REVIEW ESSAY


Reviewed by Trudie Aberdeen, PhD Candidate in Educational Psychology, the University of Alberta

Action research is an essential tool that empowers teachers to find their own answers to their own questions. Anne Burns, a well-respected action researcher specializing in foreign language teaching, has been helping teachers from around the globe in their journey to improve their professional practice.

Burns divides the content of the book into five chapters, a postscript (which contains two examples of completed action research projects), and a reading list. In the first chapter, “What is action research?”, she identifies the unique attributes of action research and compares it to and contrasts it with other forms of research and other forms of teacher reflection. By the end of the chapter the reader has a very clear understanding of what action research is and what are the steps in the process. She uses the four steps of Kemmis and McTaggart’s (1988) cyclical action research model as a framework for organizing the remaining four chapters of her book. These steps are plan, act, observe, and reflect.

In the second chapter titled “Plan”, Burns provides the reader with very clear instructions for beginning an action research project. The first advice that she offers is how to develop clear and appropriate research questions. As any researcher knows, trying to decide which question to ask is extremely important because it determines what kind of answer one will find. At this stage she also gives information on ethical considerations that are particular to the English as a second language or English as a foreign language context. She mentions that action researchers need to be particularly careful about informing vulnerable populations, such as refugees or low-literacy learners, about their rights to participate. Burn’s third chapter, “Act”, instructs the reader about different data collection methods, essential questions to ask oneself before beginning a project, and systematic application of the collection. Although each method is a discipline in its own right, there is sufficient information for the new action researcher to get started. Burns explains how to analyze these data in her chapter called “Observe”. She provides the reader with the usual steps involved conducting simple statistical procedures and in analyzing qualitative data in addition to providing a
general framework for understanding the processes involved in gathering meaning. The final chapter, "Reflect", Burns offers advice to the action researcher about deciding to complete the project, reflecting on practices and teaching values, and sharing what has been learned with others.

Each chapter of the book begins with pre-reading questions to help focus the reader. Dispersed throughout each chapter are also sections called reflection points, which ask the reader to think about the content of the book; classroom voices, which contain experiences of actual teachers conducting action research projects; action points, which contain questions for the reader to try to answer; examples of action research; and a summary of the chapter. Although each of these sections contains excellent and important information, they are not clearly marked for the reader. There is not index at the beginning of the book which explains the goal for each section. Furthermore, they are only marked by font and textboxes. It would have been better if the editor of this book had highlighted this information in a more obvious way for the reader. In my opinion, this editing decision is the book’s weakest point. I did like the fact that the author chose to include the references at the end of each chapter, rather than at the end of the book. It was a bit surprising that Burns did not choose to mention action research journals or on-line survey tools.

The book’s many strengths make up for any weaknesses. Burns has a very clear and concise style. She writes with the new action researcher in mind and informs the reader of the essential information in a way that is intelligent, yet avoids unnecessary use of researcher jargon. Any teacher who reads this book will feel confident that they will be able to carry out an action research project to its completion and will feel confident from reading the many relevant examples. In particular, this book is written specifically for the English as a second language or as a foreign language context. It is a much needed resource, particularly for teachers who work in unique and diverse teaching situations. It would make an excellent textbook for a teacher preparation program, especially one that focuses on second or foreign language instruction.