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In this piece, I explore the current status of Action Research in the EAP community and suggest some reasons why it is perhaps under-utilised as a potentially emancipatory way for EAP practitioners to become researchers of their own practices and conditions. I frame these reasons as 'risks' that teachers investigating their own practices can pose. In order to do this, this article provides an example of my own practitioner research conducted within an Action Research framework on the assessment of writing on an EAP pre-sessional course at one UK institution. I do this not to provide an example of good research but to reinforce my central thesis that conducting research is a difficult, risky but ultimately necessary practice for the EAP practitioner.

INTRODUCTION

This article is, among other things, a defence of a methodological framework for educational research that has drifted in and out of fashion in language teaching over the past few decades. In order to explain why I feel Action Research needs such a defence, I have chosen to contextualise this view by describing a project on EAP assessment undertaken over three years using an Action Research methodology. In describing this project, I wish to share what I learned from the research, why the title of this article is a caveat that Action Research (henceforth AR) is indeed a *risky* practice and suggest some various groups to whom it might represent risk. I will firstly outline some of the core tenets of educational AR and how these can be at odds with its typical use in the EAP community. Then, by briefly describing my own project on EAP writing assessment and some of the findings from the three iterative cycles, I will share the challenges I faced, and how such challenges shed light on some wider issues in EAP. My main argument is that although conducting AR is *risky* in many ways and to some interests, including sometimes our own, its inherent riskiness is precisely its emancipatory power and potential.

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

The application of Action Research for education originated from a disenchantment with conventional educational enquiry, which was accused of being disconnected from the quotidian realities of classrooms (Hargreaves, 2007), focusing instead on concerns of the academic community or government policy makers (Kemmis, 2006). It is important to emphasise that AR has represented many things to many people and there is no-one-size fits all approach. However, in their seminal work *Becoming Critical,* Carr and Kemmis (1986) identified AR first and foremost as a 'critical educational science'. AR is generally intended to be a 'democratic' form of research, with participants and researchers exploring their understandings of their localised practices in three 'mediating conditions' (Kemmis and Smith, 2008). These conditions are the *cultural/discursive* which shape thinking; the

material/economic which shape the behaviour or 'doing'; and the *socio-political* which shape how people relate to one another in relationships of power (ibid). The ultimate aim of AR then is for practitioner-researchers to change our practice, our understandings of practices, *and* the conditions under which we practice.

Hence, the notion of immanent critique*,* a Hegelian-Marxist concept which I will simplify here to refer to a sort of 'insider' critique, is fundamental to AR. Immanent critique is a way of appraising principles and practices by recognising the conditions which generate them rather than judging practices by externally imposed standards (Bhaskar, 1998). In other words, we cannot separate ourselves from the knowledge that we produce about educational practice as we are intertwined with that practice. This questions the supposed neutrality of forms of research which claim to measure educational interventions. McNiff (2013) makes the distinction between E-theory and I-theory. The former is forms of knowledge external to the self, the knowledge of and about things from studying objects (research-informed practice). However, I- theory places the self at the core of the research, even if the focus of the research is not specifically on the self as practitioner. Knowledge then emerges from the raising of tacit or intuitive knowledge of practice to explicit conscious awareness in the practitioner (ibid), which enables new forms of knowing to emerge when connections are made between existing knowledge and new experiences.

Yet the generation of that form of knowledge is insufficient for a theory of AR. Rather, praxis is the main goal of research. Praxis in AR is not merely the unification of theory and practice, or action based on reflection, but a morally-informed and ethical process of knowledge formation *through* action (Kemmis, 2009). Grundy (1987) sets out a framework for praxis based on Aristotle's definition, which starts with a situation or question about the human condition which is guided by *phronesis* or a disposition to act morally. This engages *praxis,* or the interaction with that situation through an iterative cycle of planning, action (usually implementing an intervention in the local context) observation and reflection (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982). Research is therefore conceptualised as a process where

