Preface

> . . . the challenge and stimulation from sharing the energy and professionalism of other teachers on the research team, and particularly collaborating with another teacher researcher from my college, was very enjoyable.
>
> (Vivienne Campbell, Queensland)

Recently, the notion of the 'teacher as researcher' has received much attention in the second language teaching literature. However, this attention is typically from the perspective of academic researchers rather than teachers themselves. We still know little about how second language teachers view and carry out action research, what kinds of support structures or information are needed as they conduct research as well as carry out regular classroom activities, and what conditions promote or hinder the doing of action research. The last few years have seen a proliferation of publications on classroom-based and teacher-initiated research and reflection. However, few of these publications have focused specifically on action research as it is practised and perceived by teachers and researchers working together to conduct it. The majority of these publications draw on the professional research literature to illustrate their descriptions of and recommendations for teacher research, rather than on the work of teacher researchers themselves. Much of the literature on action research in second language teaching has also had a tendency to characterise and discuss action research as 'collaborative', but then to go on to represent and promote it as a somewhat individualistic enterprise. Few discussions explore how action researchers can link their investigative work to that of other colleagues and in what ways such collaborative processes can make an impact upon whole-school changes and priorities.

The rationale for this book arises from my collaborative work over a number of years as a teacher educator and researcher with ESL teachers in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). Much of the research carried out within this national programme has adopted an action research stance for investigating teaching and learning practices and classroom processes. The aim has been to apply the perspectives gained from this particular approach to organisational curriculum and resource development. The approximately 150 teachers within this

organisation with whom I have worked closely on various projects have strongly supported the notion of collaborative involvement in action research and have seen this approach both as a way of strengthening their own research skills and as a powerful route for their own professional development.

Areas for action research have been identified through a process coordinated by the Australian government's Key Research Centre for the AMEP, the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR), at Macquarie University where I work. All AMEP providers across Australia are invited to have input into the identification of possible research areas. These are then prioritised for their broad relevance to the development of curriculum theory and practice within the organisation nationally. Once research areas are determined, teachers from different states are invited to express their interest in participation as practitioner researchers in investigating this area. During their involvement in the research, the teachers receive paid release time to attend workshops and write up their findings, but data collection activities are conducted in their own time. My own role has been to work together with my co-researcher, Susan Hood, to collaborate with participating teachers and to develop a linked network of teacher researcher groups across the country. For each project we have conducted a series of workshops with these groups over a period of approximately six months, providing input on research and research processes and data collection methods, identifying focal areas for research on an individual or partnership basis and enabling members of the group to report and reflect critically on their research findings and insights.

This book aspires to add to the growing literature on classroom-based action research, but it has, perhaps, a more modest aim: to provide an accessible overview of theoretical perspectives on action research and, especially, to provide a practical introduction from the teacher's, rather than the researcher's, point of view. To this end, the majority of the illustrative accounts in this book are drawn from the work of teacher action researchers and result from my experience of collaborating with them. I also draw to some extent on my collaborations with teachers in a high school, as well as from the work of some of my students and other Australian teachers in further education contexts. In general, these accounts aim to illustrate the kinds of collaborative processes which were set in place in order to carry out the research, as well as the decisions and actions undertaken by the individual teachers within these groups as they directed their research efforts towards change, not only at the classroom level, but also at the broader institutional level. It is to be hoped that this perspective complements existing publications by offering a straightforward account directed towards groups of teachers who wish to test out assumptions of educational theory in practice and

to promote a cooperative teaching environment which values critical reflection and informed change. I believe that if teacher action research is to flourish, it needs to be advocated by teachers themselves. It is because of this conviction that I have chosen to use the voices of the teachers I have worked with as a major resource for articulating my arguments.

The authentic voices of teachers in this book, then, are represented by Australian teachers, who are primarily involved in English as a second language in adult immigrant programmes. Readers in other contexts may find themselves working in very different types of English language programmes, in EFL classes, for example, where there are dissimilar class sizes and groupings and learners of very different age groups and cultural backgrounds. You may wonder what relevance the Australian case studies have for you. I would argue that, while the specifics of the research context and the action strategies may turn out to be very different, the kinds of practical questions and issues and daily concerns encountered by teachers of English as a second or foreign language are likely to be broadly recognisable across many educational settings and will, therefore, contain many areas of relevance for teachers in other countries. The same kinds of problems – how to motivate learners, how to teach grammar effectively, how to improve classroom dynamics, how to select and sequence tasks and activities for particular learner groups, how to encourage learners to develop better learning strategies – come up again and again and are researchable issues for teachers anywhere. The purpose of the book is not, therefore, to focus on the Australian scene, but to sketch out issues and possibilities for collaborating in teacher research in any context. However, in order to contextualise the great majority of the studies in the book, it is worth sketching out a broad picture of the AMEP, its learners, programmes and the teachers who work in it, so that readers can gain a sense of the scope and nature of the context that frames most of the teacher researchers' experiences and extracts.

