


Torrin Shimono & James Nobis

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Welcome to the latest edition of TLT interviews! We are happy to bring you an interview with Anne Burns, professor of TESOL at the University of New South Wales in Sydney and chair of the TESOL Research Standing Committee, among other distinguished positions. In addition to language teaching, she has worked extensively with refugees and migrants in Australia on government-funded programs to enable their transition into the society. Recently, she spent a few months teaching university students in Japan before giving a plenary speech at the JALT2016 conference in Nagoya. After her speech, she graciously spared some time to share her thoughts with Juhi Gupta, an EFL Lecturer at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. Juhi has more than ten years of experience teaching English in Japan and is currently the co-programme chair and co-recording secretary of the Nagoya chapter. Her research interests include human resources training, instructional design and technology, and multilingualism. So without further ado, to the interview!

An Interview with Anne Burns

Juhi Gupta

Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

Juhi Gupta: *Thank you for speaking at the 2016 JALT Conference. Could you share with our readers how you became engaged in English language teaching?*

Anne Burns: I'm originally from the UK—Wales actually. Early in my career, I left to teach French at a school in Kenya. Afterwards, I moved to Mauritius and continued my language teaching career there. I learned early on that I was able to find the most interesting employment opportunities in the English language teaching field. When I emigrated to Australia, I decided to continue teaching English and take a course in TESOL. I was lucky to be able to enrol in a new one that had just started, at what is now the University of Technology, Sydney. I met some amazing colleagues and lecturers who were laying the foundations of some of the first TESOL programs to be offered, in Australia at least.

You have been extensively involved with TESOL in Australia. Would you talk about your time and role there?

I was fortunate to be around at a time when things were opening up in Australia. In the early 1980s, more adult immigrants were coming into the country. I began working with the New South Wales Adult Migrant English Service, part of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), which is funded by the Australian Government to help new arrivals settle into the country. I had the good fortune to be able to participate at that time in professional development workshops with some very illustrious names like David Nunan, Jill Burton, and Geoff Brindley, who were developing a lot of key ideas around the learner-centred communicative curriculum, such as focusing on learners' needs, negotiating the syllabus, and exploring the use of authentic teaching materials. In the early 1990s, I joined the Department of Linguistics at Macquarie University, which was headed by Professor Christopher Candlin. Macquarie University housed the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR); a key research centre for the AMEP funded by the Australian government. As researchers and teacher educators at NCELTR, we worked with AMEP teachers across the country, researching English language education for immigrants and refugees, offering workshops and forums, and publishing work conducted by the centre.

The AMEP seems to be a unique program. How did it benefit your development as a researcher and teacher?

The program was special in many ways. It provided a wide range of courses which could be accessed by immigrants for a whole range of reasons—for example, initial settlement into the country, employment-seeking, future study, citizenship preparation, and general English development for participating in the community. Because we had to work with teachers from across the country, and there was already a strong Australian tradition of adult ESL at AMEP with researchers working in collaboration with teachers, that got me involved in action research. Our work at NCELTR needed to focus on basic and applied academic research, but also on research that would take into account the immediate interests and concerns of AMEP teachers. It was very exciting to bring those two things together and involve teachers directly in our university's research program. I was also able to include what I learned from working directly with teachers who were doing action research into my teaching in the masters and doctoral programs that we developed at Macquarie University.

Action research has been a huge part of your work. During your talk, you gave some very useful advice to teachers. What would you like our readers to know about action research in language teaching?

Going into the history of action research, a major early influence was Kurt Lewin whose work goes back to the 1940s; he studied group dynamics and looked at how people navigated issues and problems that they needed to address in their daily social environment. He promoted the concept of action being interrelated with research that people themselves can do in order to improve their social situation. He saw this as an approach where people focused on themselves, their colleagues, and their own context in order to create "a better world" for themselves. A lot of different terms like practitioner research, participatory research, or exploratory practice are used to describe the overall process, but they all mean approximately the same thing. People can start with a very general kind of desire to investigate or understand something a bit more closely, or they might have a more specific goal in mind. What you find out as a result of this kind of research can then be used, if we are referring to an educational context, in a school, classroom, or lesson. It's really valuable, too if the research is publicised, disseminated through presentations or publications. It's great when other practitioners can find out about this kind of practical research as it might relate to their own situations, too or suggest ways they could research their personal teaching issues.

My own view of action research is that we need more of it to democratise the field. A lot of research in education is done by academics who may never go into classrooms or schools. I have spent the last 25 years arguing that we need more research by teachers because teachers are the ones who are in the classroom every day, and they can contribute a lot of local knowledge and construct their own theories about practice which can complement the "grand theories" in the field. In this way, the application of theories of second language acquisition, curriculum development, methodology, and assessment can be tested out through teachers' research. That's why I think action research is important and should be published more. Fortunately, the situation is beginning to change and there are more avenues now to get action research published. Several journals such as *Language Teaching Research*, *TESOL Journal*, *English Australia Journal*, and *Profile* have been welcoming action research by language teaching practitioners.