'the researcher joins the participants in a theoretically guided program of action extended over a period of time' (Lather, 1986: 268), different to the get-in-and-get-out approach that some research can be accused of (ibid). Because of the emphasis on praxis, AR is an attempt to move beyond the potentially disempowering critical tradition of merely problematising, or 'pedagogies of pessimism' (Morgan, 2009) towards a theory of action in which participants take some control over their lives. Therefore, in AR, teachers and students are themselves contributing to a theory of education through systematic inquiry which generates new understandings of their own localised contexts, and where resulting changes in these contexts may be informative (although not generalisable) for other contexts. Boog (2003: 434) defines the criteria for success of AR at the *individual* level as participants' 'reports about the growth of their capacity for self-determination in the domain on which the research focuses', and at the *collective* level as 'whether researched subjects and other actors obtain more transforming power and influence on the process of decision-making'.

It is easy to see why these notions mean that AR might pose a 'risky' option for EAP researcher-practitioners wishing to publish such research. The inherent 'messiness' of trying to understand the complexities of one's practice and the conditions which shape it does not lend itself to the neatly delineated sections of a classic journal article. The technical rigour that peer reviewers demand can be hard to achieve when AR in our idiosyncratic contexts of EAP could require hybrid and intuitive methods of data collection and analysis (Dadds and Hart, 2001). More than this, it represents not so much an alternative means of conducting research but an alternative way of thinking about epistemology, who generates and disseminates knowledge and how. It can question in whose interest seemingly neutral research is being implemented. The idea that practitioners can be creators of their own theories of education represents a challenge to the usual ways of doing academic business, where researchers inform practitioners about the latest products of research knowledge, and practitioners and students are the objects of research.

AR represents a further risk in its potential challenge to the individualism of the neo-liberal university context of EAP. AR was initially embraced by the ELT community (Nunan, 1992; Edge, 1992), due to its particular circumstances where classic research approaches requiring time, training and funding are not abundant. Somewhat as a reaction to the problem outlined above, AR has been adopted as a means of professional development by the ELT/EAP community in its desire to be more accepted by academic communities as a higher-status skilled profession (Burns, 2005:48). The Cambridge DELTA pays lip service to AR in one of its (unassessed and uncredited) assignments. However, the problem with this is twofold. Firstly, it has led to a trend for teachers to largely focus on what they do in their own classrooms with a view to improving their own practices, ignoring the wider social and economic conditions which shape those practices (ibid). Indeed this approach is advocated by respected researchers in the field such as Wallace (1998) and Dörnyei (2007). The alternative of Exploratory Practice (EP) for time-poor teachers was posited by Allwright (2003) and while the principles of EP itself and the immensely impressive work in this area are admirable, it derives from an attack on AR understood as technical and solution-based. This is understandable given its incarnation in the ELT world, but unhelpful in its rejection of AR as a potential force for change as well as understanding.

Secondly and perhaps more damagingly, the adoption of a watered-down version of AR by the EAP community as a training tool plays into the hands of the neo-liberal university in its trend towards performative assessment of the 'effectiveness' of teaching practices. Teachers' reflections on their own practice can now be used to judge teaching and learning as measured by tick-box criteria, as the latest reaction by UK universities to the impending TEF, the Fellowship of the HEA, can attest to. This can be seen as an example of subjectification in the Foucauldian sense. To force teachers to work on self-improvement in a visible way is an example of auditing performance (Ball, 2012) through indicators of quality judged by external bodies as 'professional competencies'. While improving one's teaching and better facilitating learning is of course a worthy goal, the danger comes when

we equate a judgement of our performance with a judgment of our professional and personal identities. We are encouraged to reflect on actions, successes and failures as if they took place in a vacuum, without true reflexivity, or 'the ability to consider ourselves in relation to our [personal and social] concerns' (Archer, 2007), which has the effect of commodifying not only our labour but our very sense of selves.

At its core, AR should stem from a practitioner concern and be followed by an attempt to fully understand the context in which the research is conducted. These concerns, even if they remain at the classroom level, are then not decontextualised but are understood in relation to the conditions of our practice, as enabled and constrained by societal structures (Archer, 2000). In this sense, to conduct AR in its true form is to pose a challenge to the social structures that shape our classrooms through the exercise of agency. This disruption is a daunting prospect.

