

# Action Research in L2 Classrooms: Conflicts, Quality and Contributions to Knowledge<sup>1</sup>



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## Introduction

The field of foreign language (FL) study is gradually paying more attention to teaching practices, learning experiences, and other pedagogical matters originating from the language classroom. As a result, literature and resources are more readily available to FL teachers who have questions arising from their own classrooms. In this article, we argue for the value of instructor-driven research, or action research, to help FL teachers begin to understand the complex and dynamic phenomena occurring in their classrooms. After an initial definition, we provide an example of how action research can be implemented in one FL classroom. Next, we highlight some characteristics of the relationship between FL classroom researchers and teachers to set the stage for a subsequent discussion about validity and reliability in action research. Building on this foundation, we argue that despite criticisms concerning any possible limitations of this research orientation, action research can make important contributions to the field of FL inquiry. It should be noted that this article seeks to initiate the reflection process for teachers wishing to conduct research in their own classrooms, a crucial first step that would take place prior to any data collection.<sup>2</sup>

## What Is Action Research?

Action research was first developed out of the desire to take into account the real-world experiences of people in their natural settings. Traditionally attributed to Kurt Lewin, a German social psychologist, the notion of action research was considered an alternative to the traditional phenomenological and positivist approaches in research methodology. Action research, as defined by Lewin (1946), seeks to study a problem that is meaningful to all participants — students and instructor alike share a stake in the outcome by taking an active role in the research process.

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They also share the understanding that change would be the primary objective of their involvement as participants. Current definitions may suggest different orientations to the same objective; that is, all participants work together in order to achieve change in their social or educational environment, independent of the content area. In the second language (L2) classroom, the scope of action research broadens to include all classroom participants as members of a research community. The participants define specific areas of analysis, develop programs for their study, and take specific actions to implement change both within the classroom and in the surrounding community (Auerbach, 1994). Richards and Lockhart (1996) define action research for the L2 classroom as “teacher-initiated classroom investigation which seeks to increase the teacher’s understanding of classroom teaching and learning, and to bring about change in classroom practices” (p.12). Such research usually involves teacher-initiated, small-scale projects in the classroom and consists of a cyclical set of stages, such as exploration, action, reflection, and change. This type of classroom research implements a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to characterize the whole experience of the participants, uncover solutions, and provide insights to the problems under study. Hence, the flexibility of this design

does not limit the researcher to examining cause-and-effect relationships in laboratory-like conditions, a perspective that is not only unnatural, but also rather unlikely in FL classrooms.<sup>3</sup>

Nunan (1992) however accepts a broader definition of action research in which change is not a necessary outcome, but where data collection and interpretation by the practitioner in the context of inquiry are essential components to increase understanding of a given research problem. Action research, often subsumed under (although not necessarily limited to) the umbrella of qualitative research, is only now beginning to gain recognition and claim its proper place in FL classroom research. The next section describes one possible situation in which a FL teacher could implement this model.

## Teachers in Action: An Example

The following example illustrates how teachers can explore issues that directly affect them, whether they are curricular, learner-related, or contextual. Let us suppose that a teacher wants to investigate how e-mail and Internet chatting in the L2 affect his/her students’ overall writing performance. The teacher can track students’ progress through multiple means: via e-mail exchanges with the student, via regular pencil-and-paper writing, and via online chatting. In a traditional research paradigm, the teacher would measure the effectiveness of the computer medium with a control group of students who do not use Internet or e-mail in writing assignments and a treatment group of students who use Internet and e-mail in the same writing assignments. The teacher could then compare the two groups’ scores on the writing assignment to determine the effectiveness of the e-mail and Internet chats in improving students’ written performance. Results would tell us about the product of such writing activities but only for these two

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groups of students. In this type of study, we would find out very little about the *process* of such writing activities, such as *how* Internet versus pencil-and-paper writing activities contribute to progress in writing and *which* specific aspects are effective. We would also not be able to say definitively if it was the Internet or paper medium that was effective or if it was another variable, such as the activity itself, the topic of the activity, the proficiency of the students in question, or simply the personality of the teacher that accounted for learner progress.

