

IATEFL2011 Previewing the Learner Autonomy SIG PCE

Developing learner autonomy—the role of action research

An interview with Anne Burns, Aston University, England and University of New South
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Anne Burns with Androulla Athanasiou



Anne Burns is Professor of Language Education at Aston University, Birmingham, UK and Professor of TESOL at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Formerly, she was Professor in Applied Linguistics and Dean of Linguistics and Psychology at Macquarie University, Sydney. For 15 years, she was a researcher and Associate Director in the National Centre for English Language Teaching (NCELTR) Macquarie University, the Australian Government's Key Centre for the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). She is well known for her work in action research and for her many publications on this topic, the most recent being *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners* (Routledge, 2010).

Androulla: In your view, Anne, in what ways can action research lead to the promotion of learner autonomy?

Anne: Well, action research (AR) doesn't of itself lead to learner autonomy, but teachers can investigate ways to promote learner autonomy through undertaking action research. The AR process involves identifying an area where you could investigate a particular issue, dilemma aspect or 'gap' related to your learners' autonomy. You then put in place a dynamic process of planning, action, observation, and reflection. The planning stage is about refining your focus and working out how you could enhance or extend what is currently happening in the classroom. The action is about putting your plans in place and seeing what happens. Observation means collecting information (data) on what happens when you introduce new ways of working. The last stage, reflection, involves making sense of the processes you've used and gaining greater understanding of what kinds of classroom practices and interactions could lead to promoting learner autonomy. Actually, although these processes sound as though they go in a sequence, really they interact with each other as your insights deepen.

Let me give you an example of how AR can contribute, I recently worked with a teacher who felt that her upper-intermediate learners should be more involved in monitoring their own progress. This is how she summarised the AR she conducted:

Over time I discovered, through conversations with my students, that many of them felt they had plateaued and this perceived lack of progress was a source of frustration and waning motivation. I wanted to research the link between progress and motivation, and whether taking charge of their own progress would have an effect on their motivation and their perception of progress. I used questionnaires, open interviews, and class discussions and asked the students to set themselves progress goals. Each student outlined how they were going to achieve this goal and how I could help them. The information I gained from the questionnaires and interviews enabled me to tailor the course to their individual needs and follow up on their progress goals. In some cases the student and I refined their goals due to their unrealistic nature. The students reported that the process helped them make progress and in many cases increased their motivation.

Androulla: The example you give us seems to be an interesting case. Could you please give us a few more details about this teacher's context, what her research questions were and how she used the research methods in achieving her aim?

Anne: Yes, the teacher, Laura, was teaching a high level General English class (IELTS 6-7) from nine different language backgrounds in a private language college in Australia. The students were keen but their motivation was flagging because they couldn't see progress being made and felt they were plateauing. She wanted to find ways to show her students links between their sense of autonomy, motivation and progress. One of the things about AR is that research questions often change as understanding grows and the teacher's and learner's insights into the focus of the research changes or sharpens. So, I'll comment first on the questions that guided and shaped her research and reflections and then I'll talk about the methods later.

The first research question was: *How does giving high level general English students' responsibility for their own progress goals affect the progress they make?* However the college system Laura worked in was such that students were often enrolled for very short periods, sometimes only a few weeks. She reflected on the fact that she would not be able to give the students full responsibility in such a short time, so she changed the question: *How does giving high level general English students' more responsibility for their own progress goals affect the progress they make?*

In other words, she was adding her own role into the strategies she used for increasing her learners' autonomy. So, she also added another question: *How important is the teacher's role in the students' attainment of their progress goals?* She had a strong belief that there was a link between motivation and progress, and she asked her students questions about this in the first set of questionnaires she gave them. But then she realized that she might be making her own assumptions here so her next line of reflection was: *What is the relationship between my students' motivation and progress?* Finally she decided she needed to look at whether her students' ideas of progress were achievable and realistic, so another question became: *How realistic are student's ideas of progress and how does this affect their progress and motivation?* Following Laura's questions we can see that the focus of her concerns changed and developed as

she started to understand more about her learners, the point of her research and her own role in it.

