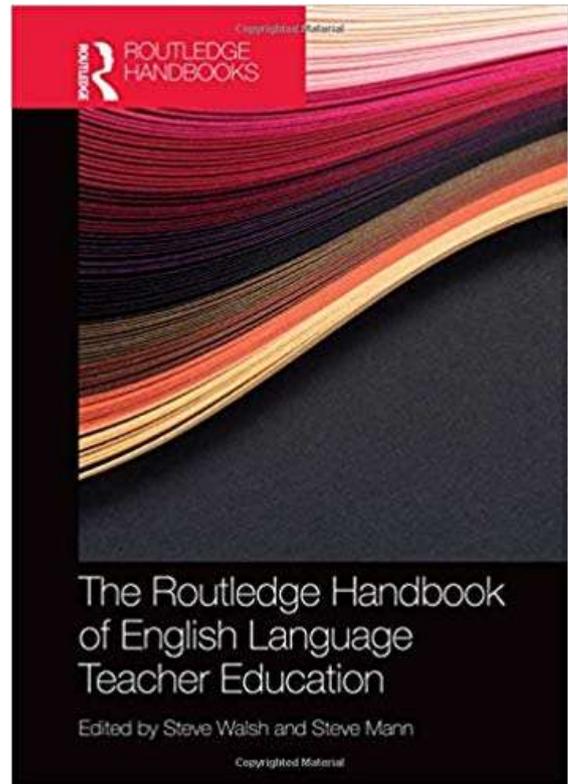
Darío Luis Banegas

Luis S. Villacañas de Castro

ABSTRACT

Action research (AR) equips teachers with systematised reflections and rich data to transform, change, improve, and contest their

own classroom practices. Thus, AR, as an inherent element in teaching, needs to be encouraged among teachers, and therefore it is in the hands of teacher educators in pre-service and in-service programmes and continuous professional development opportunities to provide student-teachers, teachers, and fellow teacher educators with awareness, knowledge, and experiences of AR. The aim of this chapter is to support teacher educators in disseminating the power of AR by discussion the implications of AR in ELTE (English language teacher education). We organise this chapter from general aspects to examples drawing on teacher educators' experiences. First, we define AR and summarise its value, the role of teachers, and the crucial relevance of motivation and sustainability in AR engagement. Second, we discuss features and conditions of AR in its preparation, navigation, and socialisation. Finally, we share examples of teacher educators involved in teaching, doing, and supporting AR carried out with student-teachers, teachers and teacher educators across ELTE.



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INTRODUCTION

Student-teachers, teachers, and teacher educators may ask themselves: Why should we do action research? Based on case studies and teachers' voices, Burns (2005) believes that, in terms of benefits, AR equips teachers with systematised reflections and rich data to transform, change, improve, and contest their own classroom practices. In addition, Edwards and Burns (2016a) suggest that AR can help teachers feel more confident about their teaching, feel more connected to their students, engage with research, and feel more recognised in their professional community. For the students, the impact is on the quality, reach, and significance of their learning. Thus, AR needs to be encouraged among teachers, and therefore it is in the hands of teacher educators in pre-service and in-service programmes and continuous professional development opportunities to provide student-teachers, teachers, and fellow teacher educators with awareness, knowledge, and experiences of AR.

Since our aim is to support teacher educators in disseminating the nature and power of AR, we organise this chapter from general aspects to examples from our own experience. First, we define AR and summarise its value, the role of teachers, and the crucial relevance of motivation and sustainability in AR engagement. Second, we discuss features and conditions of AR in its preparation, navigation, and socialisation. Finally, we share examples of teacher educators involved in teaching, doing, and supporting AR carried out with student-teachers, teachers and teacher educators across ELTE (English language teacher education). Readers may find that our recommendations can be helpful to both teachers and teacher educators given their role as empowerers.