From an action-oriented approach, the teacher would collect several samples of written computer activities and transcripts of Internet chat interactions over time, as well as student self-evaluations of the activities. The teacher could also maintain a journal about the content and progress of his/her students and interview the students about the activities or the strategies they used while engaged in the activities.<sup>4</sup> We would not be able to conclude definitively that students improve L2 proficiency because they write e-mails in the L2, but we would have an in-depth characterization of the type of learning and activities that contributed to the writing process in that particular class on those types of writing activities. The teacher could then use the information and results of the study to draw conclusions about L2 learning and apply that knowledge directly and immediately to the classroom (Zéphir, 2000; Dutertre, 2000). These classroom applications may come in the form of customizing the lessons and activities according to findings of the study and student-teacher collaboration. The teacher’s exploration of the learner perspectives and outcomes, in combination with his/her own beliefs about a given set of written tasks, then enable him/her to enact positive change in the classroom. Had the study been carried out with traditional research methods (e.g., grammaticality judgment tasks and other discrete one-time measures targeting specific grammatical structures), very little would be known about the task type and learner experience other than the number of accurate responses that students produced. This and other classroom phenomena originating from a variety of sources (e.g., learner and teacher characteristics, classroom dynamics, and L2

content) are a benefit of action research and can thus also be explored.

For our example, our teachers’ journals in the e-mail project can provide an in-depth account of the many L2 learning processes surrounding e-mail interactions. When conducted from the action research perspective, the same project offers us in-depth insight into the FL classroom experience for the learner and teacher alike. That is, the journal would provide us with the teacher’s perspectives on classroom events, such as student progress, usefulness of activities, unexpected occurrences. Students’ self-evaluations and interviews with the teachers would reveal information regarding interests, preferences, and strategies, all of which may be useful for future implementation of e-mail-based materials in the specific FL classroom. This type of inquiry addresses a clear desire “to identify and better understand the roles of the different participants in classroom interaction, the impact that certain types of instruction may have on FL/SL learning and the factors which promote or inhibit learning” (Lightbown, 2000, p. 438). This information would not only involve teachers directly in research but also could help teachers and administrators in their curricular and pedagogical decisions, which would ultimately benefit the classroom in question. The following explores some of the traditional features of the relationship between researchers and teachers.

### **Relationship between FL Researchers and Practitioners**

Historically, FL researchers analyzing classrooms have not been part of the instructional process and as such, not fully linked to the classroom phenomena observed and measured (Pica, 1994; Lightbown, 2000). In addition, FL teachers have traditionally remained separate from the identification, characterization, and definition of trends in research that have guided educational practice in L2 classrooms (Allwright and Bailey, 1991). Some characteristics of the limited communication between the communities of researchers and practitioners are:

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- “Right” theory means “good” practice: Language classroom research has generally been related to single and powerful theoretical frameworks that often follow a theory-then-research approach to the analysis of classroom phenomena (van Lier, 1994; Block, 1996). Similarly, courses in FL teacher education often seem to propose that knowing and applying the right theory for teaching and learning an FL may allow teachers to resolve all problems of practice in the classroom (Crookes, 1993).
- Experience vs. theory: Recent work in general education and language teaching suggests that teachers’ operational theories develop according to their own experience in the classroom, rather than from information provided by second language acquisition (SLA) theory (Markee, 1997; Borg, 1999). As Markee (1997) indicates, “it seems that teachers tend to rely far more on their collective and individual teaching experience as a resource for pedagogical change than on the theoretical knowledge to which they are exposed” (p. 80).
- The foreign-language classroom as a “laboratory”: FL classroom research has given more attention to individual or isolated variables analyzed under specific conditions. However, this interest has not been counterbalanced by work that accounts for the social context within which teaching and learning occurs (Breen, 1985). This situation may explain why, in spite of a remarkable increase of studies concerned with pedagogical questions (Lightbown, 2000; Mitchell, 2000), language teachers still often find a considerable amount of work in general education and FL research to be irrelevant or not targeted to their day-to-day classroom conditions and problems.
- Prevalence of psychometric measurement: Aside from their attention to individual variables, researchers tend to view psychometric measurement in education as a more “valid” methodological technique than others that could take into account the perspective of classroom participants, as well as the complexity of the language teaching and learning processes taking place within classroom contexts (Ellis, 1989; Freeman, 1996; Lazaraton, 2000). This is perhaps due to the higher regard that

the objectivity of empirical research holds in the research community, as well as a general lack of acceptance of the subjectivity that characterizes within-context participant accounts.