ACTION RESEARCH AND ASSESSMENT

My research originated from a concern around the impacts of writing assessment practices on students and teachers of pre-sessional courses- the gate-keeping nature of which is at odds with its purported goals, which are to facilitate acquisition of the skills such as analysis and text construction needed to succeed at tertiary level in a foreign language, as well as to facilitate the process of transition to disciplinary discourse communities (Alexander et al, 2008). Supported by a review of the literature, I felt that if students could not conceptualise themselves as developing writers and only see writing as equated with assessment of performance, this could exacerbate social disempowerment, the deficit model of EAP that the Academic Literacies movement has heavily critiqued (Lillis and Scott, 2007). In addition, if students see assessment as an exercise of power 'performed on' them (Boud, 2000) rather than as an opportunity for learning, this could lead to an encroachment on personal agency and negation of learning itself. From this initial rather broad concern, a project was

conceived to design and trial a form of *alternative* assessment (Huerta -Macias, 1995) named *processfolio* on a pre-sessional course at one UK institution.

Although all research involves processes and procedures, process is at the heart of AR ethos (Winter, 1989). Iterativeness is central to the idea that action must be sustained, and the reflexivity and praxis that are its goals cannot be achieved through classical experimental approaches. Hence, AR is usually conducted in cycles, with one cycle flowing into another. My project had three cycles from 2013-15 and a version of the Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) model of a spiral of planning, action, observation and reflection was adopted for each cycle. The first cycle was a Reconnaissance stage (Townsend, 2010), involving a systematic inquiry of the context, reviewing the literature and conducting empirical data from students' and teachers' accounts of assessment experiences and understandings of writing practices. The second cycle involved designing and trialling the assessment intervention to implement with my own class of 14 students; the third, widening the participation (Stringer, 2004) with a second trial (following refinements made to the folio and the research design) to include three classes and three teachers.

Traditionally, research into assessment within EAP has been either within a largely positivist paradigm using quantitative methods, or employing a purely theoretical critique. However, using an AR framework is congruent with assessment research for a number of reasons. Firstly, a focus on consequential validity (Messick, 1989) and the social impact of language assessment (Shohamy, 2001; McNamara and Roever, 2006; Fulcher, 2009), emphasise the notion of problematising existing practices and the socio-economic conditions which shape them. In EAP, this includes the common practice of benchmarking in-house assessments to international SELT criteria, regardless of the aims and materials of the course and the incongruity of the respective assessment constructs. In addition, the increasing call for a reconceptualization of validity and reliability in the alternative assessment paradigm (Lynch and Shaw, 2004) align with an AR framework of valuing that which might not be measureable in a classical language testing paradigm, and allows for flexibility when dealing

with the diversity of UK EAP assessment contexts. Moreover, there is a parallel with the iterative approach to research in AR with best practice in assessment development and production, a cycle of information-gathering regarding test specifications and constructs, to implementing and evaluating based on data collection, which feeds into refining and improving the test (Read, 2010). Finally, recent concerns around EAP teacher assessment literacy (Schmitt and Hamp-Lyons, 2015; Manning, 2016) have led to calls, albeit tentative, for more practitioner-orientated research into in-house EAP assessment practice.

In conducting this project, however, I realised that AR is not only a risky proposition for the interests identified above but for the researcher him/herself. The following section outlines my reflections on each cycle and unlike reports which attempt to 'cleanse' (Smyth and Shacklock, 1998) the AR process, I reflect on the challenges I faced, the mistakes I made, as well as the learning curve I climbed as an action researcher attempting to work collaboratively with students and colleagues. For a more in-depth (and traditional!) treatment of the rationale for the *processfolio* project, its design and findings, see Pearson (2015) and Pearson (2017).