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AR: AN OVERVIEW

We refer to AR as an umbrella acronym which includes different realisations of teachers investigating their own practices (Stenhouse 1975) to transform them, in line with Somekh's (2010: 104) emphasis on the educational dimension of all AR initiatives. 'Action research,' she says, 'is always a learning process, and in trying to bring about improvements in human interactions [...] the action researcher is always engaged in an educative process'. Framed in qualitative research, AR involves investigating an issue present in a given context, most likely a classroom or an institution, with the aim of implementing and evaluating change. To improve a situation, teachers need to act, reflect, and act again until they can see a transformation in practice achieved through synergistic efforts between those involved, for example teachers and students. In this section we focus on the transformative value of AR, the role of teachers, and the place of motivation and sustainability for AR to be meaningful and a trigger for empowerment and social justice.

The essential trait of AR is not that the teachers do the research, nor that they investigate their own practices —other forms of teacher research comply with this too. Rather, the defining trait of AR would be that the teachers' fundamental beliefs and ideas about education are fully engaged in the research process. AR is and cannot be disconnected from the general (even philosophical) questions concerning the purpose of education or its role in society, nor from how the latter should tie to choices of academic

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subject matter or pedagogical and didactic orientations. Insofar as this is the case, we think that AR is always *critical*, to the extent that it goes against the progressive deskilling of teachers and their conversion into mere *technicians* in the present neoliberal regime.

The fact that teachers' essential ideas about education are inscribed in AR also places strict boundaries and qualifies the research dimension. Whatever are the beliefs they hold about education, most teachers will agree that it is their job to contribute to education through *teaching* and making pupils learn. In the same way as 'the physician cannot experiment without attempting to heal', for Stenhouse ([1979] 2012: 133), 'the teacher cannot not learn [from AR] without undertaking that the pupils learn too'. That is why AR will always prioritize the action of teaching over research. 'The fundamental aim of action research', Elliott (1991: 49) claimed, 'is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge. The production and utilisation of knowledge is subordinate to, and conditioned by, this fundamental aim'. Indeed, if knowledge must empower action in AR (and not the other way around), then it must do so *while* and *where* the action is taking place, i.e. while the teacher *teaches* and the learners *learn*, as well and as much as possible. This fact not only confers a context-bound nature to AR and the knowledge it may generate; it also implies that action researchers, i.e. teacher researchers, should always make sure that the intrinsic aims of education are not being neglected at any point during the research process. For example, Banegas (2017a) developed an AR project to help his student-teachers develop their English language proficiency and benefit from linguistics knowledge. With this aim in mind, student-teachers' education

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became central in the context of the study, and the data collected emerged from their regular lessons, e.g. student-teachers' exams and assignments or the tutor-developed materials. This example shows that teachers integrate research into the regular teaching and learning processes, thus making students, and possibly other teachers and principals, participate in the transformative dynamics that underpin AR. The transformations that AR generates impact directly on the teachers carrying out AR (Burns 2005). However, the transformative value of AR is not circumscribed to a single classroom at a specific point in time. AR seeks transformation from the grassroots to larger systemic bodies and regulations (Somekh and Zeichner 2009), yet transformative practices do not change overnight, and the findings of teachers' research need to be supported for some time in order for teachers and institutions to feel that their efforts pay off in the long run. Therefore, the power of transformation underpinning AR is linked to two aspects: motivation and sustainability.

Drawing on notions of teacher motivation (Ushioda 2013), teachers' self-efficacy through teacher research (Wyatt and Dikilitaş 2016), and the central role played by teachers in AR (Burns 2010), it is often agreed that AR must be initiated by teachers themselves in response to an issue they feel curious about and are driven to explore. In order to support their motivation, teachers should not be left alone. Edwards and Burns (2016a: 14) remind us that 'a balance of bottom-up individual teacher motivation and top-down institutional support is crucial in ensuring the sustainability of the impact of AR over time'. In the Ethiopian context, Aga's (2017) AR study with teachers reveals that motivation to engage in AR is essential to counteract the effects of demotivating factors such as lack of time, bureaucratic processes and paperwork, funding

