

# 1 Engaging action research to explore use of assessment for improving language ability

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## Introduction

The *context* for this volume is the ELICOS sector in Australia; one important *focus* in all of the chapters is the potential value of one of the various modes of assessment: self-assessment, formative assessment or summative assessment in ELICOS classrooms to promote learning; and action research (AR) is the *method* used to investigate the efficacy of classroom interventions for improving language abilities in general and exit test scores in particular.

## The context

The context within which the research reported in this volume took place is the ELICOS sector in Australia. ELICOS stands for English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students who want to study in Australia. ‘Intensive’ denotes full-time study comprising a minimum of 20 scheduled course contact hours per week of face-to-face classes of English language instruction. In the majority of the cases, students take these courses to improve their assessment score for study or work purposes. Courses are run by authorised language centres, universities, vocational colleges and high schools. Many of these providers are members of English Australia, which is the national peak body for the English language sector of international education in Australia.

Cambridge English Language Assessment has been providing masterclasses in assessment to the ELICOS sector for a number of years as part of its partnership with English Australia. In 2009, English Australia expanded the partnership to include an AR program focusing on learning and assessment matters being resolved by teachers in real time, i.e. during the ELICOS study period. Both organisations shared the belief that if teachers

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were equipped with the skills to explore and address challenges posed by assessment results/scores, and share their findings at an institutional and national level, the Program would support the raising of educational, professional and ethical standards across the ELICOS sector within Australia and may lead to a ripple effect via publications and conference presentations at an international level (see Chapter 18 in this volume on the impact of the Program). In fact, in 2013, the Program received an excellence award for Best Practice/Innovation in International Education, which is presented annually by the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) in recognition of outstanding contributions made by individuals or teams to international education in Australia. IEAA awards are perceived as a benchmark of excellence and best practice in the education industry in Australia (see [www.ieaa.org.au/what-we-do](http://www.ieaa.org.au/what-we-do)). The citation for the award referred to ‘a groundbreaking development in international education’.

### The focus

This volume brings together a collection of papers authored by practising classroom teachers who have used assessment results (self, formative or summative) to improve the ongoing learning of their students and their subsequent test performance. Assessment results in the ELICOS sector, whether based on international examinations, home grown ones or classroom tests, have shown that students need to improve their speaking fluency, grammatical range and accuracy when speaking; to progress writing ability for example from a 0.5 band to a full band on *IELTS*, or up a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level; and to increase reading proficiency. The motivation behind conducting the research reported in this volume included, among other things, exploring and developing an informed approach to raising students’ awareness to what was required in their Academic English speaking assessment; enabling students to assess their own progress in their language proficiency; developing language skills through the use of formative assessment; using digital technology to develop clear assessment criteria and provide effective feedback; and exploring the greater influence grammar may have on total assessment score.

### Method

In explaining the rationale for choosing AR as a method, we would like to draw links between various movements and concepts in the teaching and assessment domains. If we consider the concept of assessment literacy for teachers, we see that ‘not only do teachers need to understand the conceptual bases of different approaches [to language assessment], they also need to relate such knowledge to their professional practice in their particular

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context’ (Scarino 2013:230). ‘Teachers should be skilled in using assessment results when making decisions about individual students, planning teaching, developing curriculum, and school improvement’ (American Federation of Teachers, National Council on Measurement in Education and National Education Association 1990).

The notion of teachers undertaking research in their own working environments on areas of immediate relevance to their practice is a trend that has been developing steadily in English language teaching (ELT) and applied linguistics literature for the past three decades. In fact, the highly complex multifaceted role of teacher, researcher and assessor had been gaining more and more attention in academic and public discourse.

The American Federation of Teachers, National Council on Measurement in Education and National Education Association (1990) developed the Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students. There are seven standards:

1. Teachers should be skilled in choosing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions.
2. Teachers should be skilled in developing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions.
3. Teachers should be skilled in administering, scoring, and interpreting the results of both externally produced and teacher-produced assessment methods.
4. Teachers should be skilled in using assessment results when making decisions about individual students, planning teaching, developing curriculum, and school improvement.
5. Teachers should be skilled in developing valid pupil grading procedures that use pupil assessments.
6. Teachers should be skilled in communicating assessment results to students, parents, other lay audiences, and other educators.
7. Teachers should be skilled in recognising unethical, illegal, and otherwise inappropriate assessment methods and uses of assessment information.

The complete text of the 1990 ‘Standards’ is available online:  
[buos.org/standards-teacher-competence-educational-assessment-students](http://buos.org/standards-teacher-competence-educational-assessment-students).

