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### Teacher and researcher autonomy in action research

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**GERTRUDE TINKER SACHS**

# Teacher and researcher autonomy in action research<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

An important issue in the conduct of action research (AR) projects is the autonomy of the teacher. As Elliott and Adelman (1996: 15) argue, as researchers 'we have a responsibility to ensure that our teachers do not sacrifice autonomy on the altar of security'. This paper is a reflective commentary on the process of conducting AR in one particular setting, Hong Kong. It highlights issues of teacher autonomy and researcher priorities encountered in the process of conducting action research projects. While these are reported chiefly from the researcher's perspective, comments made by the research support staff and the secondary school teachers of English as a foreign/second language themselves are also included. It is hoped that these reflections will assist other facilitators of AR projects in identifying the characteristics and processes that contribute to their success or failure and the features that lead to teacher autonomy and empowerment.

## **The social, cultural and political climate of conducting AR in Hong Kong**

A study by Richards, Tung and Ng (1992) characterises teachers in Hong Kong as professionals who feel under-consulted about issues of curriculum and policy. They teach large classes with few resources within demanding curriculum constraints, have considerable amounts of marking and school meetings, and often work in very cramped conditions (p 97). Richards, Tung and Ng (1992) also report that teachers appear to be dissatisfied with their lack of autonomy. An example of this frustration can be seen in the perception that teachers were insufficiently consulted about recent government moves such as the introduction of the new curriculum (Target Oriented Curriculum or TOC; see Carless 1997), and the discontinuation of the use of mixed codes in the classroom (Hirvela and Law 1991). Similarly, the implementation of benchmarks for Hong Kong's secondary and primary school language teachers is another top-down, government-led initiative which has been vehemently opposed by the local teachers' union, as many teachers feel concerned about what they see as a challenge to their professionalism.

In general, there has been a climate of doubt on the part of school officials about the professionalism of teachers. Evidence of teacher

consultation, autonomy and decision-making is not strong. Teachers generally work in an atmosphere of mistrust at the management level and often at the school level. Such a climate is far from optimal for conducting reflective investigative enquiry into school and teaching reform. Teacher empowerment is said to be an important by-product of action research (for example, McLean 1995). But empowerment is very difficult to attain or even facilitate if the sociopolitical context forces teachers to engage in what have been described as defensive or less desirable teaching practices (McNeil 1988; Suleiman 1998).

### **Background to the project**

Action research does not have a long history in Hong Kong (Chan 1996). In fact, in a provocative paper, Li et al (1998: 2) question whether Hong Kong has a future in action research given the 'lack of action research and school-based reforms in Hong Kong', and blame the legacy of colonialism and a culture of conformity, hierarchy, weak leadership and isolated teaching for this absence of an action research-based culture in schools. The few reported cases of action research were carried out under the auspices of various university certificate and degree programs, such as the Postgraduate Diploma of Education (for example, Tsui 1996) or with undergraduate and graduate students (Brock, Yu and Wong 1992; Chan 1996; Crawford 1999; Ho and Richards 1993; Richards and Lockhart 1992). The collaboration between university staff and the teacher in such research would be different from other AR contexts where there are no course requirements or grades to be awarded.

The two-year project reported here arose out of the need to bridge the traditional divide between the university and school communities, and to enhance communication and mutual understanding of the tertiary and school sectors in research and practice. The purpose of the project was to 'enhance the professional competence and status of teachers' (Hong Kong Government 2000a, 8: 6; Hong Kong Government 2000b) through forging links with universities. In this case, we, the researchers, saw the need to work with teachers who volunteered to participate in the project and assist the development of more reflective and effective practitioners.

### **Beginnings**

When teachers are actively engaged in deconstructing and constructing their professional activities with their peers and experts from the field, the conditions for reflective and more effective practice are then fostered and furthered.  
(Project proposal, Spring 1998)

At the time the project was conceived, we rather naively believed that teachers would actively engage in discussions about their teaching work throughout the project and that this would encourage educational change. We were mindful of the sensitivities necessary for working with

teachers. From our previous teacher development work, we were keenly aware of the delicate balancing act between trying to 'foster' or encourage certain educational practices in different school contexts while also trying to 'further' or extend good and effective practices to another level or realm of effectiveness. This awareness is embodied in the two key operational words in our project's title: '*fostering*' and '*furthering*' effective practices in the teaching of English. These two words captured both pushing and pulling, sometimes construed as opposing forces in physics.

