Contemporary Approaches to Research in TESOL

Sardar M. Anwaruddin[1]
University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is one of the largest educational enterprises in the world. Tens of thousands of teachers—both native and non-native speakers of English—are engaged in TESOL across the world. This large population of teachers depends heavily on academic researchers for developing their knowledge base. Although it is evident that teachers who engage in classroom research are more aware of their practices and better able to facilitate student learning, teacher-research is a minority activity in the field of TESOL. In this article, I briefly discuss TESOL practitioners' conceptions of research. Then, I focus on a dichotomous relationship between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research, and review some contemporary orientations to TESOL research. I conclude the article with a recommendation that TESOL practitioners engage in action research for their professional development as well as their students' increased learning of the target language.

Keywords*: research engagement, knowledge, pedagogy, TESOL, action research*

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[1] Sardar M. Anwaruddin is a Lecturer in English at North South University in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Currently, he is working toward his Ph.D. in Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto in Canada. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of English as an International Language*, *Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, *Asian EFL Journal*, *Canadian Journal of Action Research, Asiatic, Transnational Curriculum Inquiry,* and *Policy Futures in Education*. He can be contacted at s.anwaruddin@mail.utoronto.ca

Introduction

In 1962, William R. Parker wrote: "In terms of the number of pupils and teachers, of timetable hours and geographic extent, the teaching of English as a second language is the biggest educational undertaking in the world today" (quoted in Darian, 1972, p. 149). At present, the scope and impact of teaching English to speakers of other languages (this is how the acronym TESOL is to be understood throughout this article) is even greater than that of Parker's time. Like its growth as a distinct field of education, the knowledge base of TESOL has also become noticeably diverse. Scholarly journals have been launched across the globe to create and disseminate research-based knowledge among those involved in TESOL. However, much of the debate in TESOL literature has revolved around the issue of appropriate teaching methodologies. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, language teaching practitioners faced much confusion and bewilderment because of an apparent conflict between the new and the old ideas of language teaching. For example, in the beginning of twentieth century, a fairly detailed situation of language teaching at American schools was revealed by the Report of the Committee of Twelve (1900). The National Educational Association requested the formation of the committee, chaired by Professor Calvin Thomas, then president of the Modern Language Association of America. The committee investigated "the position of the modern languages in secondary education…to make recommendations for methods of instruction, training of teachers, and other questions connected with the teaching of the modern languages in the secondary schools and colleges" (Titone, 1968, p. 75). The committee found the conditions "somewhat chaotic and bewildering" and made "a critical review of the contemporary methods and some pertinent recommendations and proposals" (p. 75). The Report of the Committee of Twelve "reveal[ed] a thoroughly up-to-date awareness of the day's methodological trends" (p.76).

As evident in the Committee's emphasis on the methods of language teaching, TESOL practitioners and theorists have always used various research findings to support their preferred teaching method(s). Thus, research plays significant roles in the field of TESOL, especially when it comes to teachers' knowledge of effective teaching. In the pages that follow, I first present TESOL practitioners' views on research and a dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. Then, I briefly discuss seven research orientations currently predominant in TESOL. Drawing on sociocultural theories, I also discuss how engaging in action research may be beneficial to teachers not only for their professional development, but also for their students' increased learning. I conclude the article with a recommendation the TESOL practitioners engage in action research more frequently than they currently do.

Understanding and Using Research

Simon Borg (2009) carried out a study in order to analyze the conceptions of research held by 505 teachers of English from 13 countries. The study explored issues such as English language teachers' perceptions of research, how often the teachers read published research, how often they do research, what they think about teachers' research engagement, and the like. The study elicited the participating teachers' conceptions of research in two ways: first, they were asked to evaluate a number of scenarios, and then comment on the features of good research. Borg collected the data by using questionnaires and follow-up interviews. To understand the state of research in TESOL, Borg's findings are very significant. Among 495 teachers who reported on the frequency of reading published research, only 15.6% often read published research, 51.9% did it sometimes, 28.7% did it rarely, and 3.8% never did so (Borg, 2009). The main reasons for rarely or never reading published research were a lack of time, a lack of practical relevance, and inaccessibility to research publications.

