BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Shelina Adatia, PhD candidate, University of Ottawa

As a teacher or researcher, you have likely read several books about research. In fact, you may find yourself thinking, another book about action research? What makes this book different? Dikilitaş and Griffiths’ book, Developing language teacher autonomy through action research, is both informative and practical. The book’s intended audience is teachers – trainees and in-service – as well as teacher educators. It consists of eleven chapters, ranging from the very concept of action research to thinking about your context, collecting and analyzing data, writing and sharing your findings, and, my personal favourite, researcher narratives.

Woven into these chapters are language teaching experiences and culminating tasks. Those “who follow these tasks might be able to have a complete research project by the time they have finished working through the book” (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017, xv). Culminating tasks include identifying an issue or question you would like to address or answer, designing and piloting a data collection instrument (e.g., a questionnaire, test, or interview schedule), and specifying strategies for ethical conduct in research. Thus, a distinguishing feature of this book is that it is not only a guide but also a manual or independent course with which teachers can engage as they design and conduct individual or collective studies.

While terms such as semi-structured observation, concept maps and ANalysis Of VAriance (ANOVAs) are important to understand, equally important is understanding the various dimensions of the researcher experience. Hence, another distinguishing feature of Dikilitaş and Griffiths’ book is its researcher narratives – insider accounts into the good, the bad, and the ugly, of designing, conducting and presenting action research. Far too often, negative or challenging researcher experiences are excluded or overshadowed by more positive ones. Therefore, it is a refreshing change to see an entire chapter dedicated to diverse researcher experiences. Through short witty accounts, teachers share the rewards and reticence associated with action research. For me, the latter category particularly stood out as teachers
used powerful metaphors to express their sentiments: “I have found action research to be like a cactus: if you touch it, it hurts you.” Another wrote, “It is like wearing black clothes in a sunny day: it is gloomy and uncomfortable and makes me feel depressed.” Finally, “AR is like the food at the school cafeteria: it is tasteless, but you have to eat” (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017, pp. 254-256). Not only are these comparisons humorous, they also speak to the importance of supporting teacher researchers through dedicated time for research, ongoing guidance, and most importantly, overall autonomy of the research purpose, design and dissemination. After all, autonomy in research and teaching are interconnected – “the former could provide enlightenment and stimulation to take control of the teaching and learning situation, whereas the latter [...] could provide an intellectual basis which encourages research for professional development” (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017, p. 264).

As a graduate student, I also appreciated the critical lens the book attempts to bring to certain sections. For instance, action research is often regarded as a means of solving a problem in the classroom. While that is correct, the authors also shift the reader’s thinking by introducing the term problematizing (Burns, 2015). In doing so, action research is also presented (or defined) as a means of inspiring different ways of thinking in order to improve one’s teaching practices (Burns, 2015).

I would argue, however, that the critical lens I have just praised, is missing in certain key sections. When presenting the distinguishing characteristics between action research and academic research, the authors take a very binary approach whereby the former is one way, and the latter, another. In my opinion, the two are far more interconnected than the authors would suggest. For instance, I believe that both action research and academic research contribute to public and personal knowledge. Although action research focuses on a specific (personal) context, the findings could still add to public knowledge of a certain topic. Furthermore, although academic research certainly contributes to public knowledge, as a graduate student having just completed my data collection, I can certainly attest to the personal growth I have experienced as a teacher, researcher, and individual. Essentially, dichotomizing these two forms of research perpetuates the misunderstanding that action research cannot be academic research and academic research cannot be action research. I make these comments not out of negativity but rather, as the authors themselves remark, to question and challenge existing assumptions about research. Overall, Dikilitaş and Griffiths’ book, Developing language teacher autonomy through action research, is not ‘something tasteless that you have to eat.’ Rather, it provides much needed food for thought. That being said, this book receives the S.A. stamp of approval!

REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Shelina Adatia is an educator and researcher in the faculty of education at the University of Ottawa. Her research interests include French as a Second Language (FSL), plurilingualism and inclusive education. Her doctoral study will focus on the inclusion of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) learners in French Immersion in elementary and secondary schools in Ontario.