Developing Language Teacher Autonomy through Action Research

"Helping teachers engage autonomously in action research is a very worthwhile enterprise. Beneficiaries are likely to include learners, schools and their cultures, as well as the teachers themselves. Getting started is not always easy, though, and, with valuable examples, this volume takes teachers new to action research through crucial steps."

—Mark Wyatt,
Senior Lecturer, University of Portsmouth, UK

"For many practitioners Action Research remains at the conceptual level; they want to be involved, yet are not sure of how to implement it in their own setting. This book is of great value to practitioners eager to be involved in action research. Each step is illustrated with examples from real studies, from the very first steps finding a question to the start of the next research cycle. This teacher-friendly guide is sure to be an important source for any teacher, new or experienced, who is interested in professional development."

—Derin Atay,
Professor, Bahçeşehir University, Turkey

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I dedicate this book to my late father, and to my son, Derin, and my wife, Derya. They have always been supportive of my work. (Kenan)
And I would like to dedicate this book to my parents, Ben and Ranee, now both deceased, who always had a vision beyond the background to which they were born. (Carol)

Foreword

This book is an outcome of intensive engagement in facilitating and supporting teachers who are engaged in action research at different higher education institutes in Turkey. The idea of teachers being engaged in action research, which gained momentum in 2010 with initiatives in Izmir, is relatively new in Turkey. I will describe how I began this action research mentor journey mainly because it could be useful for readers to know how the idea of writing a book on action research emerged. The story of action research engagement in Turkey is also documented in several previous publications (see Çelik and Dikilitaş 2015; Dikilitaş 2015; Dikilitaş and Mumford 2016; Smith 2015; Wyatt and Dikilitaş 2015).

When I took up the position at a university's preparatory English language school as a teacher trainer in 2010, I was supposed to work with almost 40 teachers to promote and support their professional development. I thought about several options for professional development activities, but I wanted to make one central because I believed that the project should set goals for teachers, ensure longer engagement, inspire personal active engagement, and offer an outcome such as dissemination through presenting, writing, or publishing. Classroom observation was one good option but it would not be central as it might not address some of my own expectations such as writing and publishing. I also thought about running workshops on specific pedagogical issues, but then I would have to take too much control myself and minimize the teachers'

active engagement in learning. As an emerging researcher who was just starting to write my PhD dissertation, I thought of action research as a professional development strategy which could address most of my expectations from teachers' engagement in professional development. As I previously reported in an interview with Richard Smith in 2012, who later published it in 2014, my idea was to initiate action research as a professional development tool because it was compatible with my own overall learning experience and because I believed teachers need not be fed with knowledge but rather discover relevant knowledge themselves.

In the first year (2010), there were several challenges in supporting teachers, such as teachers' own lack of knowledge about action research and of research in general, as they reported several times. Engagement in action research was not in line with what they would expect from professional development activities as they were used to lecture-style activities in which they took part as a recipient of knowledge rather than a creator of it. As a new way of learning, action research seemed to many of these teachers to be challenging due not only to lack of research knowledge but also to contextual constraints such as limited time to devote to doing and sustaining research. Therefore, it took time to explain to them what kind of research they would undertake and how they were going to conduct it. In the first year, action research engagement was a top-down decision by the administration and me as opposed to traditional transmission-based learning as teachers expected.

To address these concerns I started to run sessions telling them more about what action research is and what actual steps and cycles are involved in doing it. We had discussions about classroom issues in groups, individually, and even sometimes in pairs. By starting to talk about classroom issues and planning how they could investigate them, the teachers developed a sense of self-efficacy in starting their own research, though not all of them were attracted to it and confident enough with the idea. In the initial years, I provided more structured support with explicit guidance on planning action research. I gave them a proposal guideline which included questions such as title, purpose, participants, data collection tools, and their expectations from doing research as documented in Çelik and Dikilitaş (2015). Such tools facilitated some teachers' initiation and helped them believe they could do

it. I then continued to provide systematic support for those who were determined to proceed. We had weekly focus group meetings where each action researcher presented a proposal to get feedback from colleagues, which also gave them confidence to discuss research issues. In one-on-one meetings we discussed relevant articles to develop knowledge about research issues, and planned classroom activities to collect data or introduce new ways of teaching and to assess and reflect upon the impact thereafter. I kept interaction and dialogue actively going in order to help them complete their action research though some were not able to do so due to limited commitment and high workload or to personal dissatisfaction with the idea of learning and development through action research. At the end of the first year, I held an in-house event where those who successfully completed their research presented it, followed by an edited book (Dikilitaş 2011).

In the second year (2011), the project developed. One development was that teachers started to collaborate with one another and investigate shared concerns, and/or puzzles. Unlike the previous year, as a trainer I found myself less dominant. Some developed confidence in initiating and sustaining their research process with less and less dependence on my support. There were also new teachers who started to engage in action research in the second year. I provided more focused and structured support for them, but they were also helped out by their colleagues who had experienced action research the previous year. As the teachers engaged in action research, they built rapport and worked more in collaboration, which also led them to becoming more autonomous and self-confident.

