Insight into EFL Teaching and Issues in Asia

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Edited by

Evelyn Doman

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This book is dedicated to Aleesa and Jaemin. Without your continual support, love and understanding, I could never have been able to complete this project. Thank you for teaching me about the real meaning of life.

—Mommy

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FOREWORD

Many of us in the field of English language teaching and applied linguistics come from diverse backgrounds and approach teaching with different methodologies, perhaps as a result of our educational experiences. Although our approaches differ, I believe that we have our students' best interests at heart. It is this common interest that has brought together English language instructors from various parts of Asia to Macao to discuss the challenges we face in our classrooms, share our successes, and look for common ground.

This book is the result of many years' worth of effort in finding a means of collaboration between stakeholders of English language instruction in Macao. At the same time, the book signals the beginning of a dialogue between language instructors in this region. The occasion to do both of these things came about in January 2013, when English language instructors from secondary and tertiary institutions in Macao and other parts of Asia met for the first English language teaching conference organized by the English Language Centre (ELC) at the University of Macau. This conference provided participants with an opportunity to hear from one of the more marginalized groups among English instructors in Macao—the secondary school teachers, who are often overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated. The conference also allowed dedicated instructors to reflect on their own teaching practices, engage in fruitful discussions, and challenge one another's approaches to teaching.

During the 10 year history of the ELC as an independent academic unit, many efforts have been undertaken to establish closer ties between secondary and tertiary educators. In 2008, the first professional development symposium brought together ELC instructors and English language instructors from 40 different secondary schools in Macao. This symposium planted a seed that was to grow into a full-scale two-day conference in 2013, and the scope of this conference broadened to include English Language Fellows (ELFs) from the U.S. Department of State.

The ELFs shared teaching practices in China, Laos, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Mongolia, providing a regional perspective on the general trend of English language teaching. ELC instructors gained insight into the challenges faced by secondary school instructors. Secondary instructors cultivated their professional

identities and voiced their hopes for the future development of Macao's English language instruction.

From this conference, further networking and collaborative opportunities arose. Teacher scholars engaged in action research in their classrooms to further align their teaching practices with solid theoretical grounding. Although we all came into this conference with different approaches to teaching, we left with the common goal of working toward praxis. This book presents some of the ongoing action research, teaching practices, and theoretical grounding discussed at the conference.

Both the conference and the book have been rewarding experiences for me, and it is my hope that future conferences will bring more opportunities for collaboration across contexts, borders, and media, resulting in manuscripts documenting some of the innovations taking place here in Macao and around the region.

Alice S. Lee
University of Macau

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This book would not have been possible without support from the University of Macau and the United States Department of State for their gracious funding of the 2012 English Language Teaching (ELT) Conference, "Working Towards a Common Core in Macao: Many Voices, One Vision", hosted by the English Language Centre (ELC). The academic staff at the ELC, the English Language Fellows from the State Department, and participating Macao secondary school English teachers helped to make the conference a huge success with their informative presentations and insightful workshops. A special thank you goes out to the administrative staff at the ELC for assisting with the logistics, PR design, and all the behind-the-scene aspects of the conference. Without their continuous support, the conference could never have been held! I would especially like to thank the contributors to this volume for their trust in my ability to ensure that their work was published. Finally, thanks are due to the publishers at Cambridge Scholars—particularly Ms. Carol Koulikourdi and Ms. Amanda Millar—who encouraged us to pursue this project in the first place, and Mr. Simon Summers for his editorial assistance. Thank you all so much!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Some of the more commonly used abbreviations in this book include:

AR:	Action Research
CL:	Cooperative Learning
ELC:	English Language Centre
EFL:	English as a Foreign Language
ESL:	English as a Second Language
LGBT:	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
TESOL:	Teaching English as a Second or Other Language
SLA:	Second Language Acquisition
Ss:	Students

INTRODUCTION

This book has its origins in the English Language Teaching Conference, "Working Towards a Common Core in Macao: Many Voices, One Vision", hosted by the English Language Centre (ELC) of the University of Macau in January, 2013. The conference, jointly sponsored by the Embassy of the United States in Beijing, drew together English teachers from around Asia working in both secondary and tertiary English-language classrooms and developmental programs. The goals of the conference were trifold: (1) for teachers to reflect on past failed practices, (2) for teachers to prepare for future challenges, and (3) for teachers to improve their teaching.

