Notes from *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners* by Anne Burns (2010)

Chapter 1: What is Action Research?

- Self-reflective, critical, systematic approach to exploring your own [teaching] context (p. 2)
- Take on area you feel could be done better, subject it to questioning, then develop new ideas and alternatives (p. 2)
- Intervene in deliberate way in problematic situation to bring about changes/improvements in practice (p. 2)
- Base improvements on systematically collected data (p. 2)
- I’m busy! Why do research?
  - Reach own solutions and conclusions
  - Immediate to our situation – lead to positive change (p. 6 – 7)
- Four Broad Phases in a Research Cycle
  1. Planning: Identify the problem and develop a plan of action in order to bring about improvements in specific area of your context. Consider:
     a. What kind of investigation is possible within the realities and constraints of your situation?
     b. What potential improvements do you think are possible?
  2. Action: Plan is carefully considered, involves deliberate intervention over an agreed period of time
     a. Interventions are “critically informed” as you question your assumptions
  3. Observation: Systematically observe effects of action and document the context, actions, and opinions of those involved
  4. Reflect on, evaluate, describe effects of action to make sense
- Above model is from Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). Taken from page 8 of book.
- Doesn’t have to be lockstep; steps can be seen as necessary ingredients of Action Research (AR) process, interacting in a flexible way, not a rigid process (p. 9)
- Essential Features (p. 10):
  - Evaluate and reflect on practice with aim of bringing about continuing change and improvements
  - Small-scale, contextualized, local in character
  - Participatory and inclusive – investigate issues of immediate concern
  - Changes based on systematic data collection & analysis
- More subjective than other research, can change methods w/new insights (p. 14)
Chapter 2: Planning the Action

- Might find that your real focus area only emerges as you proceed (p. 23)
- These kinds of questions can help guide your thinking in early stages:
  - What are you passionate/curious about?
  - What new approaches are you interested in trying?
  - What will make you a more effective teacher/administrator?
  - What will make your program more effective?
  - What gaps are there between your current situation and what you’d like to see?
  - What needs of your [clients] aren’t being met?
  - Why are some of your [clients] not achieving in the same way as others?
  - Why are your [clients] behaving the way they do?
  - What do you want your [clients] to know, understand, or do better than they currently do? (p. 23 – 24)
- Might help: Keep a freewriting journal (p. 24)
- Another option: Observe (over a period of time) a typical situation in your work. What stand out for you from your observations? What research questions or issues are suggested? (p. 24)
- Be aware of your assumptions, keep an open kind, acknowledge what your data are telling you (p. 25)
- Identify Broad Areas (p. 28)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding a focus area</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is my broad topic area?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why am I interested in this topic?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do I want to know about this topic?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How will it improve my students’ learning or my teaching?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What am I likely to learn about focusing on this topic?</td>
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- Narrowing involves developing more specific questions that should help lead logically to most appropriate ways to collect data and analyze feelings (p. 30)
- The more focused and “answerable” the questions, the more likely they are to produce good results (p. 30)
- Shape questions along following lines (p.30):
  - Avoid questions you can do little about
  - Tailor questions to fit within time limit you have available
  - Focus on one issue to see where it takes you, rather than looking at multiple aspects
  - Choose areas of direct relevance and interest to you and your immediate context
Chapter 2 Continued

- Techniques for focusing: Focusing circle, mind map (p. 30 – 31)
- Questions Checklist (p. 32 – 33) (Adapted from Schwalbach, 2003, p 18 – 21)
  - Does the question have the right scope?
  - Is the question closed or open-ended?
  - Is the question biased?
  - Does the question allow for a logical connection between the action and the outcome?
  - Does the question lend itself to data collection?
  - Does the question relate to current research?
  - Is the question ethical?
  - Is the question stated clearly and concisely?
- For more on the ethical consideration of Action Research, please see p. 33 – 38.
- When preparing resources and materials:
  - Consulting literature can be helpful, though some think it influences thinking too much
  - Involve others! Co-researches, collaborators, mentors, direct participants (p. 39)
- Outline guide for university study (p. 51) (Adapted from Fisher, 2001, p.45) could prove useful in organizing your research.
Chapter 3: Act – Putting the Plan into Action