## Action research: Underpinnings and practical processes

The genesis of AR in the field of English language teaching was to be found in the moves in the late 1970s and 1980s away from methods-based language teaching and towards the principles advocated for communicative language

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teaching. In the course of this transition, the teacher came increasingly to be seen as an active agent who mediates the teaching and learning process rather than a passive deliverer of prescribed methods. Various labels can be applied to the concept of practitioners engaging in research in their own classrooms, including AR, practitioner research, collaborative enquiry, critical enquiry, classroom research and teacher research (for discussions of differentiations among some of these terms, see for example, Bailey 2001, Borg 2010, Burns 2005). The focus in this volume is on AR, as this was the approach to research selected for the ELICOS Program.

The roots of AR are located in 20th century progressive education and social psychology movements with their interests in group dynamics, group decision making and commitment to improvement of group social situations (e.g. Lewin 1946). Originating in the US and then spreading to the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia and elsewhere, AR adopts the concept that in the educational context it is practitioners in their immediate social situation who are best placed to understand, examine and innovate in curriculum-related issues and challenges.

Carr and Kemmis (1986:215) contend that neither positivist (or experimental), nor interpretivist (or naturalistic) approaches to research provide adequate accounts of the relationships between educational theory and practice. They argue that positivist research assimilates practical problems in favour of theory and interpretivist research assimilates theory in favour of descriptive accounts. Thus, both approaches result in the separation of theory and practice. They assert that to overcome such separation, educational science ‘must develop theories of educational practice that are rooted in the concrete educational experiences and situations of practitioners and which enables [sic] them to confront the educational problems to which these experiences and situations give rise’ (Carr and Kemmis 1986:215).

Cohen and Manion (1994:186) offer the following definition of AR: ‘action research is a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention.’ In so doing, they capture some of the essential elements of AR:

- the research is localised and specific
- it takes place in a naturalistic daily environment
- it creates some kind of interruption or change in the usual workings of the environment
- it uses systematic examination of what happens as a result of the intervention.

This approach to research is a way of bringing together action, in the form of intervention and experimentation, and research, in the form of continuous examination and evaluation of the changes in practices. Thus, it seeks to

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unite practice with theory. AR is underpinned by the aim of increasing participants' functional, practical and theoretical knowledge of the nature of their daily social context and how they might operate within it.

In order to illustrate the processes of AR for teachers, in the Australian Program we adopted Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) 4-stage cyclical model. While there have been various criticisms of this model (see Burns (2005) for a discussion), it has the advantage of presenting the essential processes of AR in a relatively straightforward way, and thus provides a useful framework for teachers who may be unused to undertaking research. The model involves: planning (developing a plan of action or intervention); acting (putting the intervention in place); observing (documenting and recording the effects of the intervention) and reflecting (evaluating the observations and using them as the basis for further action). The fourth component evaluates the findings and discusses the insights gained by teacher-researchers as the basis for further action. The cycle is dynamic in that these four stages are interlinked and iterative, so that the research typically results in a spiral of cycles (see Burns 2010).

AR has been described as a 'family' of research approaches (Dick 1999) as it does not depend on selecting a specific methodological orientation, but is eclectic. It draws on either or both quantitative and qualitative approaches to meet particular challenges. Practitioners use a wide variety of techniques to collect data systematically, including observational tools, such as classroom video-recordings, observation notes or transcripts, and non-observational means such as surveys, test scores, interviews or classroom documents (see Burns 2010). The information obtained from these techniques is a source of reflective praxis (doing and reflecting on action), leading to deepening understanding, further action and theory construction, in the sense of developing 'personal practical knowledge' (Golombek 2009) or 'theories for practice' (Burns 1996).