This ELT conference was the second that the ELC had hosted in five years. The theme addressed some of the major challenges facing Macao's English language learners as they prepare for tertiary education in a fast-paced and changing world. Bringing together English Language Fellows from various parts of Asia, secondary school English teachers from Macao, and ELC teachers to discuss ways of moving our field forward, the goal was that conferences such as this would bring together local and international language teaching experts to discuss relevant issues and possible solutions. Additionally, a high value was placed on the importance of establishing channels for dialogue from all English language teaching and learning stakeholders at the secondary and tertiary levels in Macao. We hope that this conference and future conferences hosted by the ELC will foster working relationships between all these stakeholders in Macao and beyond.

This collection offers insight into current issues in teaching EFL in Asia. University and secondary school teachers and researchers from nine different Asian countries share the experiences they have encountered in their English-language courses, and offer suggestions for incorporating new methodologies and techniques both in and outside the classroom. Not only is this book filled with valuable teaching techniques that we have found successful, but it also introduces new ways of dealing with various social situations in the classroom as well. As most of the currently available literature regarding second language acquisition deals with how English is taught as a second language in English-speaking countries, such as the United States, Australia, Canada and the UK, this book is unique in that it offers the perspective of teaching English as a Foreign Language in

Asia, where students often do not get many opportunities to engage with the language outside the classroom.

This book is geared towards all university-level instructors and secondary school teachers teaching English as a Foreign Language in Asia, teachers interested in coming to Asia to teach EFL, and researchers doing cross-cultural studies investigating foreign language learning in today's global society. Teaching English abroad is definitely a booming industry these days; English is on the rise, and young educators are taking advantage of abundant opportunities.

This book stands alone in its purpose in generating a view of the situations which EFL teachers and students face today. Other books related to teaching EFL in Asia are simply guidebooks for people who are considering teaching in various Asian countries. The current collection is not a guidebook but, rather, is a detailed study of the issues which real teachers are now facing in their classrooms every day.

The book has been organized into four main sections: action research and examples of action research in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing and reading classrooms, successful teaching practices, innovative language assistance programs, and considerations for developing students' autonomy and identities.

The first part of this book is dedicated to action research. As full-time teachers of EFL, we do not have a great deal of free time at our disposal to undertake formal research. Action research allows us to investigate problems or issues in our classrooms, from the first-person perspective of the teacher.

In Chapter 1, Andrew Tweed states that Action Research (AR) is useful for English language teachers who wish to investigate various observations made in their classrooms. AR is defined as a specific and systematic soft approach to research, in contrast with 'traditional' applied research. In addition to defining AR, Tweed briefly covers some key aspects of AR, such as the AR cycle, as well as the common research methods it employs, including ways of collecting and analyzing data. Providing examples of AR projects carried out in Asian countries, Tweed discusses the advantages and disadvantages of AR, and concludes by proposing an alternative to AR called Exploratory Practice. Although Tweed admits that AR can be a time-consuming activity, he recommends that teachers take the initiative in investigating aspects of their classroom teaching, in order to avoid burnout and to maintain the passion that they originally brought to the field.

Some examples of action research follow, in chapters 2-4. In Chapter 2, Otis Phillip Elliott, Jr. undertakes an action research project in his EFL

writing course. Elliott explores the teaching of classical Greco-Roman rhetorical patterns, and offers strategies for teaching these patterns. Teaching traditional rhetorical patterns, he insists, helps his students to manage their written texts on the micro level by enabling them to diversify their papers and to make them more interesting to read. Elliot proposes four writing steps to help students become more autonomous writers.