Many ESL teachers in Japan, especially at universities, may not receive a lot of encouragement to do action research. Could you say a few words to help our readers get started on their journey?

Action research begins with an issue, a dilemma, a puzzle, or a hunch related to your teaching situation that you would like to investigate so that you get to understand things better. Sometimes in the literature on action research, references are made to "problems," but actually, I prefer the word "problematize" when we are talking about action research. It's not about a simple "problem-solution" kind of process; it's more about taking a critical and reflective perspective on your practice and using processes of research to expand your knowledge and understanding. Action research is to do with having a curiosity about your work. It can be something that you want to improve or something you want to reaffirm about your teaching. Also, in my experience, if you are able to research something of interest to you collaboratively with your colleagues, that takes things much further. A group of people all interested in the same kinds of teaching or learning issues can look at them collectively, but also can see things from different perspectives—you can engage in dialogue about things that are important to you and this seems to be a very positive way of doing action research for most teachers I've worked with. More and more in the TESOL profession, we want to see teachers who are not just knowledge-

able about theory or who operate at a mechanical daily routine level, but who are thoughtful, reflective practitioners who want to explore their own teaching practices.

Recently you've been involved in an action research program with English Australia and Cambridge English. Could you tell us more about that?

This is a program called the Action Research in ELICOS Program, which has been operating through English Australia since 2010 and is supported by Cambridge English. In Australia, the sector known as English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) provides programs for international students who come to the country. Most ELICOS teachers teach students from a variety of language backgrounds who might also have very diverse goals such as preparing to enter undergraduate or postgraduate university programs in Australia, taking IELTS examinations, and developing their general English.

I was asked to facilitate the action research program. Each year we encourage ELICOS teachers from across the country to submit a brief "expressions of interest" to research an issue they see as important to their classroom. We usually have a specific theme so that the teachers who participate can collaborate on a common topic and share their ideas. This year, the theme is teaching, learning, and assessing listening. Every year, I work with a group of about twelve teachers from different parts of the country. Three workshops are held across each year to introduce participants to the concepts of action research and have them share ideas with each other about how they are going with their research. The teachers develop their plans, try things in their own classrooms, collect data on what is happening, and come back to the next workshop to discuss their research and think about ways to proceed or to analyse their data. At the end of the year, they make presentations about their research at the annual English Australia Conference, where other ELICOS teachers and managers can listen to their research stories.

To give you just one example, one of the participants who was teaching a general English class to upper-intermediate students wanted to focus mainly on improving students' pronunciation because he felt it was neglected in a lot of classrooms. He discovered that his students had never had any formal pronunciation instruction in their countries of origin, so he asked them to do a needs analysis to see if they were aware of their own problems. They reflected on both segmental areas like word stress and suprasegmental features like intonation patterns. He also played recordings of native and non-native speakers using English and he asked the students to identify who was more comprehensible. Interestingly, the students indicated that they could understand the non-native speakers more easily. This was quite eye-opening for the students who realised that they didn't have to sound like native speakers and that even when people have a variety of accents they can still be comprehensible. They concluded that "nativeness" wasn't a prerequisite for comprehensibility. The teacher pointed the students to a variety of different kinds of activities that could help them with their own personal pronunciation issues, which greatly increased the students' confidence, and their ability to speak clearly improved noticeably. It was a very positive experience for both the teacher and the students.

What resources would you recommend to our readers for action research and professional development?

One great resource is the Cambridge English journal *Research Notes*, which can be easily downloaded from http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/research-notes/. Readers can go to the various issues where the research done by ELICOS teachers is published. I should add that the Action Research in ELICOS Program has now been replicated by English UK and Cambridge English so you can see the reports from that scheme, too. I'd also recommend the publications listed on the IATEFL Research SIG site at <http://resig.weebly.com>. These provide more examples of different types of practitioner research. There's also a video I recorded some time ago for TESOL Academic available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4kLZLhxWzk>. During my time here in Japan, I've done an interview for TEFLology, which readers can listen to at <https://teflology-podcast.com>. Finally, I will mention that my book, *Doing action research in English language teaching* (Routledge, 2010), seems to have helped a lot of teachers get started on action research.

Thank you for the opportunity to do this interview.

Further Reading

Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burns, A. (2010). *Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners*. New York: Routledge.

Burns, A., & Burton, J. (2008). *Language teacher research in Australia and New Zealand*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL Inc.