Action research may have far-reaching and lofty goals, such as:

... to learn and develop one's performance as well as to improve one's practice and to change those existing conditions and organisational constraints which impede practical improvements. (Zuber-Skerritt 1992: 93)

Our aims and objectives, as stated in our proposal, were more modest:

- ❖ To foster the development of critically reflective practice in English language teaching in Hong Kong;
- ❖ To support teachers in cultivating a culture and climate within schools for promoting and sustaining effective practices in the teaching of English; and
- ❖ To work collaboratively with teachers to develop video cases which represent best practice in the teaching of English as a second language.

(Project proposal, Spring, 1998)

We hoped to work with five teachers in five schools and we hoped that five university lecturers would want to join us in this teacher development work. We proposed bi-monthly video taping of each participating teacher's lessons, and monthly discussion group meetings on the lessons with the teachers in their respective schools. We anticipated that teachers would want to work with us in developing video cases of their action research in order to share their 'furthered' and more 'effective' practices with other colleagues in their school and Hong Kong.

However, we encountered difficulties in attracting teachers to participate in the project, even after contacting 60 schools located in the university district. As the excerpt from the letter to project participants below shows, we anticipated giving the individual teacher control of the project. However, control actually proved to be difficult and subsequently became an area of great tension and soul searching on the part of the researchers. These issues will be discussed further on in this article.

Dear Principal, Panel Chair and Teachers of English,

... Teachers who engage in action research are said to become more effective in their practices by reflecting on their teaching and then by acting on their reflections to improve their teaching. Improving one's teaching in this case is supported by others: peers and university teachers, who can help to foster the climate of effective change in practice. The power of such an approach is that the teachers themselves determine

the direction for their professional growth and direction and control the pace to do so ...

(Excerpt from letter of invitation to teachers 19th October, 1998)

Apart from difficulties in recruiting teacher-researchers, we also experienced delays in getting started with 'our' agenda, as the following excerpt from the first report reveals:

... Due to the difficulties encountered in identifying schools to join the project, as described in the previous section, the first workshop for teachers was delayed till 28th November. The first workshop was held in one of the project schools and groups of teachers from the secondary schools and one individual teacher attended the workshop. The proposed research agenda was discussed with individual teachers. However, as some schools would have examinations in late November or early December, time for the first videotaping was scheduled in mid-December or early January.

(First quarterly report, December, 1998)

Oja and Smulyan (1989: 20) remind us that:

Teachers involved in 'insider research/evaluation' activities see themselves first and foremost as classroom teachers. Their first loyalty is to the pupils and to their subjects. The problem of time for insider research tends to be viewed as a teaching vs. research dilemma, which gets resolved in favor of the former.

In other words, teachers' primary responsibility is to the pupils they are teaching and the syllabus that they must cover. Teachers cannot focus exclusively on their AR projects. This is especially true in settings where no time is allowed for teachers to engage in their AR work and where there is strict adherence to a common syllabus. Even though some researchers encouraged school administrators to be more flexible with teachers' work schedules so that teachers could be given time off to engage in more reflective practice (van Lier 1989), it did not happen for any of the teachers on this project.

In the end, instead of the 25 teachers from five different schools we initially envisaged, we had only eight teachers from four schools. The teachers had varied backgrounds and experience in teaching English. Four of the teachers held bachelor degrees, three had master's degrees and one a higher diploma. Four of the teachers had specific training in teaching English and three held a postgraduate diploma in education. Their teaching experience ranged from less than two years (three) to more than ten years (two) with three teaching from three to nine years.