In Chapter 3, Trevor U-Teng Ho undertakes action research as part of a high school EFL writing course in Macao, in order to help students overcome their frustrations about using lexical items accurately during productive tasks. By exposing his students to extensive vocabulary, through the use of collocations, semi-fixed and fixed expressions, Ho explores and demonstrates some effective ways of developing awareness of lexical learning. He also calls for a shift towards adopting Lewis's (1990) Lexical Approach to teaching lexis in the language classroom.

In Chapter 4, Tony Newman questions if it is possible to create a student-centered, highly communicative, and intensive reading environment. While theoretical debates (e.g., Williamson 2009) about whether language acquisition and communicative competence are innately determined continue to escalate, Newman believes that teachers of ESL/EFL are struggling to find real, relevant classroom strategies that enhance students' cognitive development and communicative ability. Circular Design, where careful contemplation and communion of thought between students and their teacher can occur, is proposed as a solution to this problem.

In the second part of the book (chapters 5-8), examples of successful teaching practices in Asia are presented and discussed. Examples include suggestions for dealing with mixed-level classes, differentiating student competencies, and using free software in class.

In Chapter 5, Norma Smith tells us that Cooperative Learning (CL) is a very successful teaching technique that can be used effectively in multi-level ESL classrooms. CL is a proven method of stimulating real life situations in a classroom environment. Smith shows that students of different levels of ability can work together to complete various tasks under the CL model. By stimulating the interest of students, real communication can take place.

In Chapter 6, Lynn Mallory shows that while students are frequently grouped together by skill level, there is often great disparity in their actual abilities. Teachers often find themselves "teaching to the middle", which may or may not be conducive to learning. Mallory investigates how students on the upper end can be challenged, while still giving those on the lower end the time and space to excel. The answer, she says, lies in differentiating instruction. After defining differentiation, Mallory gives

some practical and easy-to-implement solutions that will work with English Language Learners of any age group.

In Chapter 7, Alice S. Lee uses a free online software package called Book Builder to create graded readers for a specific audience. By integrating technology and collaborative learning, students are able to complete group work by writing an online book. In this experiment, groups of three to four pre-service English language teachers authored short stories with pre-, while-, and post-reading activities. Through this process, they learned the benefits of collaborative and reflective learning, whilst producing teaching materials that had real-world value. Lee recommends Book Builder as a great resource for encouraging students to write and to engage in materials development.

The third part of the book focuses upon innovative language assistance programs currently being developed in Asia. Writing centers and peer tutoring are addressed as ways of continuing the learning process outside the classroom, or through the assistance of upper-classmen or graduate students, who are more fluent in English and can thus serve as role models to freshmen embarking upon their tertiary experience.

In Chapter 8, Evelyn Doman shows that one approach to team-teaching is through the use of peer tutors in the classroom. Doman discusses how "Peer Tutors Across the Classroom (PTAC)" was started at the University of Macau, in response to the growing number of students and their need to improve their English proficiencies. The results of this new program show that peers can be helpful in creating students who are active members of the EFL classroom. Doman suggests that integrating peer tutors into the language classroom is an excellent way of reducing the teacher-student ratio, giving students more opportunities to use the target language.

In Chapter 9, Alice S. Lee proposes a possible theoretical framework through which international writing centers, which work primarily with English language learners, can operate. Lee shows that previous research in this field focuses on tutor-tutee interactions situated mostly in western educational systems. She argues that a transcultural framework should be adopted, which rejects the false native versus non-native speaker dichotomy, and places learning within various under-investigated contexts.

Chapters 10-12 address the issues of autonomy and student identity. Through building their autonomy, students become more responsible for their own learning. Likewise, giving students the freedom to express their own identity in class can aid the learning process.

In Chapter 10, Judy Emerson observes that one of the most difficult aspects of teaching is asking students to take responsibility for their learning. As the most successful students are those who are autonomous in

their learning, Emerson insists that learning be continued outside the classroom, and claims that learner autonomy helps students to develop an understanding of their metacognitive skills. By offering choices in a course, and by involving students in almost all aspects of decision-making in the classroom, instructors open up a new world for students by engaging them in the learning process.