With regard to teachers' engagement in research, Borg (2009) mentions that "a total of 493 teachers reported how frequently they did research. Of them, 8.1 per cent said they never did it, 37.3 per cent said they did it rarely, 41 per cent sometimes, and 13.6 per cent often" (p. 371). The three main reasons for doing research for those who did it often or sometimes were (1) to look for better instructional methods, (2) to solve pedagogical problems, and (3) to develop professionally. On the other hand, teachers who rarely or never did research also mentioned some reasons for not doing so. The three main reasons were (1) a lack of time (as is the case for not reading published research), (2) most of their colleagues did not do research (indicative of peer-influence), and (3) a lack of sufficient knowledge about research methods. Another significant reason was that doing research was not a part of their job responsibility. In short, although the benefits of teachers' engagement in research abound in the literature (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Pine, 2009; Borg, 2010; Burns, 2010), the reality is that "teacher research—systematic, rigorous enquiry by teachers into their own professional contexts, and which is made public—is a minority activity in ELT" (Borg, 2009, p. 377). (Note that ELT stands for English Language Teaching, which is a European equivalence to TESOL). This resonates with a

concern expressed about two decades ago that teachers' voices were missing from the knowledge base for teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). Provided that the knowledge base of TESOL is built primarily on the systematic inquiries conducted mainly by university-based researchers, it is important to shed light on the state of research in the field. To this I now turn.

Qualitative-Quantitative Dichotomy

Like any other fields, language education was dominated by the surge of positivism during the 1960s and 1970s. From 1970 to 1985, quantitative research articles dominated such scholarly publications as *TESOL Quarterly* and *Language Learning*, and many scholars viewed this dominance as a positive development. However, the 1990s witnessed a reverse trend, i.e., an "increasing prominence of qualitative research as both a subject of theoretical discussion and a method for conducting empirical work" (Lazaraton, 2000, p. 175). Anne Lazaraton, a George Mason University professor, analyzed all articles in four distinguished applied linguistics journals for a seven-year period (1991-1997). The journals were *Language Learning, The Modern Language Journal, Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, and *TESOL Quarterly*. Analyzing 332 research articles, what she found was surprising: 88% articles were quantitative, 10% were qualitative, and 2% were partially qualitative. In the partially qualitative studies, the data were analyzed quantitatively, but various qualitative techniques such as quotations from participants and transcripts were used to describe the findings. The difference between the numbers of qualitative and quantitative articles was very high in all three journals except *TESOL Quarterly*. In *TESOL Quarterly*, 62% of the articles were quantitative and 38% were qualitative (Lazaraton, 2000). Another significant finding of her study was that ethnography was the most frequently used approach in the qualitative studies; it was used 15 times in the 33 articles analyzed. The Lazaraton study may be disheartening for many, especially those who lean toward a qualitative approach to research, but it helps us gauge where the field of TESOL is in terms of various orientations to research.

Seven Predominant Orientations

Any careful review of the literature reveals that a multiplicity of orientations and approaches to research exists in TESOL. Although there are numerous methods and orientations of research, some of them are more frequently used than others. In Cumming et al. (1994), seven noted scholars each discuss a specific orientation to research in TESOL. They highlight both the value and the limitations of these orientations. Cumming et al. (1994) classify these seven orientations into three categories: descriptive, interpretive, and ideological.