We also felt disappointed that we did not get the groups of teachers in the same school, as we had planned, but only two groups of three teachers in two schools and individual teachers in two schools. However, of the two groups of teachers, none wanted to investigate similar areas in language learning. We felt that if they had done this, the workload and discussions would be easier. We were mindful that chances for successful teacher change are stronger when groups of teachers work together in

their respective schools. However, there is ultimately no guarantee that groups of teachers will work better since the success of a project depends on whether the groups of teachers have the pre-existing conditions in their schools that encourage sharing of their professional work (Burns 1999). If teachers feel threatened by some in the group or are antagonistic because they feel pressured to participate, then the group may not work cohesively in sharing their AR plans and work. The following comment by one of our teachers captures this feeling of lack of school-based collegial support as well as a feeling of powerlessness:

Our school is different. Some of our teachers are 'dry'. They are waiting for nothing. Sometimes I am enthusiastic about teaching and try different teaching methods. But, I do not receive any support from my colleagues. I stop and think, why am I doing so much while others do nothing? Why don't I stop doing all this?

... The authority and power are in the hands of a few people. In this school, we do not have a choice to say no. We have to do what we are told to do from people at the managerial level. It's not like in other schools where everyone has a right to speak up and give an opinion.

(Teacher H)

Nevertheless, it was possible in this project to provide teachers with the support of their peers in the project through large group meetings in which they could report to each other on their activities. In this way, those teachers who felt forced to join the project could then experience the enthusiasm of their colleagues from other schools.

### **Formulating a plan**

In the following extract from our letter to teachers, which can be described as our form of 'gentle fostering', it can be observed that there was some delay in making a start on AR projects. This is after six months and a number of school and university-based workshops to talk about getting started with AR.

Dear Teachers,

It's been a while since our last meeting. I do hope you are all well and I would like to send you greetings for a fruitful and happy 'Year of the Rabbit'.

- ❖ Have you watched the video that we sent to you before the Christmas holiday?
- ❖ Did you find anything interesting?
- ❖ Do you have any ideas for your area of investigation?

We are now sending you some AR project ideas and an extract from an article to help you get started.

(Letter to Teachers, 10 February, 1999)

From February to June, to get teachers started, we encouraged them to observe themselves and to develop their action research plans and carry out a small pilot study. The Teachers' Symposium, which is outlined below, was meant to 'push' them to report on the development of their plans so that they could get started in the following school year. This symposium was held at the university and all the AR teachers were invited to attend and to report on their progress. In this way, the teachers could share their work with the teachers from all the AR schools, discuss common problems and explore ways to overcome them.

3:30–3:35	5'	Welcome and project update
3:35–3:45	10'	Introductions
3:45–4:45	60'	Reporting and discussion Teacher reports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action research plan</li> <li>• Pilot study, difficulties encountered</li> <li>• Pupils' feedback</li> </ul>
4:45–5:00	15'	Open feedback
5:00–5:15	15'	Project housekeeping <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forthcoming agenda</li> <li>• Question and answer</li> </ul>

(Teacher Symposium Outline July, 1999)

At the Teacher Symposium, the teachers demonstrated progress in the development of their action research ideas. The teachers selected their areas of investigation after identifying the special needs of their students. All the teachers were looking to improve their practice by adopting more interactive and interesting teaching approaches. Table 1 indicates the teachers' areas of investigation.

Although we took a very long time to get the teachers started in carrying out their projects, McLean (1995: 5) reminds us that, 'although action research is not a quick fix for all school problems, it represents a *process* that can lead to the selection of the best operation for each specific situation' (our emphasis). In this case, the researchers had to learn to accept the teachers' pace and appreciate the process that was taking place. On the other hand, because we wanted to fulfill the aims of the project and be accountable to our benefactors, we needed to ensure that the project kept to at least a reasonable pace. Above all, we needed to be mindful and sensitive to the special problems that our teachers faced.

In fact, teachers' willingness to participate in action research or projects of any type is influenced by a number of factors. Oja and Smulyan (1989: 20) describe several characteristics of schools that influence teach-

ers' willingness to be involved in action research. They include the existence of a school climate that encourages enquiry, frequent communication among staff and between staff and administration, and in general, a receptive attitude toward teacher experimentation and change. Another factor is teachers' involvement in decision-making on school policy and curriculum matters. Where these conditions exist, school change is most likely to be easier to facilitate. However, how much can the researcher and teachers accomplish in those settings where these characteristics are absent or scarce?