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opportunities, and teachers' lack of commitment to avoid accountability for their own practices. It follows that if motivation needs to be maintained, then sustainability in keeping a project running and sharing the outcomes must be secured. It is our understanding that the need for sustainability is a call for ELTE. Teacher educators are in an advantageous position to support AR since they may work with future and present teachers on different projects aimed at transforming practice and, ultimately, education. To increase sustainability, teacher educators can work on providing student-teachers and teachers with knowledge and awareness of AR not only by drawing on the literature but also by engaging them in AR within ELTE programmes. Research engagement goes hand in hand with collaboration and therefore AR is a collaborative enterprise as it can include colleagues and students. CAR (collaborative action research) stresses the collective and participatory nature of AR (Banegas, Pavese, Velásquez and Vélez 2013), however power imbalance should be minimised to maintain motivation and sustainability (Yayli 2012).

Whether teachers are doing AR alone or with colleagues, it is important to understand how AR can be prepared, navigated, and socialised. In the following section, we consider these three dimensions of AR.

AR: CONSIDERATIONS

A brief glance at the literature shows that AR in ELT can be found across a wide range of contexts and with different participants such as:

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- Young learners (Vaca Torres and Gómez Rodríguez 2017)
- Undergraduate students in ELTE programmes (Banegas 2017a, 2017b)
- Postgraduate students in ELTE programmes (Crawford Garrett, Anderson, Grayson and Suter 2015; Halbach 2016; Villacañas de Castro 2014)
- Novice and experienced teachers (Burns et al. 2017; Castro-Garcés and Martínez Granada 2016)

What all these contexts share is the way in which AR was carried out. There was initial planning, development, and socialisation of the experience. In this section we provide teacher educators with insights and suggestions about how to support AR in ELTE with student-teachers, teachers, and fellow teacher educators. These considerations apply to raising student-teachers' awareness and constructing knowledge about AR, empowering teachers to take full control of AR or supporting them through, for example, a university-school collaborative project.

Preparing for AR

As we have hinted above, an AR project starts with a practice-related issue or a question posed by teachers who wish to explore their own practices (Burns 2010). AR should never be imposed on teachers. In arranging an AR project in ELTE, firstly, it is imperative to consider the aims, the resources, possible obstacles, the support available, and, most importantly, how the project derives from and feeds into teachers' situated practices and curriculum development so that the ecological, i.e. research from/for the context, and critical dimensions of AR are ensured. The critical dimension of AR

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responds to critical pedagogy, i.e. a type of pedagogy that seeks to challenge hegemonic practices by empowering and emancipating teachers and learners to become agents of change, thus bringing about social justice (Giroux 2011). From critical pedagogy, it is also worth thinking outside the box and awakening teachers' pedagogical imagination with the notion of transforming education based on their context and their own images and dreams of how education and professional practices should be like. For example, Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2016) carried out an AR study with foreign language student-teachers in Finland to help them reflect on their identity and think of ways in which they could exercise prominent agency as full-time teachers.

In preparing for AR, it is important to develop a sensible timeframe, for example, a month, a term, or a whole academic year. Such a timeframe is often organised around spiralling cycles with stages (Burns 2010; Dikilitas and Griffiths 2017). There is no prescribed number of cycles to follow. For example, there are AR projects containing one (Yan 2017), three (Banegas 2017a), or four (Edwards and Burns 2016b) cycles. In order to record the history of an AR project whatever the number of cycles, it is advisable to keep a journal in which teachers describe, anticipate, and problematise their AR activities as they move from stage to stage and cycle to cycle. Below, we unpack the notion of cycles and stages focusing on what teachers need to plan ahead.