Descriptive orientations include (1) analysis of learners' language, (2) verbal reports on learning strategies, and (3) text analysis. The analysis of learners' language orientation describes the language system of second/foreign language learners and how they express meaning in the target language. This orientation has many benefits in the ESL [English as a Second Language] or EFL [English as a Foreign Language] classrooms. In addition to highlighting the importance of teachers' input, the order in which students learn the language, and the influence of their first language, this orientation to research provides "the teacher with tools for determining on an ongoing basis what the learners do and do not know of the English language" (Cumming et al., 1994, p. 677). The major drawback of this approach is an extreme difficulty to weigh and interpret the obtained data and information (Tarone, 1994 in Cumming et al., 1994). The second orientation in the descriptive category is verbal reports on learning strategies which help teachers, researchers, and students better understand what the learners think about their learning tasks and strategies. Verbal reports include self-reports and self-observations, and depend heavily on questionnaires and interviews for data collection (Cohen, 1994 in Cumming et al., 1994). Critics of verbal reports orientation argue that this approach may compel students to produce verbal responses that do not precisely express their natural thought processes. Moreover, students may repress data, and their cognitive processes might be inaccessible for the researcher.

The third orientation in the descriptive category is text analysis, which describes texts and evaluates their quality. Here texts include both the texts students learn to be able to produce other texts and the actual texts they produce. Since its origin in the Prague School of Linguistics in the 1920s, numerous different approaches have been added to this orientation. Many aspects of text such as sentences, discourse, genre, and the like can be researched in the text analysis orientation. It helps researchers, teachers, and students to assess the quality of the texts they use and to evaluate the texts they produce. The major limitation of this orientation is that it is time-consuming and it requires specialized work. As a result, students and teachers might find it difficult to use this approach in their classroom research (Connor, 1994 in Cumming et al., 1994).

Interpretive orientations to research in TESOL include (1) classroom interaction analysis, and (2) ethnography. The classroom interaction analysis deals with instructional practices and various interactions between students and teachers in the English language classroom. Since the 1970s, a number of observation schemes have been developed within this orientation. While some of them tend to focus more on pedagogical practices, others may concentrate on linguistic behaviors. Nonetheless, the orientation as a whole can be very useful to understand what actually happens in an English language classroom. Critics of this orientation argue that predetermined categories in the observation schemes may limit the observer's perceptions and understandings. There is a possibility that the observers will see behaviors that are identical with the behavioral categories in their observation scheme (Spada, 1994 in Cumming et al., 1994).

The second orientation in the interpretive category is ethnography, which holds an important place in TESOL research because of its holistic and emic view. An ethnographer's main goal is to create and present a whole picture of the classroom culture. In this complete picture, nothing is absent. For the emic view, ethnographers take a *native* perspective and report from within the culture. The researchers describe the culture as they understand and participate in it (Markee & Kasper, 2004). Therefore, the ethnographer not only interviews students and teachers but also observes all pedagogical activities in action. The major challenge of this orientation to research is the insider-outsider dilemma. Ethnographers often find it difficult to make a balance between two entities: as an outsider and as an insider. They may find it challenging to interpret their observations and findings objectively, which might affect the validity of their research (Hornberger, 1994 in Cumming et al., 1994).

The ideological orientations to research in TESOL consist of (1) critical pedagogical approaches, and (2) participatory action research. Critical pedagogical approaches to research examine the questions of social, cultural, and political inequalities in TESOL education. The value of this orientation lies in its efforts to address the relationship between language education and issues such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and cultural identity. At the heart of critical inquiry is an educational vision of justice and equity. As such, teachers who embrace the critical approach "must understand not only a wide body of subject matter but also the political structure of the school" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 2). Because of the nature of its focus, critical pedagogical approach aims to be transformative, rather than merely descriptive. Critics argue that the critical approach is not a systemically defined research method. Therefore, much confusion exists among researchers regarding the scope and applicability of this approach. Moreover, many researchers are reluctant to use this approach because of its primary focus on the political (Pennycook, 1994 in Cumming et al., 1994). Proponents of this approach, however, are unwilling to isolate politics from education.

The second type in the category of ideological orientations is participatory action research in which both researchers and participants work together, find a research problem, collaboratively investigate it, and generate applied knowledge. It should be noted that participatory action research is different from action research because of its emphasis on the involvement of participants for social change. Proponents of participatory action research claim that traditional research is used mainly for generating knowledge that is helpful for researchers' publishing and tenure, but it does very little for those who are researched. In participatory action research, researchers and participants together bring about results from which the participants may directly benefit (Krimerman, 2001). However, critics of participatory action research argue that it focuses so much on the community issues that it is hard to call it a research (Auerbach, 1994 in Cumming et al., 1994).