**Table 1: Teachers' action research focus**

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Area of investigation</b>
<b>Teacher A</b>	Our traditional ways of teaching grammar and learning focus mainly on grammar rules instead of meaning. Hence, students have to do a lot of mechanical drills and decontextualised exercises. Interesting grammar tasks would supplement the textbook activities.
<b>Teacher B</b>	Even though I insist on using English in my language classrooms, students are not interested at all. They just sit in their seats and learn quietly and passively. They seldom raise their hands to answer my questions. Cooperative learning activities seem to be the best for my students.
<b>Teacher C</b>	My teaching of reading is very difficult to judge because I can't get their feedback. It's also very boring preparing my students for the A level exam. I just give them exercises. I think reciprocal teaching may make things more interesting.
<b>Teacher D</b>	I don't know if the method I use is good or bad. I want to experiment with literature circles and see if I can improve my teaching method.
<b>Teacher E</b>	My objectives are: to encourage pupils to write creative ideas; to help them to help themselves through peer conferencing and process writing; to develop their organisational skills in writing.
<b>Teacher F</b>	I am not satisfied with my teaching methods and my students always forget what I teach. I want to improve the way I teach vocabulary so that they can remember what I have taught.
<b>Teacher G</b>	Students have a poverty of different and new ideas. If students are trained in debating their ideas, they will come to regard their second language as a medium for developing their minds.
<b>Teacher H</b>	My students are relatively weak in English although individual differences are present. They can be talkative and active in class, but usually they get bored during grammar lessons. I have a teacher-centred classroom. I will try to make my lessons more student-centred.

An additional and important concern for Hong Kong teachers is summed up by one of the participating principals in his reflective report on the project:

In Hong Kong there is a belief among language teachers that their workload is much heavier than other teachers'. They would choose not to take part if they considered joining the project would bring them nothing but additional workload. (Principal A)

However, more teachers were more concerned about the constraints placed on them by the syllabus than on the workload problem mentioned by the principal. The demands of the rigid syllabus influenced everyone, including their peers and students. The comments made by Teachers B, C, D, F and H describe the full range of their sentiments.

Our curriculum is too tight that I failed to incorporate a task for every selected grammar item. There were even times when things were well prepared and yet I was unable to carry out on schedule due to the lack of time. Also, I managed to conduct only one evaluative meeting with the whole class and mostly only asked a few students about their opinions of the group task. Worst still, as I discovered that my class was the poorest among all, I started to question whether I had been implementing my action research project at the expense of other areas of teaching. Hence, I deliberately drew my attention back to other areas like dictation, comprehension and so on. As a result, the time allocated for doing the action research had to be shortened. (Teacher B)

Because I am teaching in a different way, my students will literally complain because I give them less notes than the other five teachers of English. They will try to get the notes from the other students and teachers. So, I switch a little bit, especially with my weaker class. I think with the weaker class, I have to switch back to grammar, grammatical rules because psychologically, it is difficult to change my students' way of thinking. They think I am not covering the syllabus and fear they will not be ready for the uniformed tests. (Teacher C)

There are so many different textbooks that I have to use and I have to cover. There's not enough time that I can experiment and the students have so much homework that I have to assign. (Teacher D)

I think the syllabus is very rigid. So, even if I want to teach the things more in depth, I do not have the time. I have to keep pace with the other teachers. There are many constraints for us in teaching English. (Teacher F)

Under a tight syllabus, it is difficult for us to make our students understand some grammar items. Actually I talked to the panel about this because I just doubt whether my students have learned the item and then we start to teach them something new. It does not work. However, the panel has his opinion and thinking. I do not know which belief is right. I still do not have a chance to try my method because I have to follow the syllabus. What a pity! (Teacher H)

In working through the phases of the AR cycle of developing, implementing, observing and reflecting on the effects of the plan (Burns 1999; Carr and Kemmis 1986; Kemmis and McTaggart 1982; McLean 1995; Nunan 1993; Wallace 1991), an important problem was identified by our research assistant: teachers' preparedness to investigate their own practice.