In Chapter 11, Evelyn Doman describes the peer review process. By questioning whether or not Chinese students are capable of peer review, Doman investigates the abilities and attitudes of Chinese students towards peer review, as well as the effects of peer review on the students' English writing abilities. By using tools such as questionnaires, qualitative descriptions in reflective journals, graded essays, and classroom observations, Doman shows that students in the experimental class develop positive attitudes toward the peer review process and are able to succeed in carrying out peer review, despite the widely-held hypothesis that they are not able to do so. Doman also shows that the experimental group performs significantly better than the control group in terms of post-test essay grades. She concludes that peer review should be widely implemented into the language classroom as a way of fostering collaboration, promoting student autonomy, improving students' writing skills, and building students' confidence as writers of English.

Finally, in Chapter 12, Joshua Lee discusses the sexual identities of students. Lee observes that in mainland China, most university students are not open about their sexual orientations. Although it is difficult for students to talk openly about such issues, instructors can play an important role in raising awareness about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LBGT) issues, thereby creating an environment that embraces diversity. On the basis of his teaching experiences, Lee finds that LGBT issues are more likely to be raised in more learner-centered classrooms.

The issues addressed in this volume are likely to be of interest to those currently teaching or researching in Asia. The diversity of the contributors' experience, in a range of teaching contexts, is representative of the experience of TESOL educators in this part of the world. For educators in the region who spend most of their days in the EFL classroom, the issues addressed in this book are sure to have implications for their teaching and learning.

PART I

ACTION RESEARCH

CHAPTER ONE

GETTING STARTED WITH ACTION RESEARCH: AN INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS INTERESTED IN INVESTIGATING CLASSROOM ISSUES

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Abstract

Action Research (AR) is useful for English language teachers who wish to investigate various classroom matters. Teachers may want to experiment with new techniques and evaluate their effectiveness, or search for solutions to problems that they are experiencing. This paper defines AR as a specific and systematic method of reflective teaching, and clarifies how AR compares to more 'traditional' applied research. In addition, it briefly covers some key aspects of AR, such as the AR cycle, as well as some of the common research methods employed, including ways of collecting data. The chapter will also reference some examples of AR projects done in Asian countries, so that participants can better understand the range of possible methods which can be used. A discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of AR is also included, and an alternative to AR (Exploratory Practice) is examined, for the benefit of those teachers who do not have time to carry out a more rigorous research project. Finally, resources are suggested, including some freely available on the Internet, for the purposes of further inquiry into Action Research.

Keywords: Action Research, reflective teaching, Exploratory Practice

Introduction

The foreign language classroom is a multi-faceted arena. Students are there to learn a language for various reasons, and are comprised of individuals with different personalities, proficiency levels, learning styles and other characteristics. The foreign language teacher may come from a similar background as her students or a different one; as such, she may or may not be familiar with the students' first language, and the students, in most cases, may have a limited ability in the target language. These are just a few items which add to the intrigue of the foreign language classroom.

As teaching foreign languages can be a puzzling endeavor, throughout their careers teachers seek guidance on how best to help their students learn new languages. Most teachers will have completed some kind of pre-service teacher training course, where they learn about areas such as linguistics, second language acquisition, ELT methodology, assessment, and so forth. These courses may have been included as part of a BA TESOL, MA TESOL, or a TESOL certificate program. In addition, most language teachers normally take part in some kind of ongoing professional development once they have begun to work as foreign language teachers. This may come in the form of in-service workshops at the school or attendance at conferences.

However, despite the considerable number of subjects that language teachers study, as well as the ongoing professional development in which they participate, the foreign language classroom remains mysterious in a number of ways. As stated above, there are many variables in the second language classroom; in addition, there are a considerable number of differing views on matters such as the best method of teaching languages, how languages are actually learned, and which kinds of classroom activities and techniques are most suitable for given contexts. Some teachers may, in fact, be turned off by research, as there just does not seem to be a consensus on how a teacher should best teach her students. It is somewhat understandable for teachers to say they have no time to keep up with the latest findings in the field's research journals.