Recommendations for Teacher-Researchers

The discussion above shows that a multiplicity of orientations to research exists in the field of TESOL. However, an underlying tension among all these orientations is a dichotomous relationship between quantitative and qualitative approaches to research. I argue that the polarization of research into quantitative and qualitative is not beneficial to TESOL research. We need both quantitative and qualitative understandings of phenomena under study if we want to make meaningful contributions to the knowledge base of the field. For example, it is important to know the number of ESL students in a school who are stigmatized due to their ESL identity (quantity), but it is also important to know how they feel about this stigmatization (quality). In this light, polarizing research into quantitative and qualitative results in only partial understanding of phenomena. As Ercikan and Roth (2006) argue, "the material world (ontology) and knowledge about it (epistemology) have both qualitative and quantitative characteristics" (p. 14). In fact, philosophers such as Hegel and Husserl maintained that the world—material and social—has both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Therefore, I agree with Ercikan and Roth (2006, p. 16) that: natural and cultural phenomena in general (including the cognition of researchers and their participants) are simultaneously quantitative and qualitative. Full investigations of

phenomena need to consider both of these aspects; therefore, it makes little sense to set up a qualitative–quantitative dichotomy in research.

On this basis, I recommend that we move beyond the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative research and establish more fruitful collaborations among researchers who are interested in diverse methodological approaches.

One way of bridging the divide between quantitative and qualitative research is to embrace what is now known as *mixed methods* research. In a mixed methods study, "the inquirer or investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods" (Cresswell, 2008, p. 527). Proponents of mixed methods research argue that its methodological pluralism results in numerous benefits to the communities of researchers and practitioners (see, e.g., Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). A frequently mentioned benefit of "using mixed methods research is that the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches will provide a more complete understanding of the research problem than either approach alone" (Cresswell, 2008, p. 528). For details of designing and conducting mixed methods research, consult Creswell and Clark (2007).

The review of the state of research in TESOL reveals that in addition to the quantitative-qualitative dichotomy, there is a lack of teacher engagement in research. As Borg (2009, 2010) finds out, very few teachers of TESOL engage in research to better understand the pedagogical theories and to improve their instructional practices. A person who is simultaneously a teacher and a researcher can be a better resource for students than a person who is either a teacher or a researcher. Teacher-researchers have a unique opportunity to closely examine their research participants and issues that require careful investigation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). As practitioners, they also get an opportunity to implement their research findings. In order to become a successful researcher, one of their primary tasks is to select an appropriate orientation to research. Because of a large number of orientations and approaches to research, the choice of an appropriate one has to be based on the researchers' purpose and the environment in which they will carry out the research.

Regardless of orientations, research should aim for accurate observations of various phenomena in the world. In all forms of inquiry, the researcher needs to observe a phenomenon and interpret it in a meaningful way in order to contribute to the body of knowledge in TESOL. Therefore, it is imperative for the researcher, regardless of the approaches to conducting the study, to observe phenomena and successfully link them to interpretations and uses. The researchers may begin with a problem, a hypothesis or an educated guess which is usually based on their experiences, prior knowledge, a theory, or an everyday issue. Then, they need to decide what kind of evidence or information is necessary to explore the phenomena or to test their hypothesis/guess. They also need to interpret the obtained evidence or information in a meaningful and appropriate way so that they can support the claims with evidence. In order to support their claims, the researchers must also attend to two other essential components: reliability and validity. In (quantitative) educational research, reliability refers consistency or stability of findings. In other words, a test or assessment is reliable if its scores are similar on every occasion. For reliability, an objective, neutral, and consistent observation is a must. There are different types of reliability in educational research, e.g., test-retest reliability, equivalent forms reliability, internal consistency reliability, and inter-scorer reliability (for details, see Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

In any research study, we look for information that informs our understanding or supports our arguments. In addition to reliability, we must therefore pay attention to validity, which may be "defined as the appropriateness of the interpretations, inferences, and actions that we make" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 150). To ensure the value and trustworthiness of research findings, two types of validity—internal and external—have been widely discussed in the research community. Internal validity determines "the basic minimum requirement without which any experiment is uninterpretable" (Pine, 2009, p. 81). External validity, on the other hand, is concerned with the extent to which research findings are generalizable to other sets of people and contexts. Hence, regardless of the orientations or approaches to research, every researcher needs to be attentive to reliability and validity of their inquiries.

