

Action Research as Continuing Professional Development

A Special Interview with Asst. Prof. Dr. Betsy Gilliland,

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In this issue of *PASAA PARITAT*, we are privileged to have an opportunity to interview Asst. Prof. Dr. Betsy Gilliland from the Department of Second Language Studies at the University of Hawai‘i Mānoa in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, USA. She holds a Ph.D. in Education from the University of California, Davis, and an MA in TESOL from the School for International Training (Brattleboro, VT, USA). Her research interests relate to the teaching of academic language, ranging from immigrant secondary school students learning to write for academic purposes in California to novice teachers of English for academic purposes learning to conduct classroom research while participating in a teaching practicum in Thailand.

With her expertise in action research, Dr. Gilliland was invited by Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) to serve as a featured speaker for CULI’s International Research Seminar held on July 15, 2016. Under the theme of *Action Research in ELT for Quality Instruction*, the seminar, which was meant to commemorate CULI’s 39th anniversary, was aimed at serving as a convivial forum for scholarly discussions among those interested in conducting research as part of their continuing professional development. Through the lens of action research, she discussed the diverse forms that novice classroom researchers’ studies take, using van Lier’s (1988) framework to situate the teachers’ research projects. She demonstrated the value of action research as a starting point for novice teacher-researchers wishing to investigate their students’ learning and their own professional practice.

Drawing on her extensive, hands-on experience in conducting and advising for action research projects, Dr. Gilliland graciously further shares with us in this interview her perspectives on action research as part of teachers' professional development.

1. Could you please briefly share with us what “action research” means to you?

To me, “action research” is research done by teachers in their own classrooms, investigating their students' learning. It requires both *action*, doing something different in teaching, and *research*, the systematic collection and analysis of data. Unlike traditional research, where scholars conduct research *on others*, in action research, teachers conduct research *with* their students and study *themselves* in the process (McNiff, 2013). Although it is possible for someone to conduct action research as a guest in another teacher's classroom, from my experience, it is much more difficult than when the teacher conducts research in her own class.

Reflection is a key practice that should be integrated throughout action research. Teacher researchers reflect before they begin research on potential areas for research; they reflect while teaching on how students are receiving the new interventions; and they reflect after collecting student work on what students have learned from the interventions. I hope that all teachers reflect on their practices, thinking about what happened, why it might have happened, and what they could do differently in the future. Reflection alone, however, is not action research. To go from reflection to research requires careful documentation of what happened, including some consideration of the impact of new actions on student learning.

2. In some teaching contexts, teachers are encouraged to conduct “collaborative action research.” What are the potential benefits and challenges of carrying out collaborative action research?

Collaborative action research happens when teachers collaborate (work together) with each other in the research process. They can design a research

study in which they all try out the same interventions with their students and collect the same forms of data, or they can conduct individual studies and meet regularly to support each other as they do their research. Either way, the collaboration helps overcome many of the potential limitations to teachers doing research on their own: they have the opportunity to talk through ideas before implementing them in the classroom; they can get feedback on their intervention design, data collection plan, and analysis outcomes; they can share drafts of written reports about their research process for responses from their colleagues; and they can provide emotional support when their peers are feeling overwhelmed or depressed by the research process.

Having tried to do collaborative action research myself, I can say that one of the huge drawbacks is time. Teachers are busy people, and trying to find a time when all members of the collaborative group can meet with each other on a regular basis is very difficult. This problem could be eliminated if the group were willing to meet online, using a forum where they could share their ideas, materials, and data with each other asynchronously. Another related problem is energy. We have probably all experienced situations where we are enthusiastic about a new venture and then lose energy as our other responsibilities become more pressing. A collaborative action research group where the members commit to supporting each other both academically and emotionally, however, could be an antidote to this common problem. If teachers find their action research team meetings energizing, then they will look forward to attending and continue to prioritize the process.

3. Action research has been criticized, to a certain extent, as being small-scale in nature and because of its generalizability. Some people are anxious about whether it is a legitimate form of academic research. What do you think?

I obviously think it's a legitimate form of research, and one that is worthy of being shared publicly! I do, however, know that this is not a universally held view. I had a couple Korean students who asked me whether they would be able

to get into PhD programs if they did action research for their MA theses. They had heard from classmates that Korean universities do not value action research because, as you say, it is too small-scale and not generalizable. I talked with them about how action research, when done well, can provide just as rich data as any other classroom-based qualitative study. The key is to do it well and be systematic in your data collection process.

