

# ACTION RESEARCH IN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION: TRENDS, PERSPECTIVES AND PROJECTS IN AUSTRIA

Action research has proven itself an effective form of professional development for language teachers. This article sets out to show this potential by looking at current developments in action research in the context of language teacher education in Austria. The article is divided into three parts: 1) prevailing trends and developments in action research will be expounded; 2) we examine the role of international networks in developing and implementing action research programmes for language teachers in Austria; 3) The final part describes the dynamic development of action-research-based post-graduate courses run by the University of Klagenfurt since the 1980's and discusses pre-conditions for a sustainable form of action research-based language teacher education.

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## Introduction

For decades, action research has been part of research and development in teacher education. As “a teacher’s personal study of his / her own teaching or of the students’ learning” (Scrivener, 2011: 389), the contribution of action research to the teaching profession can also be traced in second language teaching and learning. In the context of language teacher education in Austria, recent trends suggest that this form of professional development has gained new momentum. What these trends have in common is that they try to tap the potential of action research by emphasizing its collaborative character: they aim to develop a professional community, in which groups of practitioners and researchers collaborate, both locally (e.g. in the language classroom) and within international networks, to improve the quality of second language teaching and learning. This article sets out to illustrate the potential of collaborative action research by looking at (1) two recent developments in action research, which are currently widely discussed in Aus-

trian language teacher education (*Lesson Study and Learning Study*); (2) Austrian action research within the *international framework*; and (3) an example of how *action-research-based post-graduate courses* can be implemented in language teacher education.

## 1. Prevailing trends and developments: *Lesson Study and Learning Study*

*Lesson Study* and *Learning Study* have recently entered the highly dynamic action research community of practice in Austria. They can be considered as variants of action research, in which teams of teachers collaborate to improve the quality of their teaching and their students’ learning (Altrichter, Posch & Spann, 2018). *Lesson Study* and *Learning Study* are similar, in that they both depend on the cooperation of teachers when planning, observing and discussing lessons (so-called ‘research lessons’) and are based on the repeated analysis and revisions of these lessons. Both variants focus on the learning of teachers and students,

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and follow a cyclic structure<sup>1</sup>. The main difference between the two variants is that *Learning Study* is based on a specific theory of teaching and learning (i.e. variation theory), whereas in *Lesson Study* analysis and development of instruction is determined by the participating teachers' subjective theories and experiences (Feldman et al., 2018).

In recent years *Lesson Study* projects have been carried out by teachers working at Austrian schools. An interesting example was published as a PFL *Pädagogik und Fachdidaktik für LehrerInnen* study paper in 2017. As described below, PFL post-graduate courses support teachers in their classroom developments. In this case, the teacher set out to find out how, on the one hand, individual learning can be enhanced through *Lesson Study* and, on the other hand, teachers working at a school together can engage in co-operative classroom development. The project was designed according to a *Lesson Study* cycle. The topic was "Describing people" and the skill focus was on listening and speaking. An important result was that the teachers learnt how to get closer to individual learner needs through their co-operative planning and feedback cycles. The teachers involved experienced positive collaboration in a very positive way and were, for example, impressed by the ensuing opportunities to learn about their pupils' needs through observation and to discover ways to support one another as a team. (Mair, 2017)

Whereas some university colleges of teacher education are already on their way to establish themselves as strongholds of *Lesson Study* (e.g. PH Niederösterreich, PH Kärnten, PH Oberösterreich), there seem to be comparatively few efforts to explore and use variation theory and *Learning Study* in language teaching. One example of a project that investi-

gates this potential is *Variation theory in EFL teaching and learning at secondary and tertiary level* (Variate 2/3), a long-term research project, run by staff members of the Department of English (Secondary Education) at the University College of Education Upper Austria. The aim of this project is not only to theoretically explore the interface between variation theory and second language acquisition, but also to investigate the potential of *Learning Study* in the practice of EFL teaching in secondary schools. In this project, a *Learning Study* was carried out which examined the potential of variation theory for teaching English grammar (tenses). Here, a team of English teachers and researchers designed lessons based on variation patterns, implemented these lessons in three cycles, collected data, and analysed the results. The study showed that in this *Learning Study*, the pupils' performance improved significantly over time, although, as further statistical analysis revealed, this improvement cannot be attributed solely to the treatment factor.