Androulla: How did the questionnaires and interviews enable her to tailor the course to the students' individual needs and follow up on their progress goals? Did the whole process enable the students to take charge of their own progress?

Anne: To follow these questions and issues through, Laura decided to involve her students closely in the research. She told them about her investigations (and she found that 19 of them were very eager to participate) and she then asked them to collaborate with her in thinking consciously about their learning responsibilities, motivation and progress. She developed a questionnaire to ask about their learning goals and progress. The last three questions asked: *What is your progress goal?; How are you going to achieve this goal?; How can I help you achieve this goal?* Notice that she only asked about one goal—that was because the students were with her only for very short periods.

What she was aiming for was not the achievement of lots of goals, but a way of illustrating to them how they could continue to take responsibility and maintain motivation. As well as using questionnaires, Laura interviewed the students to discuss their goals more individually with them. To do this she asked them to spend some brief time with her at the end of the class. She was worried about taking up their personal time but found that actually most of the students were pleased to have an extra session with their teacher where they could talk about their learning individually.

The students' responses to the interviews and to the first questionnaire and a subsequent one where she refined what she asked based on her main research questions gave her many suggestions about how she could work with them towards their individual progress goals. She found, for example that Maria had very broad and undefined goals "to understand, speak and write English very well", but after speaking with Laura she decided to focus on tenses. She agreed with Laura to practice outside class and that Laura would give feedback on this specific area. After a few weeks, Maria commented that she felt much more confident with tense use and having a specific goal: "Now, it's good". On the other hand, Kyoko had no progress goal at all at the time of the first questionnaire. Then she developed a very specific goal "to learn over 150 words until I finish". Kyoko concluded she had learned about

“small progress goals and small and small and small and finally big—I think it’s important!”

What happened in this whole process was that Laura, working with her students, went backwards and forwards—from the issues she was trying to understand more about, to the questions she thought were important, to discussing and clarifying the goals of the students, to finding out information about these goals (in other words researching them systematically) and to helping the students see how they could take more responsibility in their learning progress. Essentially these processes were all about increasing and promoting learner autonomy. Laura wanted them to leave her class with a clearer sense of how longer-term language learning can be enhanced when short-term goals are identified.

Androulla: I understand that you've examined a number of cases in which teachers have used action research aiming at their learners' learner centeredness. At our pre-conference event in Brighton you will present some of these examples. Are there any other cases which you found interesting and why?

Anne: Yes, I've worked with a lot of teachers who were teaching adults with very varied educational, cultural and language backgrounds. One teacher I worked with was teaching immigrants from African countries who had very little previous experience of schooling. She needed to introduce the students to concepts of formal education including basic literacy skills. Her approach was to orient all the activities she did in the classroom towards the learners' needs and the kinds of things they would need to do outside class. She was able to work with a community bilingual aide so she could get information from them about what they wanted to be able to do for themselves outside class. One big item was to go shopping in the markets and understand signs and prices, especially when food shopping. The teacher's starting point was: How can I assist the students to develop their language skills to achieve out-of-class purposes? She focused on identifying with them items they wanted to purchase, the vocabulary they needed to identify these items, both written and spoken. She also practised basic question and answer forms related to shopping contexts and helped them to practice and recognize numerals and prices.

The class went on a shopping excursion to a local food market where they were given worksheets where they had to identify goods they wanted to purchase and compare prices among different vendors. In class, they did

numerous role plays where they prepared shopping lists, asked for goods they wanted to buy and recognized and calculated the costs involved. To find out where she needed to take the research and whether she needed to adapt her focus or her teaching strategies, the teacher kept a journal of the activities she used, the students' reactions and her reflections. She also recorded the students doing role plays and made notes on where they needed more assistance. She also observed some of them during the excursion to the market to see how they were managing the tasks outside the classroom. During the excursion, she took photos so that she could use them to stimulate discussion with the students about how they felt they went, using the bilingual aide to help out.

Androulla: What do you see as the negatives to action research? Are there any typical problems that teachers encounter in using action research?