Although this was not an issue for all participants in the project, it was a very critical and sensitive issue for many of them, and researchers cannot oblige teachers to adopt a particular investigative stance if they do not wish to do so. We suggested that the teachers could videotape or audiotape their lessons to aid their reflection on their teaching, but some teachers were reluctant to start in this way. In this context, Research Assistant B commented:

A reflective observation approach was very challenging and exciting to our teachers. It was because the process definitely might cause challenges and threats to their existing framework or theories in language teaching which have shaped their views and actions in language teaching practice. However, this process was not as smooth as expected. I found that some teachers were hesitant to videotape themselves. One of the possible reasons is they were not confident enough to adopt such an approach. Moreover, the lack of support from fellow colleagues and school administrators and the lack of an open and friendly school culture might have also influenced the teachers' degree of receptiveness.

### **Carrying out the AR plan**

Now that the teachers were on their way in investigating their practices, some new and old problems continued to surround us. Some of the old problems, related to time and the syllabus, were once again highlighted by our research assistant:

I faced several problems in this action research project. First, it's time. All the teachers are very busy with their schoolwork. It is very difficult to contact them and even to arrange a time for a meeting. I sometimes feel helpless when the teacher cannot follow the action plans as scheduled. Teachers found that they have to follow the school syllabus and they try very hard to squeeze time to do the activities for the action research. Even though the AR lessons are designed to fit into the syllabus, the lessons for AR took a longer time than the normal lessons did. The teachers only conducted a few interactive lessons during the school year. They spent little time on other aspects like teaching journal for reflection, video-observation, et cetera. In addition, the teachers could not see the impact of their AR as their priority is always the syllabus and their administrative work. (Research Assistant A)

In the following extract, Teacher E expands further on the problem of time and the new yet related problem of issues affecting the success or failure of the instructional approach she adopted:

Although peer conferences and process writing are conducive to teaching writing, teachers could not afford to spend too much time trying out the techniques. When I started to carry out the action research at the beginning of the academic year, all junior form English teachers also adopted the process writing in their writing lessons. Their comments on this technique: too time-consuming and not as helpful as expected. They realised that students' ability was a problem and peer conference was almost impossible. Teachers would not recommend the use of peer conference.

Most students were unable to spot the mistakes and the weaknesses in their classmates' essays. The reason was that they shared the same problem as each other. They obviously had no ideas on what to improve in the compositions. The job then became the burden of the teachers. It seemed that teachers were marking the same story twice (the draft and the final work).

The delicate balancing act of giving advice and offering suggestions for instructional changes could also determine the success or failure of the project. Here another 'new' problem was brought to the forefront when the teacher acted on the basis of her own knowledge and experience of her teaching context rather than accepting the researcher's advice. In such a situation, the researcher has no option but to accede to the teacher's decision — no amount of 'fostering and furthering' would help. The researcher has to know when to let go of what is deemed by the researcher to be a more 'effective' way to proceed in the AR process. The following excerpt demonstrates how the teacher felt with the researcher's feedback on her lesson.

The researcher suggested that I had given too much help to my students and so they were dependent on me. I thought about the objectives of this lesson. I wanted to help students write creative ideas and improve their organisational ability. Brainstorming ideas and adjectives was a good way to provoke their thinking. Helping students to draw the outline of the story was to train them to develop a habit of organising the ideas before writing. I think we could not ask a child to walk when the adults do not show them how to walk. Teachers should set a good example for students to follow. After having ample practice, students will grasp the techniques of organisation. I don't think I am trying to be dominant in the lessons.

Teacher E)

The researcher's balancing act of when to push or withdraw to the sidelines is also evident in trying to get teachers to become more reflective about their own teaching. In doing this, we found that teachers almost always found it easier to talk about their students than about themselves, even though we encouraged this type of reflection in many different forms.

What I found is that teachers are not critical enough in evaluating themselves. What they would do is record only their students' reactions to the lesson.