Generalizability in itself is a false concern with much research, including action research. Unlike with statistical studies, the goal of action research and many other qualitative studies is to examine a context in depth and for the researcher to use his or her close knowledge of the classroom and students to understand what is going on in ways that a researcher without personal connections to the context could not do. While it is true that the findings from this study cannot be generalized to other contexts, if the researcher has provided a clear description of the classroom, the interventions, the students, and their learning, then readers can decide whether the interventions might work in similar ways in their own contexts based on their knowledge of their own students.

4. What other criticisms or concerns have you heard regarding action research?

One of the major critiques I have heard is that teachers are not able to do good quality data analysis. This can be a problem for teachers both as they are doing research and when they try to write and publish their studies. When I was an MA student, I remember feeling completely lost while trying to design an action research study, since I didn't think I knew what to do with my data. At that point, and I think many teachers may be in similar situations, I had not taken any classes on qualitative data collection or analysis. I had read journal articles where researchers presented qualitative findings and used various forms of coding to identify themes, but I didn't know how to do that myself. My writeup of my MA action research work was really just descriptions of student work, without any systematic analysis. I only learned how to analyze data when I went back to study for my PhD and took several classes on qualitative analysis.

I don't think, however, that this needs to be the case. Simon Borg (2015) writes about the importance of having mentors able to support teachers who are new to doing research. If teachers are able to find a mentor who has some confidence in analyzing data, then they can learn through experience as they design studies in their own classrooms. Qualitative analysis is not difficult, but to do it well does require being careful and documenting what you are doing. The same is true of quantitative analysis—you can show a lot with simple descriptive statistics, but you can also misuse statistics if you don't understand what you are analyzing. Having a mentor—a university professor or an experienced colleague—is a great way to learn how to do action research well.

Another issue is that many teachers do not have the time to invest in doing a thorough action research study when they are already busy with all the other demands of their teaching work. This, I think, is a legitimate concern, especially in places like American and Thai schools, where teachers have 6 or 7 class periods every day, plus additional duties like supervising student clubs, and very little time in the workday to plan their lessons or grade student assignments. When are they supposed to analyze data when they don't even have time to eat lunch? This is where collaborative action research and support from the school administration can be most valuable. If teachers are able to help each other out, and if they are given time in the school day to focus on their research in the company of other teachers also doing research, then they will be better able to find the time to do research that can benefit their teaching.

5. To some teachers, teaching seems to be a priority and conducting research tends to be last in a long list of tasks. In your opinion, why should teachers be encouraged to conduct action research? What are the benefits that typically justify the extra work involved?

As I noted above, time is a legitimate concern for teachers, and without time, it is difficult if not impossible to also do research into your teaching. I don't think it should be an excuse not to do something simple. All teachers need to spend time planning lessons and assessing students' progress, and both of these

core tasks can be part of an action research study. Since action research is specifically about trying out teaching ideas and evaluating students' learning in response to those new ideas, both planning and grading can be incorporated into the action research cycle.

What teachers need to do differently, therefore, is to be deliberate and systematic about documenting what happens in the class and then reflecting on what they are seeing. An easy way to document is to keep a running record while teaching, jotting notes in the margins of your lesson plan as you go. You could also keep a copy of the class list on which you make notes of which students respond in what ways to your teaching. Ideally, if you have taken clear notes, after class (or at the end of the school day), you can then write up a reflection and flesh out the notes so you don't forget what they were about. If you find it's too hard to write notes, you can audio record class sessions and then listen to them afterwards with your lesson plans and class lists at hand. Audio recording also allows you to notice things that you might have missed while teaching, such as a student's comment to her classmate while you were listening to another student.

This in itself is enough to be action research for your own benefit. Many teachers are surprised when they review their notes or listen to a recording of their classroom, since looking back allows you to see where students struggle or succeed in ways that you can't be aware of in the moment. If you realize that the new approach is challenging students in ways you hadn't anticipated, you can then modify your plans for future lessons. If on the other hand you realize that students who had not previously participated in class are talking, for example, or you see in their writing that they have learned the concept well, you know you can continue to use the new approach as you plan for later lessons.