Realizing that there is a lack of teacher engagement in research, educational theorists strongly recommend that TESOL teachers engage in research on teaching and learning (Burton, 1998; Borg, 2010). However, an obvious question arises: How should it be done? This question may seem to be simplistic, but due to the methodological chaos in the state of research in the field, answers to this question can be complex. Acknowledging the theoretical arguments and disagreements among the scholars with regard to the "best" approaches to research, I recommend that teachers of TESOL be involved in action research more frequently than they usually do. Action research may enable them to reflect on their pedagogical practices and find answers to their questions. As Burns (2010) states, "for a

teacher who is reflective, and committed to developing as a thinking professional, AR [action research] is an appealing way to look more closely at puzzling classroom issues or to delve into teaching dilemmas" (p. 6).

Why Action Research?

We do research because we want to know something that we did not already know. After doing the research, we can say that we have come to know. We can also explain how we have come to know it. This is the case, in general, for all forms of research. In action research, the researcher takes an action, which is usually to begin a process of improvement in teaching and learning. This becomes one of the main characteristics of action research, i.e., it is practice-based. This practice is simultaneously an action and a research. Therefore, we can say that "action research is about two things: action (what you do) and research (how you learn about and explain what you do). The action aspect of action research is improving practice. The research aspect is about creating knowledge about practice" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010, p. 5). Being highly practice-based, action research aims to deal with a local problem and tries to find its possible solutions. As Pine (2009) states, "Characteristically, action research studies a problematic situation in an ongoing systematic and recursive way to take action to change that situation" (p. 30). Hence, it seems very reasonable to choose action research for learning about pedagogical practices, improving them, and creating knowledge and theories about the improvements.

Since the 1970s, there has been a dramatic surge in the practice and popularity of action research all over the world (Pine, 2009), and this has provided teachers with an opportunity to investigate and reflect on their own practices. Studies have found that "teachers who engaged in teacher research wrote more honestly about classroom problems, became more self-assured, [and] began to see teaching more as a learning process" (Pine, 2009, p. 35). Moreover, teachers involved in research often try new ways of teaching as they became increasingly sensitive to classroom variables. Thus, action research makes teachers aware of any discrepancies between goals and achievements, and between theories and practices. In this way, they become more analytical about their own practices. However, the existing literature shows that English language teachers are yet to utilize action research for their professional development.

Therefore, I strongly recommend that English language teachers choose action research which involves an informed, purposeful action. Action research puts the researcher at the center of the inquiry. It begins with a felt need to change something. This need transforms into an intent which eventually transforms into a purposeful action. This action requires that the researcher be at the center of the process. As McNiff and Whitehead (2010) say, "You use 'I' as the author of your report, and it takes the form of your personal research story. Your report is an explanatory account, not just a descriptive account, in which you give your reasons and purposes for your actions" (p. 38). This emphasis on "I" shows that the researchers take responsibility for improving their practices and bringing about positive changes to their pedagogical activities. For these reasons, TESOL practitioners need to carry out action research to investigate any phenomenon that attracts their attention so that they not only improve their pedagogical practices, but also create opportunities for students to learn.