A cycle starts with an exploratory stage focused on initial investigations and reflections around the issue to address. Smith (2015) stresses the importance of understanding the

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context and issue with care before moving forward with an action plan to ensure that context-responsiveness is achieved. This first stage is followed by an action stage where the intervention to bring about change is carefully planned. At this stage, and preferably before, teachers need to think about how they will collect data to ensure that their project produces change. Then an intervention/implementation stage is put in place and it involves setting the planned course of action in motion and observing and exploring its impact. During this stage teachers can collect data through classroom observation, reflective journals, survey questionnaires, interviews, and learning and teaching artefacts (e.g. students' exams, teacher-made handouts). The data collected at that stage feeds into the following stage, that of reflection/evaluation of the intervention. Based on such reflections a new action stage begins with the aim of strengthening the intervention and ensuring the impact of the overall project. Although reflection/evaluation is usually placed at the end of a cycle, reflection occurs throughout the cycle as teachers need to be aware of what is happening in the classroom and what contextual factors may impinge on the overall project as it unfolds. Constant reflection is what makes AR iterative in nature; since the knowledge obtained in a first cycle shapes a second cycle (Edwards and Burns 2016b; Banegas 2017a). Finally, the reporting stage emerges as an opportunity to share the findings with, for example, those involved in the project, colleagues, and other professionals, and to further objectify and understand the educational subject matter, in turn. We return to this last stage further below.

Navigating AR

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By *navigating* we mean enacting the AR project. In this dimension of AR, teachers need to be flexible and open to changes as their context and participants may inevitably suggest a different course of action. As suggested above, navigating AR with confidence and awareness requires that teachers continue recording their reflections, actions, and plans in their research journal, and sharing their experience with others. Such a writing activity will help them be systematic with the AR cycles and stages planned, while keeping an open attitude, so that a healthy balance between flexibility and structure is achieved. Teachers need to remember that this kind of research is not objective, but rather intersubjective and context-bound, which entails that they need to listen to the context, their own voice, and their participants'. As the cycles go by and teachers look back at the data they have slowly been able to gather, they are likely to be impressed!

Having clear aims within an ecological perspective helps teachers gather as much data as possible through observations, interviews, questionnaires, surveys, teaching artefacts, students' work, etc. For example, in Banegas (2017a), data were collected through student-teachers' reflective journals, teacher educator's journal, group interviews, copies of the student-teachers' exams, and the worksheets developed by the teacher educator. Teachers can also collect data through photographs and videos (Basallo Gómez 2016). Whatever the data collection instruments, it is necessary to have written consent form of those who are, for example, interviewed, or photographed. For ethical reasons (Banegas and Villacañas de Castro 2015), we need to preserve the identity of the participants and make that, at least, confidentiality and anonymity are in place

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unless the participants explicitly state that, for example, they would like to appear with their real names in a report for publication. Another ethical issue has to do with making sure that the research methods do not conflict with the educational aims of the course, but rather to ensure that the students' learning and skills are measured and assessed within a context that is valuable and interesting for them—that is, within a situation that remains *educative*.

While navigating the project, teachers can start collecting and reading relevant books and articles which will provide them with the foundations and concepts of their project. AR may become more fruitful and navigable when findings are analysed as cycles unfold as cycles shape other cycles.

Socialising AR

Research is dead if it is not shared with colleagues in the local as well as international context and this is why a reporting stage must be ensured in any AR project. Most of all, we should share the findings with those who participated and made the project possible. This reporting stage, in addition, provides further chances to objectify, analyse, criticise, and contrast the research through peer deliberation. Findings could be shared in multiple ways such as a short video which can be uploaded on a YouTube channel or institutional website, a poster hung at your institution, a staff meeting, or a presentation at a local, regional, national, or international conference. For example, the *Teachers Research! Conference* in Buenos Aires 2017 organised by the British Council, APIBA

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(Asociación de Profesores de Inglés de Buenos Aires), and FAAPI (Federación Argentina de Asociaciones de Profesores de Inglés) invited teachers to share their research projects through paper presentations. Some of these presentations are available online at the British Council Argentina YouTube channel for dissemination. Teachers can also think about writing a report to be published in a newsletter, a professional magazine, or regional or international journals which are well-known for promoting AR, such as *Profile* and *Educational Action Research*. In addition, *Language Teacher Research* accepts submission under a section called Practitioner Research. For example, in 2016, the *Argentinian Journal of Applied Linguistics* published a special issue on language learning and intercultural citizenship education guest-edited by Porto and Byram (2015); the articles were mostly written by teachers and teacher educators sharing their interventions and reflections.