- Comprehensibility of second-language classroom studies: In recent years, a larger number of papers in professional journals and texts of language teaching methodology have referred to studies on SLA to suggest strategies and instructional activities (see for example, Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Nunan, 1999; Brown, 2000; Celce-Murcia, 2001; Omaggio Hadley, 2001). However, language teachers may still find it difficult to understand the language of many classroom research reports whose concepts and rhetorical format generally continue to be directed to an academic audience.
- Expectations and “complications”: It may also happen that language teachers expect L2 research findings to have immediate implications for what to teach and how to teach, when in fact these questions should be answered by pedagogical research. To some extent, these expectations could be derived from the above-mentioned relationship between SLA theory and classroom practice. In other words, teachers may tend to rely on a pre-determined set of theoretical items that may limit their contact with other kinds of knowledge and experience appropriate for the social and pedagogical environment of their classrooms (Holliday, 1999).
- “Distinct social groups?” Crookes (1998) raises this question regarding the separate roles that researchers and teachers traditionally have in the classroom. Researchers often request help from teachers to carry the projects out, and teachers, often under pressure, do not generally conduct research, but may provide knowledge about FL students. This separation of roles might be one of the reasons that explain why teachers themselves do not easily facilitate access to classrooms, and why many investigators conduct their research within university language units or language departments.

This overview of the relationship between FL researchers and practitioners has set

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the stage for what seems to be a key argument for a general reticence in accepting action research as an acceptable orientation in comparison to other traditional forms of research in FL classrooms.

### **Quality in Action Research: Validity, Generalizability, and Reliability**

Arguably, the most common objections to action research have concerned what Kvale (1994) calls “the holy trinity” of scientific investigation: validity, generalizability,<sup>5</sup> and reliability. Does action research measure what it purports to measure (is it internally valid)? How accurate are the findings, and do they apply to other similar contexts (is it externally valid)? Do similar action research projects have similar findings (is it reliable)? In any case, an essential consideration should be made with regard to the validity and reliability of action research in FL contexts, an issue often considered a major limitation of this approach to FL inquiry (Nunan, 1992; Burns, 1999). Perhaps one reason for this belief is that action researchers tend to have a vested interest in the problems under study (Waterman, 1998). This subjectivity is a defining characteristic of action research, yet what some consider an inherent threat to internal validity can also offer understanding of the “fluid reality” (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990) of a problem, from an insider’s perspective.

Action research has traditionally been associated with qualitative approaches to research, and the rigor of qualitative and quantitative approaches is often judged by different standards. Many argue that action researchers need not concern themselves with issues of reliability and validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ellis, 1989; Wolcott, 1990; Watkins, 1991; Burns, 1999; Bradbury & Reason, 2001) because the value of action research lies in the interpretation of phenomena rather than an explanation of their causes (Peters & Robinson, 1984). Furthermore, detail-rich accounts of experience, or thick description, can provide additional, meaningful information because causation cannot be directly observed (House, Matheson & McTaggart, 1989; Schofield, 1990; Creswell, 1998). We advocate the use of quantitative and qualitative techniques, in complementary and not opposed roles, in the design of action-based research projects to inform both theory at an abstract global level and L2 instructional applications at a more immediate, practical local level. In informing both educational practice and theory, such a discussion of validity and reliability is necessary to acknowledge the empirical soundness of action-based research.