Anne: Well, I'll answer these questions by assuming that teachers wish to get involved in AR in the first place. This is not of course, necessarily the case, and in my view, teachers who feel they trained in the first place as practitioners should not need to feel obliged to become researchers as well. Having said that I do think that there are lots of teachers who are attracted to doing AR in their own classrooms and who are very interested in deepening and expanding their professionalism by looking at what research has to offer.

As far as practical negatives are concerned, I'll draw on here on what teachers themselves have told me and I'll mention three key things. The first big issue is time to devote to the process, because doing research adds an additional dimension and requires allocating time to planning, documenting what you are finding, thinking about different teaching strategies or approaches, implementing them and then reflecting and evaluating what you've found.

Then, there is also the possible responses you can get from your colleagues. In the project I just finished in Australia, the teachers told me that they had surprisingly mixed reactions from fellow teachers—ranging from cynicism about why they would want 'to do extra work', to suspicion about their motives for researching (and, in some cases, whether they were just feeding into administrative agendas!), to interest and curiosity about what they were doing, to envy or resentment that colleagues were not involved too, to requests to share their ideas and materials, to enthusiasm to be

involved in a project the next time round. In some circumstances, administrators can be less than supportive too, and may even directly discourage teachers from doing research, as it seems to be taking attention away from teaching and isn't what teachers are being paid for. So, you can see, teacher action researchers have to be prepared for very mixed reactions from those around them.

Another issue is uncertainty about the research process. Teachers' previous experiences of reading anything about research may make them think that it has to be very 'experimental' or 'scientific' with set research questions, hypotheses, control and experimental groups, pre-and post-testing and statistics. It can take a while to become comfortable with the more exploratory and curiosity-style nature of AR. In the beginning too, it can be quite hard to pin down a focus area or guiding questions and to see where the research is taking you. One teacher once said to me that she was 'in a fog' at the beginning. Focusing things can be one of the biggest problems in getting started. Sometimes there has to be quite a bit of 'ambiguity-tolerance' involved and then it's very useful to have other people, co-researchers or a supportive colleague to talk to about what you are doing. However, you can also say this about other ways of doing research—refining the focus and knowing where you are going is not an uncommon experience even in bigger projects.

Teachers can also sometimes lack confidence that what they are doing is actually research, so collaboration with others, especially if you have a research mentor available, is really useful. That can really help to give you ideas about the best ways to collect information about the issues and questions you are interested in, to see what changes you might need to make and to get a clearer picture of what the data are telling you. One problem here might be trying to use methods that you are not very familiar with or that give you a lot of additional work. Another is trying to collect too much information and then feeling as if you are drowning in it and don't know what to do with it. It can be useful then to read one of the introductory AR books that are now appearing for language teaching to get practical guidance.

Androulla: What caveats do you feel are warranted when considering AR as a form of practitioner research, particularly with regard to the development of learner autonomy?

Anne: Actually, this is a good follow-on from the last questions. I think the main thing is to

start small, remain focused, be open to change and new directions, and not to try to do too much. Give yourself a time limit also, so that you plan enough time to go through an AR cycle (and perhaps another cycle or two if there are more things to explore) but not to exhaust yourself. Practitioner research is about deepening insights about your own practice and getting to understand more about the issues you are interested in, so to some extent you must judge when you have reached that point. Also, another good approach for collecting information is to draw on or extend activities you might be doing in the classroom anyway, for example, discussion, role plays, or student surveys. That way you double up on collecting data while putting various interesting activities in place.

As far as learner autonomy is concerned, for me a big issue is that it is something that develops over a long period of time. To my mind, it's part of developing strategies *around* learning, *in* learning and *for* learning that are enhanced over long experiences of being exposed to new content, educational process and procedures, and classroom interactions. So for teachers doing AR to develop learner autonomy I think it's very helpful to think about how the issues to explore might relate to where learners are in this long process, what their needs are and what strategies (for short-term or long-term development) can be put in place.