The AMEP is a large-scale national ESL programme established by the Australian government as part of its immigration policies since 1948 and funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA). Approximately 1,500 teachers work in this programme in adult teaching centres across the different states and territories.

The major objective of the programme is to respond to the settlement English language needs of adult immigrants coming to Australia from countries all over the world. In general, AMEP classes are characterised by groups of students from many different countries of origin, who will have widely divergent experiences of immigration, ranging from business migration to intake as refugees or as part of a family reunion

programme. Students will have a range of very different formal learning backgrounds and differing exposure to the English language, either through formal instruction or informally. Some classes cater for students who may have had little or no previous education or who may have very limited literacy skills even in first language. Others focus on preparing fast-learning students with well-developed learning skills for further education or employment. These various courses are generally taught over a 10–15, or, in fewer cases, a 20-week period. This means that teachers see particular groups of students for very limited periods of time and their timetables may change rapidly as they are scheduled to teach different kinds of classes. In this situation, teachers have to be able to address different learning needs and plan different courses very flexibly.

Over the fifty years of the AMEP's existence, its programmes have diversified at various times to include shipboard classes en route to Australia, on-arrival courses offered intensively at major teaching centres, short community-based programmes and evening classes, on-site and off-site workplace programmes, distance/correspondence education, self-access and independent learning provision and a 'home tutor' support scheme. Because of government policy changes, since 1992 the major focus of the programme has again been narrowed to the settlement language needs of immigrants within their first three years of arrival in Australia. Recent government policy in relation to adult education more generally has also placed great emphasis on vocational education and training and, at the same time, there has been a widespread move to competency- and outcomes-based curriculum development. As part of the AMEP response to these changes, since this time AMEP teachers have found themselves teaching beginner to intermediate level ESL learners within a nationally accredited competency-based curriculum framework, *The Certificates in Spoken and Written English*. In addition, because of the move towards vocational training, some AMEP teachers have been employed in other government-funded, labour market English language programmes aimed at enhancing literacy and numeracy skills in order to increase employment opportunities. For many teachers this has meant rapidly diversifying their teaching from the more 'traditional' adult ESL programmes for newly arrived immigrants to courses for mixed groupings of longer-term immigrant and native speaker learners. Student attendance in labour market programmes was linked to receiving unemployment benefits. Thus, teachers were frequently faced with learners whose attendance in class was involuntary, accompanied by negative responses to learning from previous education, and who may have experienced various social or personal problems associated with long-term unemployment in addition to their language learning needs.

Readers will find the impact of these educational changes on AMEP teachers reflected in several of the case studies in this book. For many readers employed in very different ESL/EFL contexts, some of the AMEP teachers' concerns may seem distant or unreasonable, even bizarre. The idea of second language teachers having to teach mathematics or literacy in mixed group classrooms may strike you as bewildering or unrealistic. The cultural and social ambience of the Australian classroom reflected in the nature of the student–teacher relationships may also be in contrast to your own experiences. However, for the Australian teachers featured here, these were precisely the kinds of new directions they were required to take as second language teachers. Nor, I would argue, is this requirement to adjust to new classes, new learners and new working conditions, so remote from the experiences of many second language teachers in other multicultural countries where, in the 1990s, similar rapid changes are occurring in government and educational policy, such as in Britain, the United States and Canada. What is illustrated by these examples is not so much the specific classroom subject or content areas to be taught, as these will always differ from teacher to teacher, but the processes and decisions that a second language teacher went through in addressing an action research issue of practical significance in his or her educational situation.