- Collect data in a systematic way! (p. 54)
- Data collection is always mixed in with strategies or actions you put in place to change/improve your focus area (p. 54)
- Techniques used for data collection should match what you are trying to find out (p. 54)
- Have to weigh how to balance data collection with day-to-day operations (p. 56)
- Don’t’ be afraid to use data collection techniques in creative and adaptable ways
  - Adjust cycles, processes, methods to meet needs creatively in context (p. 56)
- Table on p. 57 useful in thinking of different methods for action research:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods for Action Research</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Observation: What do I need to see?</strong></td>
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<td>Examples:</td>
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<td>- Observation by colleague on particular aspects of classroom action</td>
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<td>- Brief notes or recorded comments made by the teacher while the class is in progress</td>
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<td>- Audio- or video-recordings of classroom interactions</td>
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<td>- Transcripts of classroom interactions between teacher and students or students and students</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Maps, layouts or sociograms of the classroom that trace the interactions between student and teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Photographs of physical context</td>
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- Observe and Describe: What Do I Need to See?
  - AR observation is self-conscious (p. 57):
    - Focused: On specific information
    - Objective: See things as they are
    - Reflective: See things from position of inquiry and analysis
    - Documented: Deliberately make note of info
    - Evaluated and re-evaluated: Check interpretations with self and others
  - List of questions to help as you start to link your observations to the issues you are trying to investigate:
    - Which particular setting do you want to observe? Which key players do you want to observe? What kinds of learning activities should you focus on? What aspects of language learning are of interest? What kind of events are you interested in? Which kinds of behaviors should you target? Which kinds of interactions are of interest? What techniques in your teaching do you want to change? (p. 59)
Think about who or what you will observe, how many people or events will be involved, when and how often you will observe, and where and how you will do the observation (p. 60)

Possible Observation Tools (p. 62 – 72)
- Observation sheets
- Behavior checklists
- Events checklists
- Observation notes
- Reflective observations
- Analytical observations
- Narrative observations
- Shadowing
- Recording and transcribing
- Maps and photographs

Ask and Discuss: What Do I Need to Know?
- Type of data is to do with what people think, believe and perceive and the way they explain their personal histories, experiences, actions (p. 74)

Possible tools (Book goes into detail on how to structure all of these) (p. 74 – 90)
- Interviews
- Questionnaires/surveys
- Journals/logs

Important to triangulate your data (p. 95):
- A combination of angles on data will help give you more objectivity
- Collect more than one type of data
- Compare, contrast, cross-check
- Other types of triangulation: time, space, researcher, theory
- Can help explain things that seem contradictory
- Can mean doing radical reassessment of your biases as new insights emerge
Chapter 4: Observe the Results of the Plan

- Analyze as you go! (p. 104)
- Get at meaning of data through reflective questions (p. 104):
  - Does the data answer my questions? How?
  - Main messages so far? Gaps to fill?
  - Am I sticking to the right questions or is the data telling me that something else is more important?
  - Do I need to collect other kinds of data?
  - To answer my questions, are some data more important than others?
- Analyzing AR data is a continuing process of reducing information to find explanations and patterns (p. 104)
  - Assembling your data
    - Collect all the data you have as well as any ongoing reflections you’ve made
    - Review your initial and/or your revise questions
    - Start going through your data and look for broad patterns, ideas or trends that seem to answer your questions
  - Coding the data
    - Based on the broad picture, start refining it by coding your data into more specific patterns or categories
    - Identify which of your data sources you can code qualitatively and which you can code quantitatively
  - Comparing the data
    - Once coding is complete, compare the categories or patterns across your different sets of data to see whether they say the same thing or whether there are contradictions that you can highlight
    - Develop tables, charts, or sets of quotes to set the data out and display them in concise form
  - Building meanings and interpretations
    - Think deeply about what the data are saying by reflecting beyond the immediate surface details
    - Look for more abstract “big picture” concepts and not just step-by-step descriptions of what you have found
    - Pose questions, identify connections, and develop explanations about what the research means at the broadest level of your understanding it
    - Refine your own “personal theories” about the meanings of this research
  - Reporting the outcomes
    - Think about how you can present your research and what you have found to tell others
    - Consider how you will organize the whole “story of your research” from beginning to end and not just the analysis and findings
- Burns goes into depth on categorizing and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data. This section goes beyond the scope of these notes, but can be found on p. 106 – 30.
Chapter 4 Continued