In 2012, the project continued with more enthusiasm and I had the opportunity to work with external mentors such as Simon Borg and Richard Smith, who were invited to my institution to work with teachers who were doing action research during the projects. Their feedback on the teachers' action research and comments for the future of the project were valuable as deeper insights emerged such as developing the idea of presentation and publication, which would lead to changes in the way presentations were delivered. They also attended the conference at the end of the year as plenary speakers and attracted more audience from other nearby institutions and cities (for further details, see Dikilitaş 2013).

The project was supported in 2013 by the then coordinator of IATEFL Research Special Interest group (ReSIG) Richard Smith, who met with the 18 teachers and provided feedback during the year. Such external help created motivation and enthusiasm for the teachers to sustain their engagement in action research. Supported internally by me and externally by other well-known names, the teachers felt valued and became more concentrated on their work. The feedback they received from me and the external mentors included the methodological designs of action research as well as the overall purpose and topic of research. Receiving feedback from different mentors intensified the degree of learning and development and provided motivation for the teachers to move on. The teachers started to develop their understandings of action research through dialogues with others rather than working within template proposals and structured guidelines. The teachers stared to plan and develop their own research engagement path and created for themselves unique ways of researching.

At the end of the 2014 project, another annual conference was held with the participation of Richard Smith, Anne Burns, Mark Wyatt, and Judith Hanks, who gave enthusiastic talks and commented on the development of action research in Turkey both in their speeches and in the concurrent sessions. Their individual feedback in the sessions were also valuable for the presenters. That year, the conference was called the IATEFL ReSIG Teachers Research Conference, which attracted relatively more presenters and attendees from Turkey and beyond. Another development from the previous year was that the annual conference book was edited by Kenan Dikilitaş, Richard Smith, and Wayne Trotman (2015) and published as an IATEFL ReSIG book, which was made open access in the official website.

The same conference was held in 2015 and 2016 in collaboration with the IATEFL ReSIG in İzmir and in İstanbul, respectively. The growing number of attendees—92 in 2015 and 120 in 2016—indicated a developing interest in action research particularly in Turkey. The follow-up publication of the 2015 conference in İzmir was edited by Kenan Dikilitaş, Mark Wyatt, Judith Hanks, and Deborah Bullock, which is now open access in the website of IATEFL ReSIG. An initiation which began in 2010 with a very small scale project developed into an inter-

national one with the external supporters at different stages ranging from helping action researchers in process to contributing to the annual conferences and publications.

It is clear that the project has developed in different ways. For example, it has become an international event which brings together teachers, educators, and trainers who are interested in action research. This is one of the major sources of motivation for teachers to engage in research and complete their work by the end of the academic year in order to be able to present it. Another development has been the liberation of the teachers in taking the control of their own research often moving to relatively less interference by the mentors and more teacher autonomy. The teachers have started to select topics to research and conduct research in their own classrooms with more collaboration and individual efforts. The degree of autonomy which has developed throughout successive projects with the active engagement of teachers has manifested itself at different levels, such as developing skills for reading articles critically, collecting and analysing data, reflecting on the findings, presenting and writing research. The observed teacher autonomy development was triggered by the sustained engagement in doing, presenting, and writing up research, which was well supported by the ongoing collaborative work, the follow-up conferences, and publications. This clearly showed the positive impact of the research engagement experiences, teacher autonomy, and demonstrated sustainability. The teachers learnt to research not only by monitoring their own development and learning in the successive years but also by assessing others' work and receiving constructive rather than judgmental feedback during the conference and the editorial process of publication.

I have also developed a sense of autonomy in mentoring action researchers as a result of the successive experiences in these conferences and publications, which had an immense effect in cultivating my own professional development as a research mentor. Over the years, I have taken up different mentor roles because I also developed my skills as a mentor, which led me to taking on varying roles. Malderez and Bodóczky (1999) list the roles of mentors as model, acculturator, support, sponsor, and educator, whereas Halai (2006) categorizes these

roles into four: an expert coach, a subject specialist, a critical friend, and a learner. I recognize that I have fulfilled almost all of these roles while mentoring teachers who were doing action research.

– Doing research with the teachers or even sometimes presenting with them as a *model* (Malderez and Bodóczky 1999)
– providing workshops as a *subject specialist* (Halai 2006), and as an *educator* (Malderez and Bodóczky 1999)
– providing opportunities for *collaborative reflection* (Malderez and Bodóczky 1999) in the *expert coach* role (Halai 2006)
– developing relationships—*critical friend* (Child and Merrill 2003; Halai 2006)
– collaborating on specific research issues, as a *mentor as learner* (Halai 2006)
– taking on the role of *support* (Malderez and Bodóczky 1999) through *management and leadership*
– *acculturator* by introducing them into the research community (Hobson and Sharp 2005) through publication opportunities in the follow-up books.
– *sponsor* holding conferences and facilitating opportunities for publications and bringing in people for them to discuss with (Malderez and Bodóczky 1999)

Apart from these roles, I tried to create *learning opportunities* (Orland-Barak and Rachamim 2009) and to sustain interaction and support *practical knowledge growth* (Wyatt and Arnold 2012) by observing and giving feedback on action research.