While writing contributes to dissemination of AR findings, it could be a daunting task. A good idea to avoid staring at a blank page is to start describing the context of the AR project, i.e. the institution, the programme, and the tutors and students involved. In addition, teachers may start by studying how articles are structured and worded. Copying phrases, reporting verbs and other features of academic writing can help teachers organise their notes and drafted findings. Once teachers start writing, they need to remind themselves that writing is a process through which there will be writing, deleting, rewriting, starting again, and producing different versions. In this process, looking for the support of a critical friend to provide feedback can become a tremendous learning experience.

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Now that we have provided a succinct description of preparing, navigating, and socialising AR, we will attempt to share specific and detailed examples of how AR can be included in ELTE.

AR AND ELTE

Since our main aim is to support teacher educators in their interest of spreading and supporting AR, we share below examples of teacher educators (1) teaching AR-based modules in IELTE, (2) doing AR projects on their practices in IELTE, and (3) supporting AR projects with (novice) teachers.

Teaching AR

In the province of Chubut, southern Argentina, a new four-year pre-service English language teacher education curriculum was introduced in 2014. With the aim of promoting teachers' identity as producers of school knowledge based in teacher research, especially AR, two modules were introduced. Both modules were two terms long and they involved the design and implementation of a research proposal in groups.

One module was called Educational Research (**Table 1**), delivered in Spanish through peer teaching, and it provided future teachers with an overview of educational research

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beyond ELT. The core contents of the module were: situated professional practice and research, research paradigms, features of literature reviews and theoretical frameworks, sources of academic knowledge, research critique, and features of a research project.

Table 1. Outline of an educational research module in IELTE.

Module: Educational Research Two tutors: A teacher educator specialised in general education and research and a teacher of English with experience in research and academic writing		Two-terms (March-November) 2 hours weekly
Aims:	To help future teachers reflect on their practices. To encourage interdisciplinary research. To examine educational settings as complex social objects. To empower future teachers to generate classroom knowledge. To develop critical thinking skills and academic writing skills.	
Term 1	During this term, student-teachers attend lessons on epistemology, research paradigms and research methodology. They also have workshops on academic reading and writing. In groups, they collect and analyse research articles on educational issues from Argentina and Latin America. They make presentations which summarise and critique some of those articles.	
Term 2	In this term, the lessons focus on designing a research project. In groups, student-teachers plan descriptive-exploratory studies which they implement in higher education or secondary education institutions. There are tutoring sessions so that the tutors in charge of the module provide them with specific feedback and support. They submit a report and make a presentation in front of their peers and teacher educators.	

This first module was significant because it helped student-teachers operationalise the results of systematic reflection and develop a research attitude in their development as future teachers. It was also a novelty, and a challenge for the teacher-educators in charge, as it was their first encounter with research through a module specifically designed to introduce educational research.

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The second module was called Research in ELT (Table 2) and it was delivered in English. The module aimed at educating future teacher-researchers from a perspective based on empowerment, participation, criticality towards dominant ELT discourse, bottom-up processes, and the development of context-responsive answers to educational issues, even if their answers did not match mainstream ELT. The core contents were: action research and teacher research, ethics in AR, participatory action research, research methods, and reflection through AR.

Table 2. Outline of an AR module in IELTE

Module: Research in ELT One tutor: A teacher of English with experience in research and academic writing	Two-terms (March-November) 2 hours weekly Term 1: face-to-face Term 2: face-to-face meetings every 2 weeks + work online
Aims:	To help future teachers reflect on their practices. To empower future teachers to generate classroom knowledge. To develop critical thinking skills and academic writing skills.
Term 1	During this term, student-teachers outline an AR project to be carried out in their own settings as student-teachers. The F2F lessons will provide opportunities to discuss the rationale of AR and research methods and relate this framework to their own projects. There will be opportunities to read and discuss AR-based studies published in different settings. The tutor can ask student-teachers to make a short presentation on a study of their own choice. During this term, the projects will be implemented and will continue over the second term. Together with implementation, student-teachers will be asked to start drafting their rationale, context description, and other parts a research report may contain.
Term 2	In this term, there will be lessons every two weeks together with