- Validity is Important! Ask yourself, “how can I make sure that what I am finding results in reasonable judgments and conclusions?” (p. 130)
  - Checkpoints:
    - Is the research focus the right one?
    - Is the activity or strategy used pedagogically sound?
    - Do I need to review my research questions? Do I need new research questions?
    - Am I getting a rounded picture?
    - Am I being objective?
    - Are there other people with whom to collaborate or consult?
    - Am I giving myself enough time to examine my data?
    - Do I have enough support from my data for my claims?
    - Am I looking for things that don’t square with the rest of the data?
    - Am I claiming too much about the results?
Chapter 5: Reflect

- Reflection involves creative insights, thoughts and understanding about what you have been doing and finding (p. 141)
- Reflection flavors and molds the whole Action Research experience (p. 142)
- There are four dimensions of reflection that are likely to emerge as you reflect on your research. Each dimension contains questions that you could ask yourself:
  - Reflecting on practice (p. 142 – 143). For instance:
    - How did I select my practical actions to improve my classroom situation?
    - Why did I select these particular actions?
    - How did the actions I selected work to improve the situation?
    - Were the actions effective? Did I need to change them?
  - Reflecting on the research process (p. 143). For instance:
    - How did I go about “testing out” my practical actions?
    - How have I collected data to inform my practical actions?
    - How did I use the data to illuminate what was working in my classroom?
    - How have I used my data to change direction, if necessary?
    - How has my experience helped my extend my knowledge of how to do research?
  - Reflecting on beliefs and values (p. 143 – 144)
    - What are two of my strongest personal beliefs about my work?
    - How did these beliefs affect the decisions I made as I did my research?
    - How has my research deepened my understanding of my personal beliefs?
    - In what ways have my practical theories developed?
    - How has developing my practical theories helped to build my knowledge? About teaching? About research?
  - Reflecting on feelings and experiences
    - What were your personal reactions to the changes that resulted from your practical actions? Were they positive or negative?
    - How did you deal with negative reactions? What impact did the positive reactions have?
    - Did the negative reactions trigger ideas that you had not thought about before? If so, how, and what did you do?
    - How did your personal feelings contribute to the way you did your AR?
    - What personal feelings and experiences arose from finishing your AR? Were they positive, negative or both?
Chapter 5 Continued

- Planning next steps: The number of cycles you complete depends on your circumstance and what your research suggests (p. 146)
  - You may continue the action, which could involve testing the same issues with different participants or may go in a completely different direction (p. 146)
  - If you’ve finished your research, you’ll want to bring out interpretations of what the research means. Consider the following means to do so (p. 148):
    ▪ Review and synthesize your data set
    ▪ Critically examine what the data tells you about the issues explored
    ▪ Relate your research to themes in literature on topic
    ▪ Link your discussion to those of colleagues
    ▪ Use colleague reactions to inform interpretations
    ▪ Examine assumptions, beliefs, values through a new lens
    ▪ Expand and elaborate ideas about what your research means
    ▪ Look at the “bigger picture” in your research
    ▪ Consider ways to summarize and publish

Citations