CYCLE ONE: RECONNAISSANCE

The main findings of the Reconnaissance stage on the pre-sessional in 2013 largely confirmed my concerns. The six student participants interviewed demonstrated a largely mechanical approach to writing and defined their development mainly in terms of outcomes (scores or criteria); often requiring 'model answers' to follow. Hence, many found it difficult to explain their own writing choices beyond a fixed linear process and acquisition of linguistic features, for example, *"we learn nominalism" (*sic). There was minimal conception of writing as a means of positioning oneself within an academic discourse community (Hyland, 2009), although many expressed frustration at arbitrarily imposed topics for tests in which they had no prior knowledge or interest. Many felt it was the job of others to evaluate them, exemplified by one student's resigned attitude to assessment as 'performed on' her

(Boud, 2000), you *told us 'ok now you have to write a timed writing'. I will do it. And then give us a long essay. I will do it.*

Staffroom discussions recorded in my AR journal focused on the dependence that students showed on teachers to judge them, as one teacher commented,

> *students can just feel like they're just writing in the air and they don't know… "what do people want from me? Judge me, rank me I just want to see my grade".*

This is perhaps indicative of an inability of learners to organise, control and evaluate their experiences (van Lier, 1996), vital for agency in the learning process. Perhaps most worrying though was the level of students' emotional stress in anecdotal teacher accounts and student interviews alike. One student cited his inability to settle in London, *I cannot feel part of this city because I might be excluded any time I fail an exam,* an example of the alienation around gaining access to higher education (Case, 2008) that international students can feel in the face of gate-keeping assessment.

Based on the findings from this cycle, the *processfolio* project was conceived. *Processfolio* is the name for a type of assessment associated with Zessoules and Gardner (1991) in the Pittsburgh ArtsPropel project, and adapted for design courses such as engineering (Kyza et al, 2002). Rather than a collection of disparate pieces of work as in the traditional version of a portfolio (Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 2000), *processfolio* allows students to depict the journey they have undertaken in order to complete one piece of work: in this case, a 1000-word research essay set by the institution on a topic related to their chosen discipline. It should include a variety of work undertaken as part of writing the essay in the order in which it was completed. It also requires students to select those pieces themselves and state why they have done so in an annotated contents page, mini-essay or abstract. The aim of the *processfolio* is to provide an opportunity for students to conceptualise their own processes of text creation and research by exploring and justify their choices. It provides reflection and discussion about writing development, disciplinary differences, textual ownership and

plagiarism, but rather than mere written reflection, allowed for a *demonstration* of development, the challenges faced and how this might affect continued learning processes. Because students had control over their organisation and presentation of the folio, they were able to demonstrate active engagement with assessment. The idea was that they would feel more in control over the way they wish their abilities to be judged. At this point in my thinking, I wanted the folio to explicitly assess the process in some way as I felt that if it was not assessed, it would not be viewed as important by all students (Weigle, 2000). However, theoretical, ethical and practical concerns would not enable me to grade it, only to give holistic comments. This also seemed beneficial in order to adhere to principles of formative assessment (Harlen, 2012).

CYCLE TWO: THE FIRST TRIAL

I trialled the *processfolio* in 2014 with one class of 14 students. It could not be used un-trialled in a high-stakes context and so was implemented on the first four weeks of a nine-week course where students were required to produce the formative assignment described above. Using the folios and interviews as primary data sets, it was clear that there were benefits. Each folio was different, reflecting a degree of independence and ownership of the process and product (Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 2000). Some displayed more creativity than others, for example one student divided the process into three stages, retrospectively imposing her own order on the process. All justified to a degree the choices of the pieces they had included, and identified weaknesses and strengths of their product essay. Language used in the introductions to the folios, such *my essay;* the use of active past tense verbs, *I decided, I chose, I produced* and the various terms that they used to refer to the folios, *a documentary, a witness, an invisible tutor,* indicate their identification with their own work. Some of the main benefits identified in the interviews were the level of confidence and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994) gained from their record of their experience of managing the process, *I felt I was on the way to a professional.*

Although preventing plagiarism was not an explicit goal of this type of assessment beyond combatting the sense of alienation that can manifest itself in such behaviour (Case, 2008), it seemed that it also helped to facilitate the notions of textual ownership. One student explicitly pointed out her use of the folio at the formative stage of the course helped her at the summative stage:

> *I noticed from the folio feedback that I didn't put my note-taking in the folio. It may be because I didn't note-taking clearly so it leads to the plagiarism.*

There was also evidence of a shift in recognition of the process in addition to merely grades,

> *I am more stressed about how to say, consequences than the process...so ask us to write a product and a process can provide us with new…method,*

allowing them to see assessment as an opportunity for learning in addition to a judgment of performance (Harlen, 2012).