(Research Assistant A)

Also, as we tried to be helpful, we had to find a delicate balance between collaboration and cooperation. Oja and Smulyan (1989) make a clear distinction between the two behaviours. They see collaborative involvement as taking many forms, but essentially involving researchers and teachers in communicating frequently and openly and working equally as peers. Cooperation, in contrast, has an element of following what the other party says — it is one-way individual action rather than two-way interaction as seen in collaboration. We knew that in order to empower teachers, they needed to be closely involved in the designing of

their instructional activities and in all the decision-making surrounding their project. On the other hand, time was always a major problem as has been echoed in other AR reports (Burns 1999; Oja and Smulyan 1989; van Lier 1989) and we wanted to ensure the necessary support for the teachers. This necessitated some intervention on our part:

The teacher performed better when the grammar tasks were designed by her rather than designed by the research assistant. (Research Assistant A)

Finally, one aspect of the action research process that emerges from our experience is the stress that it can place on teachers: Some teachers may become so frustrated by the time pressures on their regular school-work, that they abandon the project:

I terminated the action research in April since it is difficult to finish the syllabus in time. (Teacher E)

The issue of Hong Kong secondary level teachers' stress is examined by Chan (1996) and Loh (1995). Loh's study is of particular interest because she focused on ESL teachers. Her investigation found that marking workload, teaching to the curriculum, and students' examination performance exerted the highest stress on teachers. Chan (1996) found that teacher stress was related to overall mental health and recommended that teachers should manage stress by actively adopting stress avoidance behaviours. Pennington (1996) appeals to the emotional side of teaching and recommends that anyone considering innovative project work with teachers should first focus on the motivational input and relationship building at the start of the project. In our work, it took almost a year to establish trust and help teachers to get started on their pilot studies.

### **Evaluating the process: the roles of the researcher and the teacher in facilitating action research**

Cole and Knowles (1993) have documented some of the roles and responsibilities of teachers and researchers in conducting collaborative research. They highlight similar concerns to those encountered in our project, such as issues of negotiation and collaboration. Table 2 summarises some of the difficulties and sources of tension that we have experienced and includes some suggestions for possible remedies on the part of both researchers and teachers who wish to engage in collaborative action research.

### **Reporting on the action research**

At the time of writing, of the eight teachers who have participated in this project, one terminated her project when she was in the last phase of her work and another is beginning her project. Of the other six teachers, three have presented their work at international conferences and six have

**Table 2: Fostering and furthering collaborative action research**

<b>AR processes and issues</b>	<b>Researcher's response</b>	<b>Teachers' response</b>
<b>Identifying an AR problem</b>	The researcher should provide some helpful feedback to assist teachers in identifying possible areas to consider for their AR projects. This can be done after listening to the problems that the teachers are experiencing in their schools.	The teachers can make arrangements to audio or videotape their lessons and then observe the lesson to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson. The teachers could also start with problems that are being experienced in the classroom.
<b>Developing a course of action</b>	The researcher needs to recommend pertinent approaches, reading materials etc for the teachers to consider in the development of the AR projects. The researcher could also assist teachers by summarising some of the relevant articles and highlighting their key findings and approaches.	The teachers need to find the time to read and discuss alternative approaches to their existing instructional practice.
<b>Clarifying the course of action</b>	The researcher could organise group workshops that will introduce innovative approaches and ideas to develop and extend teachers' thinking about their teaching.	The teachers need to attend the workshops and actively engage in the sessions.
<b>Supporting the development of the plan</b>	In developing the AR plan, the researcher should provide the teachers with guidelines that will help the teachers to articulate the AR process of systematically investigating their practice. The researcher could also provide the teachers with a list of questions that the teachers could use to monitor their teaching and guide the writing of the reflective diary. If measures are needed to analyse teachers' and students' responses to the activities, support should be given with these too.	The teachers need to follow the guidelines to develop the plan and systematically carry out the project. The teachers need to adapt the researcher's recommendations according to their own ideas and situation.