Participant-sensitive mentoring involves considering each researcher or research group with their unique needs and addressing them in a constructive way. The degree of sustainability of these successive projects and publications spread across Turkey has been intensified by the affordances of the resourceful and supportive environment created by internal and external mentors.

Teacher autonomy development from doing action research, which is the focus of this book, is the main purpose of research mentoring. While I developed several research mentoring skills as outlined above, I also had the opportunity to integrate them into the support and facilitation I was

offering to the action researchers. Challenged by the idea that action research was new in the context in which I was working, I brought out different strategies to overcome them, which spurred me to renew my approaches to mentoring each action researcher. It was the close working opportunity with the teachers that facilitated the interaction and the process of support and collaboration. As a mentor, I have accumulated over the years information about the researchers, their classroom teaching practices, and the way they engage in research. In many ways such opportunities served as facilitative factors for my mentoring and for the action researchers' learning opportunities to investigate their practices and develop gradually increasing teacher autonomy to do research both independently and collaboratively in the context. The sustained research mentoring and ongoing engagement in doing research helped educate action researchers who were committed to increasing their professional engagement in their careers.

Joint authorship is a challenging process especially when the authors live in different cities. However, the authors of this volume tried to keep to the deadlines and exchanged a number of emails and had face-to-face meetings (though limited) in order to maximize the potential to contribute to the book. The process of writing through collaboration was managed by the authors writing different chapters and sharing with each other for further revision and editing. The chapters were peer-reviewed and improved through negotiation and agreement. We also discussed sequencing chapters, sorting out chapter organization, and selecting titles and sub-titles.

In this book we have documented the ways in which teachers can engage in action research and develop as professional teachers committed to an inquiry stance in generating personal pedagogical knowledge and developing autonomy. Equally importantly, this book is a source which teacher educators who wish to support teachers doing action research can employ in their mentoring process.

Kenan Dikilitaş

Preface: Overview

How Is This Book Different?

1. It aims to develop teacher autonomy by means of engagement in action research.
2. Although acknowledging that the research process is not always linear, the book aims to set out the action research process in a clear progression which teachers can adapt to their needs.
3. The book aims to get teachers to engage with the process by means of examples, narratives, questions, and tasks.
4. Teachers who follow these tasks might be able to have a complete research project by the time they have finished working through the book. This means that the work they do will have a tangible and usable outcome.
5. Examples of actual action research project material will be included in order to provide teachers with concrete models which they might examine, adapt to their own needs, and, where appropriate, replicate.
6. Teacher narratives from those who have engaged in the action research process are included to add a "human" touch, hopefully to inspire those who need encouragement, and to reassure those who are experiencing problems that they are not the only ones having these kinds of difficulties.

7. This book is designed to be highly practical. It gives multiple ideas for how to establish research questions, to choose appropriate methodologies, to adapt to the existing context, and to go about collecting data. It provides examples of possible instruments, clear instructions for how to carry out the most common kinds of statistical procedures, ideas for how to do presentations and write up research findings for those who want to do this. All of these steps can be very intimidating for a new researcher (or even, sometimes, more experienced ones!).

8. In spite of the practical bias, the book aims to be theoretically and ethically rigorous, and presents theoretically and ethically sound methodologies throughout.

9. The book also has an extensive glossary which explains in some detail the terms used in the book. Since this topic requires some quite specialized vocabulary ("jargon", if you like), which can be intimidating for non-experts (most of us!), a glossary which can provide quick and easy reference is a major asset.

Audience

1. Trainee teachers who are working for a Diploma and who have access to a class (maybe practice teaching) where they can conduct the research.

2. In-service teachers who want to expand their own professional horizons and develop their autonomy.

3. In-service teachers who are working for a higher qualification (e.g. a Master's or PhD).

4. Teacher educators who are working with in-service or trainee teachers who wish to guide their students through the process of action research.

Questions to Consider

The questions are designed to revise the contents of the chapters and to create discussion and reflection. They may be useful for individuals who want to check their understanding of what they have read, for groups which may benefit from some prompt to stimulate discussion, or for teacher trainers who might use them to stimulate class discussion or as the basis for assignment work.

Tasks

The tasks are designed to be cumulative, so that, if teachers wish, they could be combined to form a complete research project by the end of the book. This means that, instead of having just more piles of assignments (as we all have had), the progress through this book has a tangible outcome, which may be satisfying in itself, or which may be used as the basis for a presentation or for publication.

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