## 2. The international framework

As already mentioned above, action research in Austria takes place within an active and highly dynamic community of practice. And yet, further development without cross-fertilisation from international communities is inconceivable. Very importantly, over the past decades Austrian action researchers have been involved in the international network *Collaborative Action Research Network* (CARN [www.carn.org](http://www.carn.org)). Founded in the 1970's to promote action research initiatives and

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the people involved, the network runs annual conferences at which members and non-members have opportunities to present and discuss their work within different formats. *CARN* Conferences are renowned for the encouraging and positive atmosphere and also for the wide range of professional areas involved from health care to social work and a range of educational fields. *CARN* reaches out at global level and over the years regional networks have developed either representing action researchers in a country or speakers of a language. The Austrian action research community is deeply involved in the German-speaking network entitled *CARN D.A.CH*.

*CARN D.A.CH* meetings held since 2012 attract local participants including classroom teachers. As Science Education is strongly represented and prominent in *CARN D.A.CH*, at the Innsbruck meeting organised by the Pedagogical University Tirol in January, 2019 efforts were made to make action research projects in Language Education visible. Thus, a symposium on “Action Research Communities” (described in the article Jacquin/Lechner) was included in the programme as well as presentations on action research in inclusive settings and action research on a lower secondary project. A further presentation block dealt with Lesson and *Learning Study* in the language classroom. A further international framework available to researchers in the field of languages is provided by the *European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML)*. This is, so to speak, the reverse situation: everyone involved in the ECML is a language expert and there is no a-priori connection to action research. However, action research as a way to enhance work in the language classroom was included as a priority in the 2015 call for projects “Languages at the Heart of Learning”. The “Action Research Communities for language teachers” coordinated at the

Pedagogical University Tyrol provided an opportunity to bring together researchers from four countries within a core team and throughout the life of the project, reach out to colleagues in the thirty *ECML* countries ([www.ecml.at](http://www.ecml.at))

### 3. Action-research-based post graduate courses: the PFL programme

#### 3.1 PFL beginnings and course design

In Austria, ideas for reflective teacher development based on action research were generated by a team around Professor Peter Posch at the University of Klagenfurt, and from the beginning there were strong links to and co-operations with Professor John Elliot and Bridget Somekh at the University of Norwich. Courses for “in-service teacher training”, *PFL* courses, were developed in the early 1980’s for teachers of different subjects such as English, German, Mathematics, Natural Sciences and creative subjects, e.g. arts. In 1990, the first edition of *Lehrer erforschen ihren Unterricht* by Herbert Altrichter and Peter Posch was published. This work (now available in the fifth edition) was based on experiences in the early courses and provided a comprehensible rationale and hands-on guidelines to action research and has become a type of course textbook.

From the early days, the course design of the *PFL* programme was developed around the pillars of seminars providing, on the one hand, input on action research concepts, instruments and current ideas in subject methodology, and, on the other hand, impulses and space for participant



contributions. From the onset the team concept for teacher education courses was vital to the course philosophy (Cf. also Krainz-Dürr et al.: 338)

### 3.2 PFL: adapting to educational trends and course sustainability

At the heart of the *PFL* concept lay the conviction that courses to support teachers in their professional development in a sustainable way must span a considerable period of time.

Over time, courses have adapted to current national educational needs and emphasis has moved with changes in educational agenda. The course for English teachers was originally of a general nature at a time when teachers in Austria set and assessed their own school-leaving examinations and other forms of assessment and were thus free to develop their lessons thematically within a broad national subject curriculum. From 1997 to 2005, the courses for English teachers were courses on “English as a Medium of Instruction” and open to teachers of other subjects teaching through English. From 2006 until 2017, the focus was very clearly on the development of “Competence-Orientated Teaching”, the Performance Standards (Bildungsstandards implemented at the end of Lower Secondary schooling in English, German and Mathematics), the development of a standardized school leaving examination (i.e. Standardisierte Reifeprüfung, in Austria: Matura) and the implications of these on classroom teachers.

Making practitioners’ knowledge public is an important element of action research (Feldman, Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 2018). Thus, in order to obtain a course diploma *PFL* participants are required to write publishable study papers documenting their action research in their own classrooms. The length and number of papers required (1-2) has varied over the years and is adapted to needs of the

course (i.e. for German teachers, teachers of Mathematics etc.). The requirement is always introduced, explained and exemplified during the first seminar to ensure that participants can begin their action research process upon return to school. During the regional group meetings progress is discussed and as writing advances, time is devoted to guided peer reading. Presentation of the paper is important and participants are given opportunities to share experiences and findings both through oral presentations and written format. The final study papers were formerly published in print-format in a publication series issued by the University of Klagenfurt. Since the millennium, web-publishing has been effected<sup>3</sup> (<https://www.imst.ac.at/imst-wiki/index.php/Kategorie:Englisch>).

