

To sum up, this book contains rich descriptions of a language-learning situation that illustrates the planning, implementation and evaluation of the autobiographical reflexive approach, and suggests how it can be applied in foreign language-learning contexts. It proposes a paradigm that integrates cognitive and affective factors in foreign language education. Thus, this book should be essential reading for foreign language teachers, teachers of English for Specific Purposes, student teachers, postgraduate students and researchers.

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## Value and validity in action research

Schwalbach, E.M. (2003). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group

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Action research has increasingly been integrated into tertiary preparation courses, practitioner research projects and teacher education programs over the past two decades. It is also figuring in educational policy documents internationally as a preferred approach for teacher training and professional involvement in the reorientation of curriculum policies and curriculum change. For many teachers it represents a feasible and attractive means to expand their professional development and research skills. For many more it still remains a mysterious and arcane concept that pushes them to undertake research, for which they feel unprepared and ill-equipped. Yet others might see it in the same way as a teacher I once worked with: *What's the point of just piffing little research in my classroom? It can't be of any use to anyone!*

Eileen Schwalbach's *Value and validity in action research* not only provides an immensely teacher-friendly introduction to action research, explaining its rationale and relevance, but also raises some important, timely and challenging debates that surround it. The thesis of the book is that while action research and teachers' involvement in it is to be welcomed, serious questions need to be raised about the value and validity of action research projects. Specifically, teachers need to be confident not just about carrying out action research but also that their results are valid. Similarly, they need to be able to 'draw reliable conclusions and report them accurately and fairly' (back cover of book). These are important considerations if action research is not to be relegated to an 'under-class' of research.

In a compact 116 pages and seven chapters, the book covers a substantial amount of ground in ways that teachers interested in action research will find both informative and reassuring. To supplement and make concrete the discussion in each chapter, Schwalbach provides practical exercises and descriptive case studies from four teachers with whom she conducted research projects. Each case study refers back to the

discussion in the chapter to extend and illustrate it from the teachers' points of view. While not all of these studies are specifically focused on the language classroom, their 'take-home messages' have clear relevance for language teacher researchers.

Chapter one fills in the background and provenance of action research, tracing its history from the early 20th century and the fluctuations in how it has been regarded over time. This chapter also places it in relation to paradigms of research in teaching and the philosophical assumptions of qualitative versus quantitative research. The issue of validity in research, and in action research in particular, is raised immediately in this first chapter and thus sets the course for responding to the key challenges for research by teachers raised by the author.

Chapters two to five present, respectively, 'Finding a problem', 'Reviewing the literature', 'Designing the methodology' and 'Findings'. Thus, readers are taken systematically through different stages of conducting a research project. The strength of these accounts is that the author avoids vague and abstract descriptions of research processes that must be unpacked by the reader. Instead, she provides questions, examples and ways of checking decisions that offer real practical assistance to teachers struggling with the messy processes of doing research. For example, in chapter two, on identifying research areas and then narrowing the focus of the topic, Schwabach poses several questions that can be used as criteria for evaluating research questions:

- Is the question open-ended?
- Does the question assume an answer?
- Does the question have appropriate scope – not too broad or too specific?
- Is the question based in research literature?
- Is the question stated clearly and concisely?
- Can the question be answered by collecting data?
- Is the question ethical?
- Is the connection between your 'action' and your expected outcome strong enough?
- Is the question significant?
- Is the question feasible?

However, rather than leaving readers to puzzle out their own responses to how each of these questions might apply to their own concerns, she provides clear-cut guidance. For example, this is the format of the response to the first question above (p 19) and for each one that follows:

Don't ask questions that can be answered by a 'yes' or 'no' response. Sometimes you just need to change the wording. Which question is better?

Will cooperative learning affect students' ability to engage in academic discourse in social studies?

How will cooperative learning affect students' ability to engage in academic discourse in social studies?

The second question allows for a richer response. It requires the teacher-researcher to think about the quality as well as the quantity of students' verbal interactions.

Having provided this level of guidance for each question, she then brings in the four case studies to show how the individual teachers dealt with these decisions in their own research. She follows up the cases with a succinct summary of the main points to reinforce them further.

Chapter six and seven, 'Validity revisited' and 'Value of action research', return readers to one of the main challenges: how to achieve validity – usually referred to as *trustworthiness* in qualitative terms – of action research. In chapter six, to reiterate and reinforce the responses provided throughout the book, and to offset the usual way in which books on action research discuss validity 'in terms of data collection' (p 93), the author turns again to the four teachers. Rather than providing individual accounts as in other chapters, this time she unites the teachers in an interactive discussion where they share perspectives based on their research experiences. Prefacing this discussion, she alerts readers to the major themes that reinforce the teachers' views on what gave their projects validity. These themes include collaboration with peers,

revisiting theory in the literature, revisiting research questions, triangulating data, remaining objective and not claiming causality or generalisability, each of which is pointed out and commented upon as it is raised in its reported conversation.

The final chapter draws again on the teachers' personal viewpoints to discuss the value of action research, which 'can best be determined by the ways in which it affects students and teachers' (p 111). Increase in content and research skills, professional progress into further training and accreditation, positive changes in practice and in student achievement, development of deeper insights into student understanding and learning, increased confidence as a teacher, greater appreciation of the importance of metacognition, and the central importance of literacy development to early academic growth are mentioned as particular areas of value and development that action research offered these teachers.

If there is one constraint in this book it is that its brevity is both a strength and a weakness. Readers looking for depth of academic debate about action research validity and value will not find it here and are likely to see the treatment of some of the concepts as simplistic. However, such readers are not the primary target audience, and ultimately the match between content and readership is overarchingly well designed.

Schwalbach's experience as an action researcher, both in undertaking action research at doctoral level herself and in working with teachers at masters level and in other teacher education programs, shines through this book. It is evident in the clear, direct, inclusive and informal way in which she addresses her readership, as well as in the plentiful guidance and explicit direction she offers, making no assumptions about what previous knowledge or skills readers should have. While it is not specifically directed at language teachers, this is exactly the kind of book that any teacher, including those in the field of TESOL, will want as an invaluable aid to taking the first steps into doing action research.