For the teacher engaged in an action research project, quality and rigor in the

research design may be of lesser importance, especially because teachers have a stake in the outcomes of their studies. These outcomes have direct relevance to the specific classroom, i.e., replicating findings beyond that site becomes a secondary concern because the research questions may only exhibit themselves in a particular FL classroom, and therefore any action taken would apply only locally. This inherent subjectivity of action research has caused some researchers to reconceptualize the traditional notions of validity as defined above that are associated with cause-and-effect relationships (House, Matheson, & McTaggart, 1989). Instead, they favor a broader, more complex, conception of validity that recognizes the multidimensional nature of knowledge (Lather, 1986, 1991; Kvale, 1994; McTaggart 1998; Bradbury & Reason 2001). For quality in L2 action research, Burns (1999) offers validity criteria that emphasize its social, collaborative, and action characteristics. This expanded concept involves the inclusion of multiple voices, successful outcomes that result from actions taken during the research cycle, dependability, and competency of the research process, the participants’ understanding of the context and its social realities, and peer review of the research. Bradbury and Reason (2001) argue for flexible validity criteria to allow the project to develop according to its objectives as they emerge, a notion that traditional validity criteria do not take into account. This alternative view of validity allows each situation to emerge in its natural state but also meets standards of quality and rigor in research. Nevertheless, the contributions that teacher-initiated classroom research can make if teachers disseminate their findings can inform L2 practice and theory, an important step in cultivating a mutually productive relationship between research and practice.

Reliability, on the other hand, is a less common concern in action research (Ellis, 1989; Wolcott, 1990; Burns, 1999), partly because of the dynamic nature of a given classroom situation. Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh (1993) observe, “in action research, reliability is only possible in a very restricted sense. Naturally occurring situations are usually changeable: it is seldom possible to observe comparable situations at different times because the situation will have developed in the meantime” (p. 75). In other words, it would be unlikely to observe repetition of similar findings either within a given action research project or in a similar project conducted in a different context, due to the dynamic nature of classroom situations. However, teachers should be encouraged to disseminate their findings

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through professional meetings and publications to illuminate the issue for other classroom teachers who may find themselves in similar situations.

Teachers who conduct action research projects in their classrooms can take certain steps to increase the quality and rigor of their projects so that they can serve their immediate needs while also providing a vital contribution to the research on classroom L2 learning. Several researchers have offered recommendations by which the quality of action research projects may be judged, alternatives to traditional views of validity-based rigor. These alternatives include:

- Triangulation, or the use of different research techniques to examine the same problem (Lather, 1986; McTaggart, 1998; Burns, 1999; Feldman, 2003). This technique offers the researcher a multidimensional view of the problem under study. For example, a questionnaire, in combination with interviews and proficiency test results all offer different types of information about FL learning in the classroom context.
- Crosschecks of information among the perspectives of the participants and other researchers (Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh, 1993). This step assures that participants in the research are accurately represented. Crosschecks, or verification of parallel findings with other researchers on the constructs, definitions and findings also assure quality in the action research process.
- The inclusion of unheard participant voices (McTaggart, 1998; Mertens, 1998). Traditionally, teachers and learners were the objects of classroom research, and as such did not have the opportunity to participate in the research process. Action research gives the teacher and learner a voice, with which they can take part in both the processes and the outcomes.
- Continuous reflections that bring about change and then further reflection on that change (Lather, 1986; Altrichter, 1993; McTaggart, 1998). As action research is cyclical in nature, reflection

is a necessary component that enables change. In other words, the results of an action research project may suggest a certain path of implementation that could improve learning or the learners' experience in that particular classroom. The teacher's reflection is an essential step in identifying classroom needs, recognizing what steps are necessary to bring about change, and implementing the plan to initiate the change.

- Clear and detailed descriptions of data, methods, and interpretations (Feldman, 2003). For example, the instructor might disseminate excerpts of his or her journal, examples of student work during the research process, transcripts from classroom observations, or other information pertinent to the issue under investigation. Furthermore, the instructor might also share how the findings influenced his or her subsequent classroom decisions. These interpretations would then serve to illuminate the issues for other instructors wishing to investigate similar phenomena.
- Rival explanations and data interpretations from researcher and participant perspectives (McTaggart, 1991, 1998; Altrichter, 1993). To shed light on the local discussions that ensue in action research projects it is necessary to keep other, competing explanations in mind. These alternatives may be found in professional journals and conferences, and research reports. This practice not only maintains an open dialogue in the field, but it also attests to the multidimensionality of the FL classroom experience.
- Peer review through dissemination of findings in professional journals and discussion within the research and teaching community (McTaggart, 1998).
- Acceptance of 'knowledge' as a multi-dimensional concept (Bradbury & Reason, 2001). Traditionally, the tendency to view quantitative, product-oriented studies as more valid has limited our views as to what types of information actually contribute to

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knowledge. This narrow scope has rendered knowledge as uni-dimensional. Action research recognizes the many factors, both process and product that contribute to knowledge.