However, there were fundamental issues which arose during the project and were evident in the students' interviews. Some students who had compiled the *processfolio* retrospectively found it time- consuming, as I had expected, but some expressed a concern about the fact it was assessed at all. For example, one student stated that the assessment was in some ways negating the process, the very thing I was trying to mitigate. Although I had felt that assessing it was necessary for motivation, I realised that I had fallen into the trap of employing assessment as a technical tool to *demand* engagement (Madaus, 1993), or worse, as a means of performing the individual through a *public display of reflection*, as one teacher eloquently put it. One student indeed expressed their discomfort with the reflection element:

> *If I don't need to submit it I can do better because I can write something that I really want to say in this paper and I can learn from my comments.*

I realised that I was inadvertently through good intentions perpetuating a discourse of making the learner responsible for their own learning, problematic because when students see their own learning process as entirely their own responsibility rather than seeing it as a

product of the society in which they are learning, or the conditions that shape them, it justifies certain neo-liberal policies (Torrance, 2015), in a similar way to those performed on teachers. Realising that I was not adhering to the principles of AR in my initial thinking about my assessment intervention is an example of the benefits of immanent critique. As an insider, I was able to notice impacts at the structural level that an outsider researcher may not have seen.

It was clear that I had to change my way of thinking about the *processfolio* and what I wanted it to do. In an attempt to marry principles and pragmatism, I had to reconceptualise the *processfolio* not as an alternative assessment tool to elicit desired behaviours, (Hughes-Wilhelm, 1996), but as a means of mitigating such attempts to do so. The folio would therefore not be assessed but submitted in tandem with the product essay to emphasise the integral nature of process and product (Ivanič, 2004). This would better allow for the exploration of tensions in the academy around writing and assessment without the fear of judgement, of facilitating some agency on the part of students, while raising to explicit consciousness students' awareness of the social conditions that shape their educational experiences and how they can negotiate them.

CYCLE THREE: WIDENING THE PARTICIPATION

The third AR cycle took place in 2015 involving three classes with three teachers. All participating teachers were volunteers, as by its nature, AR facilitates bottom-up engagement as opposed to top-down imposition, although due to the vagaries of summer teaching schedules, a limited number were able to participate in the full nine-week course. Although many benefits of the folio were similar to the first trial, more genuine evidence of agency emerged. A number of students expressed in the folios and interviews an explicit awareness of their choices. One student commented on his pragmatism, aware that the course was not teaching him all he needed because of the assessment but that he had to comply with the assessment conditions, *I think postgraduate is not just summarising, I have*

to find something new. But the main task was to finish that essay. Another student was honest about the frustrations he felt in trying to fit his ideas within a restrictive framework of an essay, but both embraced that frustration as part of the academic writing process and reflected on his choice to disregard the pragmatic option:

> *Why can't I pretend I love everything, just choose one topic – that way you don't put your emotion into it, it's like a machine and it might be easier? But I think that's a waste of time. I think the pain is part of the experience.*

While these students could well have conceptualised these choices and changes regardless of the project, the *processfolio* had given them a tangible means of doing so. Crucially, as it was not 'assessed' and only completion was a requirement, students could present themselves in an honest way without fear of quantitative or qualitative judgement, or even make an agentic choice not to engage with it beyond a surface level if they so wished.