For a sample action research study, see Anwaruddin (2013). Based on the observation that most of my students use computer-based technology (CBT) in their daily activities, I used computer assisted language learning (CALL) as an intervention in this study. This CALL curriculum was focused on Web 2.0 and its applications for educational purposes. The main objective of the study was to understand the effects of a CALL curriculum on the participants' learning motivation. To meet this objective, I designed CALL and non-CALL lessons to teach English to a class of first-year undergraduate students. Throughout this course, I observed students' behaviors and attitudes and collected data from different artifacts and student responses. Comparison between student behaviors during the CALL and non-CALL lessons and analysis of the triangulated data indicated that the use of Web 2.0 in the CALL curriculum contributed to an increase in students' motivation as well as their learning of the target language. This study may be of relevance to those interested in the intersections between web-based technologies and TESOL students' learning motivation.

Choosing to engage in action research can be beneficial to TESOL teachers from the perspective of sociocultural theories of learning. Sociocultural theorists believe that learning occurs through participation in social activities (see, for example, Cole, 1996; Saxe, 1999). Theorists in this tradition draw heavily on the works of Lev Vygotsky, who believes that individuals learn by *internalizing* various cultural aspects such as language, physical tools, and symbols. They also transform their practices by negotiating meaning with others and situating their individual action within collective activity (Knapp, 2008). This sociocultural perspective views learning as embedded within social events in which individuals interact with other individuals, objects, and events. Therefore, "understanding learning requires a focus on how individuals participate in particular activities, and how

Contemporary Approaches to Research in TESOL

they draw on artifacts, tools, and social others to solve local problems" (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p. 450). Recent developments of sociocultural theories in second language acquisition (SLA) research have challenged our understanding of the traditional cognitive and behaviorist approaches to teaching and learning (Cross, 2010). An emphasis on the sociocultural approach focuses our attention on the situated nature of language learning and the context in which it takes place. It also calls for increased awareness of how teachers identify themselves, understand their professional roles, and develop relationships with students, texts, and contexts in order to better facilitate the learning processes.

This sociocultural approach to action research may be valuable to teachers' learning and professional development for another reason, i.e., to be able to critically examine the theories and methods imported from foreign contexts. Many scholars (see, for example, Pennycook, 1989; Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Akbari, 2008; Wedell, 2009) have raised concerns about the pedagogical effectiveness of TESOL methods borrowed from other contexts. Some have called for a locally-situated pedagogy for teaching foreign languages (Anwaruddin, 2011). They take a locally-based approach to theories and methods of teaching because they believe that an uncritical adoption of foreign models ignores the local contextual realities and sociocultural factors that play crucial roles in students' learning. Many scholars have examined various forms of "transfer" of pedagogical methods and approaches (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). In fact, this issue of transfer, also known as educational lending and borrowing, has been a recurring theme in comparative and international education (for details, see Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Scholars have warned against uncritical adoption of foreign theories and methods of education, which are not always suited to the culture and heritage of the host countries. For example, Nguyen, Elliott, Terlouw, and Pilot (2009) investigate the application of cooperative learning, a Western method of education, within an Asian context. Their investigation finds "a complex web of cultural conflicts" in the application of the Western method to an Eastern educational context (p. 109). It also highlights "the potential for mismatch when educational approaches are transferred across cultures without sufficient consideration of the norms and values of the host society" (pp. 123-124).

In keeping with the concerns mentioned above, I propose that we take a locally-based approach to understanding what theories and methods are best suited to the sociocultural and material contexts in which we teach. For this type of understanding, action research appears to be an appropriate choice. By engaging in action research, teachers of TESOL can empower themselves and learn about the problems in their own, local teaching contexts. This may contribute to the establishment of a local knowledge base, enhance teachers' knowledge of teaching and learning, and help them improve their pedagogical practices. I also recommend that while engaging in action research projects, teachers move beyond the dichotomy of quantitative and qualitative approaches to research. Since the world has both quantitative and qualitative aspects, both of them are essential for full understandings of the phenomena under investigation (Ercikan & Roth, 2006). Therefore, one viable option for TESOL action researchers is to adopt a mixed methods approach to their inquiry (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Thus, action research may be beneficial to TESOL practitioners for their professional development as well as their students' increased learning of the target language (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Borg, 2009, 2010; Burns, 2010).

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