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	<p>online work through a platform which can channel student-teachers' concerns, experiences, and progress with their AR project. F2F lessons will also be used for student-teachers to share their work in progress.</p> <p>The term will end with the student-teachers submitting a report and presenting their research. Their reports will be collected and edited and shared as an institutional pdf book through different platforms and social networks with the aim of socialising the student-teachers' first experience with doing and writing research.</p>
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The module usually received positive evaluation from the student-teachers as it featured a learning-by-doing approach through which they started thinking about their research topic and questions from the start and developed further awareness of ELT research while experiencing it first-hand.

Leading research modules as condensed in Tables 1 and 2 implies that teacher educators need to becoming acquainted with recent studies and reviews on educational and action research in their region and elsewhere. It also implies selecting suitable reading material for student-teachers who approach research for the first time in their trajectories as learners. Furthermore, it means making sure that there is a balance between theory and practice since modules of this nature aim at doing research at the educational institutions where the student-teachers may be completing their practicum experience.

Doing AR

We usually say that teachers are surrounded by data. Their classrooms, whether material or digital, contain a whole universe ready to be explored. This situation also runs true in

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ELTE settings where teacher educators can collect data with their student-teachers in their higher education classrooms. Below we share two examples of teacher educators carrying out research on their own practices in IELTE triggered by issues they noted and shared with the student-teachers. While the first example (Table 3) shows one teacher educator with his student-teachers, the second example (Table 4) illustrates CAR as it involved another teacher educator and their student-teachers.

Table 3. Teacher educator-led AR in IELTE.

Issue:	What's the impact of this module on student-teachers' professional knowledge and English language proficiency? To what extent does the module respond to student-teachers' needs and expectations?
Module/Tutor	English Grammar (with a focus on systemic functional grammar) (Darío)
Timespan	Two terms
Cycle/stages	Activities
Initial investigations	Student-teachers read the syllabus and in pairs talk about what they expect from the module. They write a summary and hand it out to the tutor.
Action	The tutor starts a reflective journal to keep track of feelings and support for the development of materials. The tutor plans the lessons and prepares the materials for Unit 1 in the syllabus making sure that the student-teachers' expectations and needs have been included whenever it's possible.
Implementation	Lessons are delivered. The tutor scans the student-teachers' assignments and other evidences of learning (e.g. answers to tasks completed in class).
Evaluation & Reflection	At the end of the unit, the student-teachers are provided with a set of evaluation questions for individual reflection. In the following lessons, they answer them in groups and submit their collective answers by email. The tutor condenses their answers and shares them with the group to receive more specific feedback. He plans Unit 2. The cycle is repeated two more times.
Reporting	Based on the questions and data collected (tutor's reflective journal,

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	and student-teachers' evaluations and learning artifacts), the tutor makes a Prezi presentation to his students and later shares the findings with his colleagues. A manuscript for potential publication is prepared.
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Table 4. Teacher educator-led CAR in IELTE.

Issue:	How can we ensure that our student-teachers cover assigned materials before each lesson?
Modules/Tutors	Introduction to Linguistics (Darío) English Language and Interculturality (Grisel)
Timespan	One term
Cycle/stages	Activities
Initial investigations	Record students' excuses for not reading the assigned material. Discuss with students how many hours should be devoted for 'home reading'. Both tutors keep separate journals of what happens at every lesson.
Action	The two tutors choose texts together (e.g. articles, videos) which students can relate to both modules for a month. The content could be linked to Introduction to Linguistics, and language use could be deconstructed in English Language and Interculturality. To promote purposeful reading, each text must be followed by a short activity (e.g. answer comprehension questions, summarise the text through a graphic organiser). Students will know that any of them can be asked to share their answers. In their journals, the tutors keep a record of their criteria for choosing texts and designing the text-based activities.
Implementation	At the beginning of each lesson, a student is asked to share the answers and ensures that their peers also complete the task. Each of these activities counts towards the final grade for each module. Students are asked how they found the text and the activities. The tutors keep a record of students' responses and rate of activity completion.
Evaluation & Reflection	At the end of the experience, the tutors lead a group interview (audiorecorded) where everyone discusses the impact of the activity. They share their reflections as written in their journals. The tutors note down strengths and weaknesses, and altogether agree on ways of going through another cycle to encourage reading.
Reporting	Based on the question and data gathered, the findings are shared with the student-teachers and later with colleagues at a staff meeting and institutional conference.