For the teacher who is a novice investigator, the questions that one investigates and the information that one gathers should be linked from the outset to the theoretical foundations *and* practical implications of the phenomena under investigation, and a research design that reflects the exploratory nature of this type of investigation should be considered. This can be achieved through introspective methods such as journals, autobiographical writing, and other exploratory methods such as interviews, observations, and focus groups. These methods allow for the observation and interpretation of events as they occur in their natural settings, as well as an emergent understanding of behaviors in context from the perspectives of those involved, characteristics that research conducted in the analytical/quantitative tradition are not designed to capture. These options serve as the quality checks by which these types of research projects should be judged. They differ from traditional, empirical standards of rigor in quality that apply to objective measurement in laboratory-like conditions. A reconsideration of the standards of quality in this manner can help redefine the relationship between L2 teachers and research.

### **Contributions of Action Research to Knowledge**

The above discussion of validity and reliability in action research is intended to reconsider the potential value of this methodological approach for research on FL classroom teaching and learning. Even though teachers use action research for their individual contexts and purposes and questions regarding its validity and reliability are of lesser priority, the further acceptance of action research in the field of FL teaching and learning would allow a greater understanding of language learning process and behaviors from the insiders' perspectives. Action research can be of great practical value to the L2 teacher but can also be informative to the field of SLA because of its in-depth look at a problem in its natural setting. However, in order for action research to become a generally

accepted point of reference for SLA in instructional contexts, other dimensions should also be taken into consideration. Action research could contribute to SLA research in the following ways:

- The re-assessment of the relationship between theory and practice with regard to the analysis of classroom processes. The growing interest of SLA researchers and applied linguists in alternatives to complex statistical analyses and data interpretation might eventually help overcome the traditional tendency to give more weight to researchers' views than to a teacher's practical experiences. This might be achieved through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, and the implementation of a research-then-theory orientation to language problems. Such an approach is very common in educational settings, where the theoretical basis for a study emerges as the research is conducted, rather than conducting experiments that seek to provide evidence of a specific theory. Some authors in applied linguistics have suggested alternative notions such as "complexity" in the investigation of contextualized experience, "quantification" through the triangulation of analytical techniques, and "credibility" of conclusions based on the interpretation of data (Davis, 1995; Freeman, 1996; Edge & Richards, 1998). These processes attempt to develop a less restricted discourse for research (Miller, Nelson, & Moore, 1998) that promotes a shift toward techniques that include participant voices and contextual information but yet meet quality standards through a consistent connection between the research problem and the chosen research methods (Lazaraton, 1995).
- The value of teachers' personal practical knowledge. All teachers engage in individual and collective processes of reflection on their professional practice inside and outside the classroom. It is through these processes that teachers develop their personal practical knowledge that reflects their values, beliefs, attitudes, formal training, and experiences related to teaching a second language (Woods, 1996). Exploring and understanding this kind of knowledge is beneficial not only for the education of pre- and for in-service language teachers, but also as a means to interpret complex classroom processes from a variety of complementary perspectives. To illustrate, let us revisit our earlier example of the L2 teacher who is comparing student writing proficiency in electronic and

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pencil-and-paper media. A study of the grammatical accuracy of the writing samples is not sufficient to help us understand the other secondary processes that contribute to L2 performance. In addition to the linguistic aspects of the tasks, these processes may include issues of classroom socialization, anxiety, and motivation, as well as individual learner variables such as learning style and strategies, and previous experiences with the L2. In this situation multiple perspectives on curricular issues can be explored: those of the teacher, those of the student, and those of the school district. All of these elements contribute to the teacher's beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes towards teaching and learning, and information about the context can offer a richness of information about the complexities of the L2 learning process that a score on a task cannot offer.