## Approach and Program structure

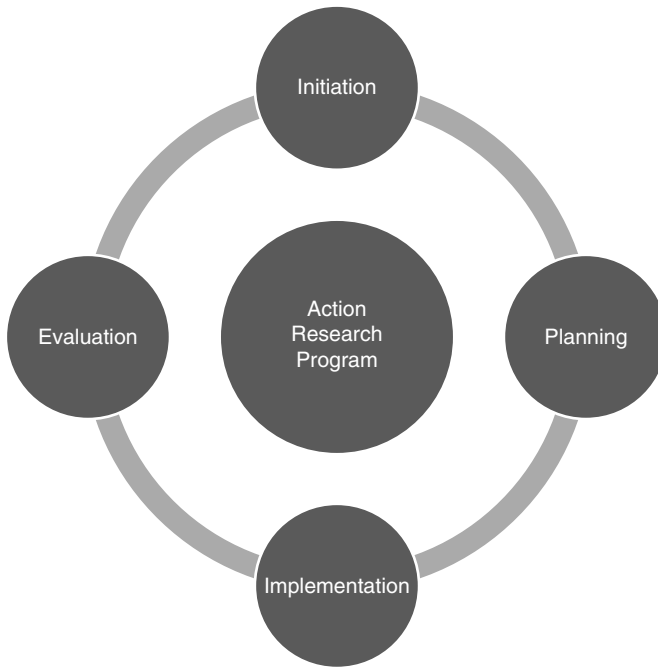
AR in educational contexts can be undertaken in various modes from a single teacher investigating his or her classroom, to a group of teachers co-operating in their own school, to teachers from a similar educational system working with a researcher or facilitator. In addition, contextually it can be located at the level of a single classroom, a school or organisation or at a larger-scale system level. The latter approach was adopted by the English Australia–Cambridge English Action Research Program (henceforward referred to as the Program) where the aim was to enable teachers to work at the classroom and/or school level, at the same time being mindful of the impact the research might have on the larger scale sectoral level.

ELICOS programs in Australia are designed for international students

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who require English language development. Students may study General English or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses such as English for business, hospitality or health, or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in preparation for tertiary studies. The Program followed a cyclical and iterative process consisting of four phases, namely, initiation, planning, implementation and evaluation (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 The Program cycle**



In the initiation phase, a reference group was set up to provide advice on planning and implementation of the Program, monitor the achievement of key milestones and evaluate the Program for the purpose of continuous improvement. The reference group was comprised of representatives from both organisations, together with an internationally recognised scholar in AR (the first author of this chapter) and an in-country project manager from English Australia. The Program now has an annual cycle during which the reference group meets three times to agree on research priorities, participant selection, award winners (one project that has achieved the most impact is selected each year), and suggestions for the Program's continuous improvement. The planning phase included:

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- discussing research priorities and themes (see [www.englishaustralia.com.au/2015\\_action\\_research\\_program](http://www.englishaustralia.com.au/2015_action_research_program) for an example of 2015 research priorities)
- identifying roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders, i.e. each partner, technical expert, AR program manager and co-manager, local coordinators and participating researchers
- setting up the structure of the Program
- providing an implementation timeline, and
- developing and/or refining various tools required for implementation, e.g. call for proposals, selection criteria, guidelines for report writing and publications, report evaluation criteria, and selection criteria for award winners.

The implementation phase follows a structured timeline as shown in Figure 2.

Because the concept of AR is new to many ELICOS teachers, three scaffolding workshops are provided as part of the Program. The workshops are facilitated by the first author of this chapter and the English Australia professional support and development officer (see Chapter 18). The first workshop introduces teachers to the concepts and processes of AR, explores some of the literature related to the theme for the year's Program (e.g. in 2017, teaching, learning and assessing listening), outlines AR methodologies and data collection approaches, and assists teachers to refine their plans for the next stage of their investigations. The second workshop enables participants to update each other on their research projects and to work collaboratively to provide peer feedback. During this workshop, participants identify any further steps and data sources required, refine their action plans towards completion of their projects, plan for writing up their research projects, and begin preparations for presentations of their research. The third workshop takes place a day before the annual English Australia conference. At this time, the teachers report on the final outcomes of their research, rehearse their presentations for a colloquium about the Program presented annually at the conference, and provide feedback to the facilitators on their experiences and on the professional and personal issues that arose as they conducted their research.

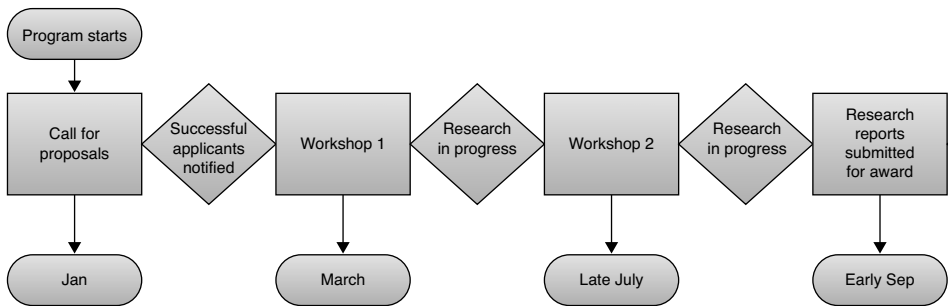
The evaluation phase considers the elements of success and lessons learned from the Program planning and implementation, investigates its effect and the impact on the teachers and on the ELICOS sector, and provides a platform for discussing how to make the Program sustainable (see Chapter 18 in this volume on evaluation, intended and unintended outcomes and impact).