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What implications can such experiences (Tables 3 and 4) have for teacher educators?

First and foremost, they imply being open to sharing concerns, strengths and weaknesses with student-teachers and colleagues. Second, they imply being ready to receive negative feedback (sometimes worded without any hedging!). Finally, they involve active reflection and a research attitude in tandem with teaching as the data should be systematically collected and analysed as the project develops so that the findings are fed back into the learning process.

Supporting AR

The following collaborative action research (CAR) project gave two student-teachers (Ana Hortelano and Violeta Cano) the chance to refine their critical thinking on ELT as they transitioned from the last years of their university degree to the world of in-service education. Together with Luis, their university teacher (a lecturer and researcher working at the University of Valencia, Spain), they reflected on and devised alternatives to how the prevailing models of EFL teacher and learner identity constricted teachers and learners alike (Canagarajah 2017), and to how ELT in Spain is still a ‘signifier of social class privilege and access’ (Vandrick 2014: 88), meaning that learners from low and/or marginalised social, economic and cultural contexts find it harder to connect their own identities and cultural capital to English as a subject, and consistently obtain lower results than in any other subject (Anghel, Cabrales and Carro 2016). In order to make English education more significant and less oppressive for these learners, the team experimented with concepts originally coming from fields other than ELT, and which remained distant from its mainstream theory and practice: funds of knowledge

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(González, Moll and Amanti 2006), funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart and Moll 2014), and the notion of multiple, multimodal literacies as put forward by the New Literacy Studies (Pahl and Rowsel 2012). As can be seen in **Table 5**, during three long research cycles the team assessed the affordances created by these concepts for EFL education with children who lived in an underprivileged neighbourhood in Valencia.

Table 5. AR cycles and projects.

Research cycle	Academic year	Academic context	Projects	Members' role
Cycle 1	2015/16	Ana's and Violeta's practicum placement period	"Multimodal identities": pupils create multimodal self-portraits	Luis: university teacher as researcher Ana: student-teacher as researcher Violeta: student-teacher as researcher
Cycle 2	2016/17	Regular EFL sessions	"If I were a giant in Nazaret": pupils create artistic interventions in the neighbourhood	Luis: university and school teacher as researcher Ana: school teacher as researcher
Cycle 3	2017/18	Extra-curricular workshop	"Words matter/Palabras reales" project: pupils organize a community museum to display their multimodal and artifactual work	Violeta: school teacher as researcher

As might be expected of a three-year CAR, the participants' situation changed both professionally and personally in the process: Ana and Violeta started off as university students but had already become in-service teachers by the final research cycles. As

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main researcher, Luis had to fight hard to find flexible ways to conduct the research and keep Ana and Violeta fully engaged. Whatsapp conversations, Facebook posts, or informal exchanges in front of coffee cups, all became essential to channel the team's reflections and exchanges, together with more formal and academic seminars in which the team shared, commented, and coded their research journals, thus creating a solid base of evidence for writing academic papers later on.