The lack of time can also limit how much teachers are able to share their findings with others. Although publicly sharing the outcomes is an important aspect of action research, that does not mean you have to write up your study and publish it in an international journal. It may be enough to start by sharing your findings with your colleagues in your department at your school. One department

I worked in had an annual mini-conference where teachers shared with each other (no-one was invited from outside the department) and described things they had tried in their classes and how their students had responded. That counts! It only takes a short time to make copies of your activity plans or prepare a few PowerPoint slides showing what you did as you planned the new approach. Then you can talk casually with colleagues about what you did and answer their questions. It might be possible to make such a mini-conference part of your regularly scheduled department meetings, so that it doesn't even require time commitment outside of the school day.

6. Some teachers with less teaching and research experience may feel that they have “nothing to research.” Others may lack confidence in conducting action research and thus put it off until they feel that they have “more confidence.” What are your suggestions for them?

Related to the challenge of time, teachers may not feel like they are ready or able to do research that looks like what they read in books and published journal articles. This is exactly how I felt when I was an MA student just getting started with my own research. I didn't think what I was doing was innovative or interesting to anyone else. As I noted earlier, I didn't even really know what I was doing.

I advise teachers who don't think they have anything to research to do what I did: think about what's going on in your class. Then think about what isn't quite the way you hoped it would be. This is where you can start finding something research-able and worth researching. You can do research to figure out *what* isn't working, *why* things aren't working, *who* is affected when things don't work, and/or *how* you can modify your teaching to make things work better. Keep in mind that as a teacher, your ultimate goal should always be to help your students learn better; this doesn't mean, however, that you have to do research on your students' learning per se. You may want to focus on their experiences or perceptions of what you are teaching, or compare their performance on one activity with their performance on another activity.

To the second concern that teachers may not have the confidence to do research, I think you gain confidence with experience. You need to try out something new and then do it multiple times in order to feel like you can do it with confidence. Action research is no different. You may not want to share what you try with anyone, even your colleagues, the first few times you try it. That's OK!

Action research lends itself well to doing multiple cycles of teaching, observing, reflecting, and modifying the approach. You don't have to share what you did on the first try. But don't use that as an excuse not to try something new if you see that the way you are currently teaching isn't working as well as you had hoped. Read some books written for teachers, look at internet forums for teachers, and see what other people recommend. Try a new activity in your class. Take notes on what you see your students doing. Look over their work when they are finished. Think about what you see—how many of them have used the language forms accurately? How many have written more sentences than they did last week? How many have incorporated new vocabulary into their texts? What did you hope they would learn or do that they didn't do? How can you address this gap when you teach them next? At this point, you have just completed a cycle of action research. The activity may not be anything special, and your students may not have learned much, but you identified a teaching problem, acted on that problem with a new approach, analyzed your students' performance, and reflected on what you could do differently in the future. That's action research!

7. It seems that most of the literature on action research has laid emphasis on identifying concerns in the classroom, developing and evaluating classroom interventions, and monitoring the learning process and outcomes. Little is devoted to discussing the ethical issues in conducting this kind of research. Should we be more aware of the potential ethical issues involved in carrying out action research?

Most definitely. Action research carries some of the same ethical concerns as other forms of research, but also adds some others due to the relationship of

the teacher-researcher to her students. Like all research with human subjects, we need to be sure we are not doing anything that will harm participants (students) physically or emotionally. Common sense should be enough for us to identify any kind of teaching approach that would hurt students, but we also need to make sure we don't ask questions that could traumatize students or psychologically scar them. As teachers, we additionally need to make sure that we are not doing anything that will restrict what some or all of our students can learn. While the goal of action research is often to try out new and better ways of teaching, if there is a chance that students won't get the opportunity to learn what they need for the purposes of the class, it may not be worth the risk. There's a temptation to divide a class into two in order to have a control group and an experimental group, but if the control group is denied any instruction, then they lose out on the opportunity to learn what they would have with the regular curriculum.