As for the teachers, I found this more fraught that I had anticipated. I had naively assumed that my colleagues shared the same views around assessment but this was not the case. Although Sara's hope for her students aligned with the ethos of the folio,

> *I felt that they really needed to learn to […] value their own opinions because there was a kind of a sense of not trusting yourself […] really depending on the teacher's opinion*

John felt that there was little that could be done to change things,

I know students can become quite dependent […]. But other than telling them to just get on with it, I don't see what you can do. His views reflected an assessment discourse of measurement and outcomes, which did not align with the purpose of the folio, *If someone can produce a product, the process doesn't really matter. The product is how you measure how well they've done.*

I was conflicted at many stages with the democratic and participatory nature of AR in allowing teachers to interpret the *processfolio* for themselves, while hoping that they would commit to implementing it with their own classes in order for it to have the desired impacts.

As Townsend (2010) states, AR cycles and iterations can be messy, and risky, in that they can take us far from the direction we imagined taking when we embark on a project. While this is of course the case for other types of research, the 'human factor' of AR in attempting to collaborate with colleagues and students for change, as well as the attempt to deeply understand the context while enacting that change, perpetuates this frustrating process. However, John's scepticism did abate by the end of the project as he identified beneficial impacts on his class compared to his previous years of teaching on the pre-sessional:

> *By the last couple of weeks […] they were doing it all themselves, I was just confirming, so it was very different. I did feel they were less anxious […] less teacher dependant […] more confident and had transferable skills actually.*

This is an example of how AR can pose a risk to ourselves. It challenges our assumptions about our practice, our students, our profession and ourselves through reflexive monitoring (Archer, 2007) and the exercise of agency. Although John's attitude to the purpose of EAP assessment did not unequivocally alter, it confronted him with questions and may have contributed in some way to a shift in thinking. It required *me* to rethink many of my own assumptions and understandings of my purpose as an EAP practitioner. It also confronted less agreeable aspects of my personality in my desire to control processes and outcomes. I had to recognise where I could be 'causally efficacious' (Shipway, 2011) and where the limits were within the social structure of EAP pre-sessional assessment and its 'mediating conditions'. In addition, a theory of action through research requires an engagement with theory and a body of literature that is often neglected by time-poor teachers trained to be interested only in improving their own teaching. Challenging the epistemological traditions of research that informs our practice does not mean that we can ignore this research foundation, especially if we wish to be taken seriously as EAP scholars.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

I have argued that AR represents risk for practitioners, the academy and the neo-liberal university. However, as I have tried to show in the context of my project, it can be a risky endeavour for the field of EAP itself. I propose that changes have to originate from an immanent critique of our practices, but this comes with some caveats. The *processfolio* project required us to question methods of assessment that place extreme stress on students and teachers, and worse, may not only be an example of valuing only what is measured, but a means of creating what it intends to measure (Hanson, 2000). In other words, perpetuating a conceptualisation of writing as a product created in a vacuum by applying formula to meet criteria, employed due to cost and time-effectiveness, speaking an inculcated discourse of SELTs. There is a danger here that perhaps through immanent critique, as we expose and promote what we do as EAP practitioners to our wider stakeholders, we find it conflicts with the realities of the university climate in the 21st century. At that point we face the dilemma of whether to acquiesce or whether, and how, to resist. There is also the risk, as in the *processfolio* project, that collaboration reveals that many of us are not as much on the same page as we would like to think when it comes to a construct of EAP.

Although the immanent critique that AR represents is daunting and brings to light some things we would perhaps rather leave in the dark, I would contend that in the end it is more empowering if we practitioners are the ones who do this for ourselves rather than waiting for border agencies, government policies, university audits and the latest decontextualized research to tell us what to do. In EAP, we teach and talk of rhetorical moves. However, in Ancient Greece, *parrhesia* represented the opposite of *rhetoric* in its function of speaking candidly and challenging those in power. According to Kemmis (2006) AR should be a form of *parrhesia*, capable of telling unwelcome truths. I am not suggesting that EAP should only be concerned with AR as a research framework. But if it is to be used, the risks must be

considered, and by risks, I mean what good AR that returns to its roots of collaboration and morally-informed action and social concern may have the power to achieve.

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