In terms of sustainability, even more important than the professional and personal changes just mentioned was how the CAR team was able to adapt itself, year after year, to a new academic setting. A new school management team was elected at the end of the first research cycle, which brought changes to the school's timetable that impacted on the feasibility of the project. Thus, from being first implemented in the context of Ana's and Violeta's practicum period (with Luis acting as a supervisor), by the second cycle the project was already restricted to a regular, weekly EFL lesson, and was finally bound to an extra-curricular workshop on Fridays. Despite the obstacles that these (and other) decisions can have on the stability of an AR project, action researchers need to adapt to the changing conditions that surround them, since this is the price to pay in order to work in real institutions under real circumstances, which is the only way to access and transform education as it is. As a result of the change that came up at the start of the second cycle, Luis began to act as school teacher for the first time in his life, which posed manifold challenges but also new opportunities to the project.

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The examples included in this section illustrate the extent to which teacher educators need to be aware of their fluctuating contexts and use creative and critical thinking to transform challenges into possibilities which gravitate between teaching and researching as a two-facet entity aimed at equipping those involved in AR with reflective tools for making their contributions meaningful and sustainable.

CONCLUSION

We have seen how the benefits of the AR initiatives that teacher educators put forward shape and are shaped by the contexts in which they are developed. Some of the issues we addressed through our AR projects found no viable alternatives coming from the prevailing ELT commonsense (Gitlin 2008) or doxa-ruled practices espoused by our institutions, and some of our AR projects were even directed against ELT commonsense itself, which loomed as the problem from which we wanted to free ourselves.

While dominant ELT discourse, as exerted through a powerful cultural, educational and testing industry, has contributed to providing strength and cohesion to the ELT field during decades, on the other hand it has often imposed decontextualised solutions and approaches in national school curricula and teacher education programmes (Guerrero 2010).

Fifteen years ago, García Doval and Sánchez Rial (2002: 286) described ELT in Spain in the following terms: ‘Somehow, the view of the primary school teacher as a technician has not changed very much: ‘Blind faith in the textbook! You don’t need

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anything else!'. In such a scenario, it is unlikely for English teachers to find enough institutional freedom to develop a strong sense of agency, or at least not of the kind that includes making decisions over curricular matters and push forward their own professional development (Stenhouse, 1975). Nor will there be much ground, either, for significant cases of AR projects to grow and mature. Accordingly, it may actually be inconsistent to call for further engagement with AR on part of English language teachers without encouraging them, also, to question the power dynamics that shape our professional and academic field. For the chances are that the former will hardly occur without the latter. This is something all of us working with AR in ELTE should remind ourselves of every now and then. It may well be the case that AR in ELT must become more critical if AR is to survive at all.

All in all, teacher educators working with others in AR in ELTE have to: (1) configure a professional identity that is characterised by acute awareness of their context, (2) develop creativity to respond to challenges opportunities, and (3) reflect on the ideologies that develop not only in a classroom, but in organisations, institutions, and curriculum development. In this way, the outcomes of AR can lead to further participation in educational processes and policies.

FURTHER READING

To cite:

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- Abdallah, M.M.S. (2017) 'Towards improving content and instruction of the 'TESOL/TEFL for Special Needs' course: An action research study', *Educational Action Research*, 25 (3): 420-37.

This article addresses a pressing issue: how to educate future teachers in special needs education. The context is a group of student-teachers at an Egyptian university and their tutors, and the article discusses their quest for understanding and implementing more systematic opportunities for learning how to teach English as a foreign language to learners with special needs. The article provides a wealth of information to teacher educators and practitioners.

- Dikilitaş, K. and Griffiths, C. (2017) *Developing Language Teacher Autonomy through Action Research*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

This book is mainly characterised by its practical angle. The authors provide a succinct discussion of AR and other forms of teacher research before a careful elaboration of AR through examples of projects and other stories carried out by practitioners. The authors describe AR as a tool to empower teachers and help them develop professionally through research in/for/from the classroom and in their hands.

- Mirra, N., García, A. and Morell, E. (2016) *Doing Youth Participatory Action Research*, New York/Abingdon: Routledge.

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This volume looks at education from a broader and complex perspective. Therefore, it is helpful for those language teachers who are interested in examining education from a more integrative and bigger picture. The authors address AR from a participatory perspective which includes how learners can become active agents of change and co-researchers.

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