- The combination of methodological research techniques. In addition to a more active role for classroom practitioners, the exploration of participant perspectives also involves the extension and combination of methodological research tools, techniques, and methods such as field notes, ethnographic reports, structured and semi-structured interviews, stimulated recall, focus groups, (auto)biographies, academic and institutional documents, home visits, case studies, journals (written by learners, teachers, or researchers), and observation instruments which could incorporate the views and perceptions of language classroom participants.<sup>6</sup>

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- The need to consider contextual factors in research design and development. The consideration of various sociocultural variables, e.g. inner city versus suburban school districts, diversity in student makeup that may intervene in academic settings might provide teachers and researchers with information about the path that learners take in linguistic development as well as about the dynamic social and cultural processes of engagement with the L2 and its speech communities. The consideration of contextual factors also involves the observance of ethical standards to avoid bias or discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical disabilities, and religion, among other characteristics (Nunan, 1997).
- The role of action research in language teacher education. As part of their professional development, novice teachers should be given time to understand and criticize the investigative process followed by the research community (Crookes & Chandler, 2001). Teachers should also be given enough opportunities and resources, which can be in the form of research workshops, orientations, equipment, and support to attend conferences, to implement classroom-based research projects that arise from the issues they encounter in their individual classrooms. Both language teacher educators and classroom researchers in general should encourage the continuation of this type of inquiry, initiated by teachers-in-training, even after they have completed their teacher education programs and entered into the academic work force. To this effect, action research should receive academic and institutional support through the appropriate dissemination of action-research reports, professional recognition for faculty members and student teachers involved in this kind of research, and the collaboration between university researchers and FL teachers in a variety of educational contexts—school systems, colleges and universities (Crookes & Chandler, 2001).

Action research focuses primarily on participants' of understand FL classroom phenomena. It may also play a key role in the increasingly active and cooperative relationship between researchers and teachers. Perhaps this increased collaboration is due to a growing interest in the implementation of innovative and multidisciplinary techniques in FL classroom research; the interaction of teachers' personal theories and practical knowledge with the development of instruction and learning in the classroom; and the diver-

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sity of social and personal factors involved in the unique environment of FL classrooms.<sup>7</sup>

In his book *Introduction to Applied Linguistics*, Alan Davies (1999) points out that “Applied linguistics does not need a unitary theory; what it requires is an openness to influences and theories from elsewhere, so that professional applied linguists can adopt a theorizing approach to language problems” (p. 142). We have attempted to suggest a similar position with regard to the specific context of research within language classrooms. We believe that the effort made by action researchers is valid not only to identify, analyze, resolve, and evaluate immediate classroom problems, but also to encourage principled and collaborative reflection by both teachers and researchers on the events in FL instructional settings through multiple perspectives. This collaborative and reflective cycle of action and planning in FL classrooms can open further possibilities for those wishing to examine local issues in their FL classrooms. Additionally, it can facilitate a discussion on research quality and the value of an action research approach as part of a democratic, social process, rooted in post-positivistic research traditions and gaining prominence in second language research.

## Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2000 meeting of the Second Language Research Forum, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- 2 See, for example, Lacorte and Cabal Krastel (2002) and Roberts (1998) for potential L2 action research topics and techniques.
- 3 For detailed descriptions of possible educational research techniques stemming from qualitative and quantitative research traditions, see Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991; Gall, Borg, and Gall 1996; McMillan, 2004.

- 4 Similar studies have employed a diversity of research techniques. All differ in design and scope, and as such, reveal the multiple dimensions that characterize the experiences of the teachers and learners alike. Sabieh's (2002) experimental approach compares interactions and learner perceptions of a treatment group of L2 students who interacted with the teacher via e-mail to a control group of students who did not use e-mail to interact with the teacher. Lam (2000) uses a case study approach to monitor in-depth one L2 learner's development when exposed to Internet correspondence. Stockwell and Harrington (2003) track learners' L2 development through analysis of their e-mail interactions with native speakers of Japanese.
- 5 Generalizability is considered a form of validity and will be grouped with validity for the purposes of this article.
- 6 Sample observation forms can be found in Richards and Lockhart (1996) and Roberts (1998). Allwright and Bailey (1991) summarize several classroom observation systems for L2 classroom phenomena such as interaction, communication types, and teacher feedback types.
- 7 For a more detailed description of how to set up an action research project, see Allwright and Bailey (1991), Burnaford (2001), Burns (1999), and Richards and Lockhart (1996).

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