## Overview of the volume

The volume is divided into four parts, the first three of which focus on a different aspect of classroom assessment and/or testing. Part 1 presents AR

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**Figure 2 The Program timeline**





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oriented towards self-assessment. In Part 2, the research focus is on formative assessment, while in Part 3, the authors orient their research towards summative assessment. Part 4 provides a conclusion to the volume by evaluating the impact of the Australian Action Research in ELICOS Program on the participants and on the sector.

### Part 1: Action research for self-assessment

The four chapters in this part explore from various perspectives how teachers worked to introduce elements of self-assessment into the courses they were teaching.

**Jennifer Wallace** (Chapter 2) explored ways of improving learners' grammatical range and accuracy when speaking while also encouraging autonomous learning. She was motivated to develop an informed approach to raising awareness of what was required in students' Academic English speaking assessment. Over two research cycles in her Academic English classes at a private ELICOS school in Sydney, she investigated the use of voice recording, transcription and peer feedback for grammar self-assessment in speaking, and data was collected via questionnaires, observation and interviews. Her research outcomes demonstrated that students gained increased confidence in noticing grammar errors and self-correcting their grammar. The chapter illustrates the profound impact AR has had on Jennifer's teaching and knowledge of assessment, and explains how the project has encouraged her to continue exploring second language speaking. Jennifer worked at the English Language Company in Sydney at the time of her project and participated in the 2013 Program.

**Diana Cossar-Burgess** and **Alla Eberstein** (Chapter 3) from the University of Tasmania English Language Centre focused on enabling their students to assess the progress of their own speaking skills. In pre-project surveys, the teacher researchers found that students considered speaking to be an important life and/or study skill and were aware of their slow progress in developing it, but felt that they lacked independent learning strategies they could use to improve. Over a period of 10 weeks Diana and Alla provided the students, who were preparing for university study, with weekly speaking activities that typically included a conversation with a 'native speaker' initiated by the student; a recording of themselves speaking about specific topics; and reflections on a designated time/length of time at home where only English was spoken. Students kept a speaking log where they recorded and reflected on the outcomes of these tasks. Diana and Alla found that most students felt they made some progress in their speaking proficiency after using the self-assessment strategies suggested in the project, and that they were intending to use these strategies in their future. Diana and Alla participated in the 2012 Program.

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The goal of **Kerry Ryan** and **Jade Sleeman** (Chapter 4) was to increase students' engagement with reading and improve their critical reading skills, and hence develop a stronger sense among their students about how they could begin to assess their progress. The authors found that the use of authentic materials (such as news), students' free choice of reading material and Facebook as an alternative reading medium allowed students to better engage with reading activities. Facebook provided a collaborative online forum, and as such, it allowed students to read with a social purpose and share opinions on a topic. This, along with in-class activities, helped increase engagement with texts and improve students' critical reading skills. The authors highlight the usefulness of Facebook in developing critical reading skills, as well as students' enthusiasm for harnessing social media as a learning tool. However, they also caution about some issues they encountered with online communication, such as anxiety due to the lack of face-to-face interaction. Jade and Kerry, from La Trobe University Language Centre in Melbourne, participated in the 2014 Program and they were highly commended for the 2014 award for their project exploring the use of Facebook to develop critical reading skills.

**Jock Boyd** (Chapter 5), aware of students' increased usage of social networks, cloud computing and digital devices (DDs), set out to investigate how students use DDs for vocabulary acquisition and to show how digital devices could be used more fully and creatively to enhance learning of second language vocabulary, both general and specialised (discipline-specific). Participants in his study used the DDs as lexical tools to self-regulate their vocabulary learning, and they then reviewed their learning through self-testing. Regular vocabulary tests played a vital role in generating data on language use for the study. The tests allowed Jock and his students to observe and record what students did when they encountered an unfamiliar word and how they use their DDs for vocabulary learning. Jock believed that vocabulary development was central to students' test performance and could therefore contribute to improved scores.

The project showed that digital devices need not be discouraged in the classroom; in fact they should be absorbed into classroom learning strategies. Digital devices not only help vocabulary acquisition but they seem to enhance a student's autonomy and motivation in classroom learning. Jock, from Think: CLASS (Centre for Learning and Academic Skills Support) in Sydney, participated in the first AR Program in 2010.

### **Part 2: Action research for formative assessment**

Part 2 of this volume, which consists of five chapters, describes AR carried out to promote various forms of formative assessment in classrooms that were preparing students for future academic and vocational study.