We also need to make sure that we don't violate their privacy by sharing any personal information with others. In the United States, we are required to get consent from our students (if they are adults) or their parents (for students under age 18) if we want to use students' work for research purposes or do any research with them that will be reported outside the classroom. This means that we can of course do action research for our own purposes simply by trying new approaches and documenting how the students respond, but if we want to present any findings to colleagues at a conference or write about the research in an article, we need to have signed consent from all the students whose work we use. Once we have that consent, we need to make sure that no one would be able to identify the student from their work, so we have to give them pseudonyms (replace their real name with a fake name) and delete any information that could be connected back (such as if the students write about their family members' names or list their home address).

Finally, where teacher research is somewhat different from research done by outside scholars, we need to be acutely aware of the power differences and possibility of inappropriate influence on our students. If students are adults

(legally able to consent to participating in the study), they may be afraid that refusing to participate in their teacher's research project will affect their grades in the class or change how their teacher treats them. This is a more difficult challenge, but if the students trust their teacher, the teacher can explain that their participation will have no connection to the teacher's treatment in the class. It is also possible to do the research for your own purposes and then later get consent from students to use what they wrote or did during the unit for sharing outside class. Participants always need to know that they can withdraw their consent (choose to not participate any longer) at any time, even if they were initially willing.

8. When we write an article based on an action research project, should we follow the same pattern or organization as we do in other kinds of research?

I think the organization depends on your purpose in writing as well as the accepted formats for the place where you want to publish. Most academic journals have a preferred format—some even specify the titles for each section (most generally, Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion)—while others seem to be more flexible. It is possible to write up an action research study in the same format as a traditional research study, but it may be more desirable to present it as a narrative in which you tell the story of how you developed your teaching approach and how each cycle progressed. It may also be important to refer specifically to action research literature in order to justify your study, since some reviewers may be concerned that a teacher doing research in his own classroom could be biased in interpreting the data.

9. Do you have any suggestions for teacher researchers who find it difficult to publish their research project? Some may be daunted by the writing and publication processes. What advice would you give to them so that they will not give up writing?

Start small! If you keep a blog, you can document your study through regular blog entries. If you use Twitter or Facebook, you can share your ideas, findings, and struggles as you work on your research. With social media, you can

also follow other action researchers working in schools around the world and see what they are doing, as well as connect your work with theirs. (One group of teachers in the UK has a dedicated Twitter account where they report on their action research: <https://twitter.com/thsresearch>.) You may be able to find a virtual group of collaborators who are there to support your work.

Join local professional organizations where you can meet other teacher researchers and share your ideas orally before you try to write them down. Most professional organizations have a newsletter where members can write short articles related to their teaching work, too. If you are working on collaborative action research with colleagues, consider writing one article together rather than each trying to write your own. Another way to share the outcomes of action research is to establish a web site or resource collection for your program where teachers can share successful lesson ideas. The other advantage of having a group of colleagues is that you can provide each other with feedback on your writing, too. As with all writing, make it a habit. Write a little bit every day. Don't try to write an entire article in one day.

10. Apart from disseminating research findings through publications, do you have any suggestions that would encourage teacher researchers to use the findings to establish a cycle of enquiry and dialogue among themselves for their professional development?

This is where having a group of colleagues at your school or in your region is so important. You might want to look into the Japanese concept of Lesson Study, which is well established in Japan and beginning to be recognized in the US and UK as a professional development model that really works for teachers. Lesson study teachers will collaboratively design a teaching intervention and then observe each other teaching the same lesson in their own classrooms. After the observations, they reflect on the process and modify their teaching. Though most teachers in lesson study groups do not seem to publish their research, they are able to share with their colleagues in their schools and beyond through oral presentations and discussions.

We are grateful to Asst. Prof. Dr. Betsy Gilliland from the Department of Second Language Studies at the University of Hawai‘i Mānoa in Honolulu, who kindly shared with us her views on action research in ELT. With the rich assortment of theoretical insights, pedagogical ideas, and ethical concerns earnestly shared with us, we hope that our readers will find her discussion intellectually inspiring for their on-going professional development. As we all may be well aware, action research has long been employed as a tool to help teachers and researchers uncover pedagogical techniques and approaches to improve their classroom teaching practice. It is in particular viewed as an effective means of building the capacity of teachers as researchers of their own practice. It is beyond a shadow of a doubt then that those involved in the field of English language teaching welcome action research as its accruing findings have proved to be pedagogically useful for their professional pursuits.

References

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Interviewer

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