**Table 2: Continued**

<b>AR processes and issues</b>	<b>Researcher's response</b>	<b>Teachers' response</b>
<b>Monitoring the project</b>	The researcher should assist the teachers with timely feedback and transcribing of the lessons for further evaluation. Any other analysis that needs to be done should be done with the researcher's assistance to minimise teachers' workload.	As the AR project develops, the teachers should allow periodic audio or videotaping of their lessons for critical self-reflection and review of teaching. Teachers should also record their reflections of the lessons in a diary or on a cassette tape.
<b>Teacher's workload, input and ownership of the project</b>	The researcher needs to allow the teachers some space to manoeuvre and needs to be intimately aware of the teachers' time constraints and existing workload but should not do all the work for the teachers.	Teachers need to find time to meet and to discuss with the researcher approaches for developing the project. Teachers need to be able to point the researcher in the direction s/he wants to go in terms of developing instructional strategies.
<b>Writing up and sharing the AR project</b>	The researcher needs to provide the teachers with samples of AR teacher reports and give guidelines to assist teachers in writing their report. The researcher should encourage the teachers to consider different forums for sharing their AR work.	Teachers need to read the exemplars and write up their report. They should adapt the guidelines to suit their own reporting style. Teachers should consider how they want to share the fruits of their AR work.

participated in an action research video production. Of all the teachers, five have submitted their action research reports for publication and all the others have promised to complete theirs before the end of the project.

From all the teachers who have persevered in this project, there is a very important message for school administrators and policy makers: teachers want to improve their practice and can do it when given the necessary support. Given the present destabilising climate of suspicion, mistrust and doubt in Hong Kong regarding the professionalism of English teachers with the proposed onset of language benchmarks, this project sends a strong message to policy makers. We need to consider more potentially productive and longer-lasting effective alternatives for fostering teacher development and improving the climate and culture of teaching in our schools (for example, Edge and Richards 1993; Koo 1999; Reed et al 1997; Tinker Sachs and Mahon 1998a; 1998b).

There are many problems inherent in conducting action research. Among these problems are (1), the existing climate in the schools in terms of the kind of support that administrators and colleagues offer to each other and (2), the inflexible demands placed on teachers by the need to complete the school's syllabus. In our project, we found these two areas the most difficult problems to combat.

## **Conclusion**

Of the three objectives stated in the first section of this paper, only one has come close to being met. Through our activities, we have assisted the development of critically reflective practices in English language teaching, but we have not been able to do very much in helping teachers to cultivate a culture and climate within schools for promoting and sustaining effective practices. This second objective is seen as vital for making progress in changing schools (for example, Churchill 1996; Donahue 1996) and in Hong Kong there is an urgent need to challenge the prevailing norm of teacher isolation (Koo 1999; Kwan 1993). Only cohesive groups of teachers working together can begin to accomplish this target. The achievement of our final objective, the development of video cases, is very much dependent on teachers' willingness to share their practice in this medium. They have been willing to do this in both written and oral form and this in itself is a major accomplishment. In the meantime, we will not lose sight of our goals and the obstacles that lie ahead of us in trying to promote teacher development through action research (Day 1999; Li et al 1998; Koo 1999). The range of possibilities for conducting AR investigations in education and in second language learning in particular, is endless (for example, Bailey and Nunan 1996; Burns and Hood 1995; 1997; 1998) and we in the Hong Kong context are just beginning. With the continued support of different funding agencies, AR can be adequately financed so that university researchers can provide the specialised resources that are necessary to promote long-term responsible and reflective teaching (Burns 1998).

In this paper we have described an AR project that took place in a context that was far from optimal. However, what made the project successful in the short term was the tenacity of the teachers themselves and the motivation that they possessed to overcome the conditions that had the potential to destabilise their progress. The effects of their participation on teaching and learning were perceived as beneficial:

I truly believe that action research is an effective avenue for the improvement of classroom teaching. It is the only reason why I support our teachers in participating in this action research project. (Principal A)

Although I have experienced many setbacks in my action research project, I still believe that doing action research is beneficial to both teachers and students. It does not only provide a chance for teachers to stay back and

reflect on their own teaching, it is also an effective means for teachers to face the weaknesses of their own teaching and to work out possible ways to improve them.  
(Teacher A)

Further investigation of the long term impact of the projects described here will reveal the extent to which action research can improve teaching and learning in the Hong Kong context.

### **Acknowledgments**

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