In the chapters that follow, then, action research is exemplified from studies in the Australian context, one that, perhaps more than many others, has been particularly conducive to large-scale collaborative action research in the field of language teaching (McDonough and McDonough 1997; Roberts 1998). Despite some of the very recent shifts in government policy surrounding immigration and adult ESL educational provision, and in contrast to almost all other countries, Australia has had a relatively long and stable history of well-funded national support for adult ESL programmes, resulting in a high level of teacher professional development and specialisation and a coherent large-scale programme of curriculum development and research (see, for example, Nunan 1988; Tudor 1996). At the same time, the increased awareness of and focus on action research arising from the experiences of the 1973–6 Ford Teaching Project in Britain found substantial expression in Australia at Deakin University, which became a major centre of activity from the late 1970s onwards for educational action researchers working from a critical perspective, such as Stephen Kemmis, Wilfrid Carr, Colin Henry and Robin McTaggart. This work undoubtedly provided fertile ground for transposing action research approaches into the adult ESL field so that it could be integrated into curriculum and professional development in a fairly large-scale and cohesive way. While some readers may say that, compared with their own situations, this is an indulgent, or even a provocative, position

from which to portray a picture of collaborative action research, it seems to me that the main point is that the AMEP experience has been a fortunate and productive one, which has provided a strong argument that second language teachers can and should have a major, and empowering, presence in research in their own field. It has also provided a critical framework for exploring teachers' responses to involvement in research, for analysing processes for supporting collaborative teacher research institutionally and for highlighting the value of integrating curriculum enquiry with the normal patterns of practitioners' work.

It is teachers' voices, then, drawn from the daily realities of their specific settings that are foregrounded in this book. Most of the teachers whose work is featured have been my colleagues over a number of years. Each chapter is prefaced by suggestions, reflections and evaluations made by some of them during the course of their research. With the teachers' permission, I have also drawn substantially on their work to provide practical illustrations which we hope will be helpful to other collaborative groups. In almost all instances, it was the teachers' choice that I should refer to them by their own first names to reflect the close collegiality that grew within our groups during the various phases of the research. The discussion tasks at the end of each chapter include many of those that we tried out at various points in the different collaborating groups.

Action research has achieved something of a 'flavour of the month' characteristic in recent discussions of teacher education. However, it makes demands of time and energy on teachers, who are not typically encouraged to do research. It can be confronting and unsettling in its requirement that we look at our practices critically. In my experience, it is made more feasible, professionally exhilarating and relevant when conducted with a collaborative and supportive group of colleagues. This book does not make any claims to offer definitive models or theories of action research, but it is hoped that by offering realistic accounts of the personal experiences of classroom teacher researchers and those who have worked closely with them, it will inspire other teachers, teacher educators and researchers to incorporate collaborative action research processes into their own professional activities as a systematic way of theorising and reflecting upon their classroom and organisational practices.

1 Why should teachers do action research?

> Collaborative action research is a powerful form of staff development because it is practice to theory rather than theory to practice. Teachers are encouraged to reach their own solutions and conclusions and this is far more attractive and has more impact than being presented with ideals which cannot be attained.
>
> (Linda Ross, New South Wales)

1.1 Action research: a case study

Linda Ross is an experienced ESL teacher who has worked for several years in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). In 1995, because of changes in government funding arrangements, she found herself teaching a class of adult students with very diverse needs, who were quite unlike the kinds of immigrant groups she had previously encountered. Her class consisted of both first and second language English speakers and it focused on the development of literacy and numeracy skills. Linda describes her class (this and the following quotations are from Ross 1997: 133–7):

> a boisterous, enthusiastic group of ten students in a class funded by the Department of Employment, Education and Training. [The class met] for 20 hours a week, four hours a day for 15 weeks and was for people who are long-term unemployed to assist their entry or re-entry into the workplace. The students' ages ranged from 17 to 42 and many had a somewhat chequered educational history.

Linda became part of a collaborative research group of teachers from different teaching centres within the same organisation who found action research a transformative means of responding to the changing profiles of their classes and developing new teaching strategies and approaches to meet their students' heterogeneous needs:

> At the time I had very little knowledge of how action research works but the focus intrigued me. Surely we have all struggled with groups that are disparate to varying degrees. Could there be any answers? . . .

> On the whole I felt adequate in the area of literacy. However, I felt inadequate in the area of numeracy. It was a new field for me and I was aware that the students' abilities varied widely . . . In the numeracy sessions I handed out worksheets or selected areas from the textbook and then gave assistance as required. These sessions felt hectic, chaotic and generally unsatisfactory.