Papers typically focus on issues from the language classroom from teaching skills to learner needs. The essential element is that teachers find an area of language teaching that they wish to develop and where there are feasible possibilities to do so. It is important that the teacher is in control of the research process. One example has already been described in the context of *Lesson Study* in Austria. A further example shows a teacher’s concern to meet the needs of gifted learners in the context of educational reform. The setting was a lower secondary school in the country and the teacher’s question was how to keep gifted learners focussed and interested. Formerly, pupils at lower secondary schools in Austria were streamed. Restructuring at national level meant that streaming is no longer permitted and in many cases teachers are left alone to



support a wide range of learners. During the PFL course, the teacher became aware of useful methodologies and also learnt how to work with action research tools. The research question is “Which types of differentiation programmes can support gifted learners in the development of the skills of Speaking & Writing? A project carried out in a 4th class of a lower secondary school in a rural area.” The project as described in the paper looked at the design of different activities for speaking and writing and how to find out about their effectiveness through action research tools, in this case mainly focus groups, observation and questionnaires. The results were enhanced learning outcomes but also greater satisfaction on the part of all the children in the classroom. (Promberger: 2017)

### 3.3 PFL and the inclusion of *Lesson Study*

Since 2015, *Lesson Studies* have been included into the course for English teachers to ensure that on-going developments and discussions on the role of *LS* approaches are taken into consideration. Currently, courses are being planned for teachers already working in initial teacher education or CPD or teachers with a co-ordinating role within their schools. The target-group are people concerned with the teaching of English at Primary and Lower Secondary level.

### 3.4 PFL success criteria

Given that it has been possible to maintain the *PFL* courses for a period of over 35 (!) years, the question arises what the success criteria for this action-research-based programme are. Here, looking back at developments, it can be argued that the following core elements have been retained:

- > The importance of mutual regard and respect which need to prevail both between team members and between teams and course participants (cf. Rauch, F. & Wallner, B. 2019: 208).
- > The strong team spirit meaning that

course leader teams work with openness, tolerance and a capacity for respect

- > The principle that during team meetings all voices are equal and agreement must be reached before plenary sessions are implemented.
- > The principle that action research begins with strengths and leads to development and enhancement. (Cf. Krainz-Dürr et al.: 2002).
- > The fact that teachers constantly find themselves in situations to which they must immediately react. Within the courses teachers reflect upon situations leading to empowerment in future situation.
- > The principle that teacher knowledge is vital to educational progress and therefore must be nurtured.
- > Teacher knowledge is valued through support given to publications.
- > A capacity to adapt to change and target current developments.

### 3.5 PFL – a never-ending success story?

As already pointed out, the long-standing nature of this programme is remarkable, stemming from a capacity to adapt to change. And yet, this seemingly never-ending success story has recently been under pressure due to reduction in funding. Although the course provider was always obliged to reapply for funding before starting up again, participants in earlier courses benefitted from funding that covered all costs incurred including fees, travel and accommodation. Over the past fifteen years, however, step-by-step participants have been asked to fund their own travel and accommodation, and courses, previously offered during term-time, can now only be run during school holidays. Both developments have led to worries about time and money, which has brought about the necessity to consolidate courses (Hanfstingl, Abuja, Isak, Lechner & Steigberger, 2018).

Recently, this action research community has received further important impulses through Lesson Study and Learning Study, two collaborative action-research variants of professional development.

## Conclusion

Recent developments in Austrian language teacher education show that there is an active, dynamic, and internationally well-connected professional community that looks at action research as “a methodology exceptionally well suited to exploring, developing and sustaining change processes both in classrooms and whole organizations such as schools, colleges and university departments of education” (Noffke & Somekh, 2013: 2). As the PFL courses exemplify, this action research community can look back at a long and successful tradition of supporting language teachers in their professional development in a sustainable way.

Recently, this action research community has received further important impulses through *Lesson Study* and *Learning Study*, two collaborative action-research variants of professional development, currently widely-discussed and already implemented in some language teacher education programmes in Austria.

*Lesson Study* and *Learning Study* can both be valuable, but they are still ‘work in progress’. Thus, there needs to be further research (and funding!) to fully develop their potential in the context of Austrian language teacher education.

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