Nevertheless, it would be unfortunate if teachers lost their sense of curiosity, simply because they were turned off by the literature. Puzzles, problems, and questions—these are the kinds of things that make teaching exciting; when there is a way of investigating our own individual puzzles, and we find answers to them, we become ever more interested in the teaching and learning process. Action research (AR) is a systematic tool that teachers can use to explore the questions or problems they encounter

in their classrooms. By choosing problems to examine more closely, collecting and analyzing data, and reflecting on what they have found, teachers engage in AR.

Here are a few definitions of AR:

> Action Research is a form of teacher-driven research. Its goals are to improve classroom practice, and to empower teachers (Thornbury 2006, 3).

> Action research is a way of reflecting on your teaching by systematically collecting data on your everyday practice and analyzing it in order to come to decisions about what your future practice should be (Wallace 1998).

> It is related to the ideas of 'reflective practice' and 'teacher as researcher.' AR involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts (Burns 2010, 2).

Thornbury (2006) says that AR is empowering. Indeed, putting teachers in the position of personally investigating what does and does not work and why, allows them to feel more in control of and responsible for the methods they use in class. Both Burns and Wallace mention reflection and being systematic. While these notions may seem incongruent, we will see below how both have their part in the AR cycle.

Many teachers are involved in some sort of reflective teaching. At the very least, this may involve time spent thinking about one's last class after it has finished. A teacher may reflect on what went wrong and why, or what went really well and why. She may deduce the causes for the effects she has just seen. Another example of reflective teaching would be to verbalize these same concerns with other teachers, to see how they respond**.** Perhaps they have had some experiences and can offer a different perspective or additional insights into why something happened the way it did. One final common example of reflective teaching would be to keep a journal. This would allow the teacher to look back weeks, months or even years later, to see what problems or issues had arisen.

The examples above include teachers interested in what occurred in their classes and the search to understand the reasons for what happened. However, the conclusions we draw from reflective teaching can be very subjective. For example, although we may surmise that the reason a certain student spoke more in class was that he was interested in the topic, it could be for an entirely different reason.

While AR recognizes the importance of reflective teaching, it also includes a closer and more scientific examination of classroom issues, in order to give the teacher greater confidence in the final outcomes of the

study. Rather than being based on conjecture, the conclusions drawn in an AR study are supported by evidence.

Finally, one needs to draw a line between action research and more traditional, or applied, research. One of the main distinguishing factors is that while the findings of applied research are generalizable to other teaching and learning contexts, those in AR are not. Rather, AR is concerned with localized contexts and culturally specific problems. In other words, people who do AR are looking for ways to solve problems or explore issues in their very own classes. Whereas applied research is considered to be more scientific and more objective, AR can be more subjective. However, this subjective and often more qualitative approach is one of AR's strengths, insofar as an AR project can take into consideration all the local realities of a particular learning environment. A study done in the UK on the effects of extensive listening may involve equipment such as computers, the internet or CD players, which are not available to students in other countries, thus rendering the study somewhat less useful. An action researcher, who asks similar questions while taking these constraints into consideration, may be able to reach more useful findings for herself and her colleagues.

Key Aspects of Action Research

This section will examine two important components of action research: the AR cycle, and some commonly used research methods for collecting classroom data.

The AR Cycle

People involved in AR often talk about the action research cycle. Although different AR cycles have been proposed over the years, with slightly different stages, many share a cyclical framework. Burns (2010) uses the following cycle as a basic model: Plan—Act—Observe—Reflect. While the action researcher would generally move in the direction from planning to reflecting, Burns also explains that it is possible, at times, to move backwards in the cycle. For instance, this might happen if the action researcher noticed something in the *Act* or *Observe* stage that she had not previously considered. Noticing this, she may then decide to go back and adjust her plan. The AR cycle is thus a dynamic model, rather than a static one. In what follows, we will take a short look at each step in the AR cycle.

The first stage in the AR cycle is *Plan* (Burns 2010). Our plan emerges first by identifying the problem we would like to examine, so that we can