At the beginning of the project, Linda felt uncertain as to how to find a specific focus for her research, so she began by simply observing her lessons:

> noting what [I] saw and so start focusing on the issues . . . I began jotting rough notes immediately after lessons. On 22/3/95 I noted: 'In a half hour session the stronger students only got a few minutes attention . . . and how can I be sure that the weaker ones are in fact gaining the skills and concepts that they lack?'
>
> On 27/3/95 I wrote: 'A typical numeracy lesson – hectic! We revised fractions. The stronger ones know immediately that $\frac{1}{4}$ is half of $\frac{1}{2}$. The weaker ones look completely mystified. I need to go much further back for the weak students. How will I find time?'
>
> A few days later I added: 'A support teacher would help – and more graded materials – and more expertise!'

Through these notes and other observations it began to become clearer to Linda why she felt so dissatisfied with these sessions:

- Despite expending considerable energy, my efforts were piecemeal.
- I needed a far clearer picture of the strengths, weaknesses and progress of each student.
- I needed to develop the basic skills of the weak students but at the same time extend the strong students.
- My classroom activities were both a time management and a course design issue.

Having analysed some of the problematic factors in her classroom, Linda developed a number of practical action strategies to address them. She proceeded through a series of research phases, each of which enabled her to discover more about her students and how to meet their needs. First, she set about gaining a clearer picture of the students' strengths, weaknesses and skills and developing ways of tracking their progress:

> I developed a checklist of skills so that I could monitor the progress of each student . . . I include a small section below:

	Lillian	Warren	Chris	Kerin	Mike	George	John	Barry	Peter	Kelly
Uses place value up to 5 places										
Uses decimal point appropriately										
Can read numbers from calculator										
Can 'round up'										

> The checklist proved extremely useful and the numeracy session felt far more focused. The checklist became the basis of my lesson planning.

Linda was still worried about the amount of time she was able to give to each student. She decided to find out how the students felt:

> I began to discuss some of my concerns with the students . . . I mentioned to some of the stronger students that I felt I was neglecting them. They were surprised and assured me that they liked the present system. One of them told me in her usual direct manner:
>
> > We don't want a teacher breathing down our necks. We don't like to be treated like kids. We like it when you give us the sheet and we can just get on with it. Don't worry – we'll yell if we need you.
>
> I felt an incredible sense of relief! Why hadn't I spoken to them earlier.

Aiming to improve the classroom management problems she had identified, Linda decided to divide the class into ability groups:

> I prepared worksheets at two levels and gave them out – as discreetly as possible – according to the ability of the student. The students did not actually move into groups. The aim was to allow the weaker students to develop skills at a much slower pace, while extending and challenging the stronger students.
>
> . . . I abandoned this approach very shortly after introducing it as it

> was more destructive than constructive. Despite my efforts, the students immediately compared their sheets and there was a subtle change in the group dynamics. Two of the weaker students began to come late, did not bring pens, had not done their homework and so on.
>
> I had made the mistake of 'labelling' some students as under-achievers and realised that I had undermined their morale. This was interesting since they had always found it quite acceptable to label themselves . . . It seemed it was quite different if the teacher did the labelling.

Linda reflected on the outcomes of these strategies and decided on a new course of action:

> I realised that in my enthusiasm for greater efficiency, I had undermined the self-esteem of the students who required the greatest support. I decided on a new strategy . . . I took graded materials into the classroom and explained that the first worksheet was to be done by everyone and was compulsory. After that it was up to the students how much they completed.
>
> I found this method successful. Even though I had feared that the stronger students would complete the compulsory sheet in a few minutes and then simply chat, this was not the case and they were keen to go on with the extra work. The weaker students seemed to gain satisfaction from the fact that they were able to complete the compulsory work successfully.
>
> Using the checklist as the basis of my ongoing assessment, I felt that I was now far better able to monitor progress. At the end of the course it was apparent that all the students had made good progress.

A further step in the research, and additional insights into her students' needs, came when Linda enlisted the cooperation of one of the two researcher coordinators with whom her action research group worked.

> This last step should have come much earlier in the process as it gave me so much insight into the students' perceptions and needs. One of the research coordinators, Sue Hood, visited the class and asked the students questions concerning their preferred learning styles and past learning experiences. The students responded very positively to the fact that their views were being sought and valued.
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> Sue: Is it a problem in the class . . . that you have different things you want to do? (General agreement from students that this is not a problem.)
>
> Chris: The one thing is we're all learning. That's the main factor.