For example—are they young learners, where you can find out about their previous backgrounds and experiences or the skills that will have an impact on how they cope with classroom activities? Here for example, you might interview their previous teachers, parents and the students themselves, or give them preliminary tasks and observe and note how they handle them. You then have a basis to experiment with what scaffolding of their learning needs to be put in place to help them become more autonomous. With teenage learners, you may want to experiment with tasks they can do outside the classroom that help them practice language and learning skills they have just experienced in class. With these kinds of learners you'd also want to focus on what motivates and excites them when they are not learning formally (e.g. using technology/multi-media) and see how you can integrate some of these activities back into the classroom. You could discuss with them how they went with the tasks, what challenges they encountered, and what areas need more support so that they can try things out again. With older learners it may be important to identify their

views on learning autonomously. There may be cultural or experiential barriers to the whole idea of learning independently and so your research may focus on helping them to view their role as learners differently. Or you may be in a situation like Laura, where the point of the research was to give learners new concepts and strategies about independent progress and to equip the learners with some ways of using them in future learning.

Androulla: In your experience, what changes are needed at an institutional level to make AR a viable and sustainable form of practitioner research?

Anne: This is a big issue so I can only make some preliminary suggestions here. There's a general tendency for educational institutions not to view research as part of a teacher's duties. This is particularly so in school situations; for teachers working in college or university situations the situation might be a bit more conducive to encouraging research because they are working in a post-school context. But teachers don't typically get acknowledged, rewarded or remunerated for doing research.

In an ideal world, at the management level institutions would encourage the concept of connections between research and practice, maybe helping teachers to think about what research done in our field can be drawn on in classroom practice, and encouraging teachers' input. So one change is to encourage a research-oriented culture—the idea that research has a role to play in what practitioners do in their professional work. Another change would be for institutions to put regular opportunities in place for teachers to be involved in research. This kind of involvement doesn't necessarily have to be at an individual teacher level but could focus on pressing issues, challenges or changes that the institution is facing. For example, if there is a change in national or local curriculum documents, the focus of the research done by a group of teachers could be to look at how these changes are affecting various things in the classroom (materials, types of activities, outcomes, assessments?), what new or innovative ideas for classroom practice can come out of the change, or what further developments need to happen. To my mind, AR is an ideal accompaniment to any forms of institutional change as it can help management and practitioners to look at the key implementation issues so that good results emerge and that developments can be managed in a more constructive way. Amazing things can

happen when people work collaboratively and positively like that.

Another change would be for institutions to value and acknowledge the AR that teachers do. In the recent project I referred to, there were several important institutional things that did happen to show teachers involved that the AR was seen to be viable and valuable. First, the institutions concerned made sure to send information to the teachers about the possibility of being involved (this sounds obvious but it doesn't always happen); then they gave enthusiastic approval and support for the teachers who volunteered to get involved, allowing them a small amount of time off to attend meetings and workshops and supporting them with the institutional equipment they needed, such as recorders or space.

Next, they encouraged the teacher to talk to colleagues about their research as they were doing it and when it finished; some teachers were allowed to involve other colleagues who were interested, others were asked to talk at staff meetings or at professional development sessions which the institution organized. One other thing that happened was that the institutions supported the teachers to talk at a professional development conference where many other teachers learned about their work—and now we've heard that other institutions and teachers are very keen to learn more about AR, to get together to do some research in their institutions, and to join in when more AR opportunities arise. All of these things have made a big difference to the way the teachers have felt about doing research and has given them the sense that what their investigations were valued and appreciated.

As I said, this is a big topic but I hope these ideas give a flavor of what could be done at the institutional level. In my experience when teachers get institutional support it really has an impact, not only on them professionally but also on the institution concerned.

Androulla, thank you very much for all these very interesting questions! I'm really looking forward to speaking more about learner autonomy and AR, and about the kinds of things that teachers can investigate at the LA SIG Pre-conference Event at IATEFL in Brighton next year.

Androulla: Anne, I would like to thank you ever so much for sharing your stories and knowledge with us. They are mostly valued, and we are looking forward to your talk in Brighton!