ARTICLE

Action research through the lens of the ‘rendang’ analogy

Mohd Syafiq Aiman Mat Noor,1* Satirah Ahmad2 & Zailah Zainudin3

1School of Education, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, United Kingdom
2Jabatan Bahasa, Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Sultan Abdul Halim, Kedah, Malaysia
3Malaysian Action Research Network, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 July 2023
Accepted 3 August 2023
Published 3 September 2023

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR
School of Education, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS29JT United Kingdom
s.matnoor@leeds.ac.uk

KEYWORDS
Analogy; contextuality; continuity; quality; rendang

ABSTRACT
This article explores similarities between the preparation of rendang – a rich, concentrated curry that’s sweet, spicy, and savoury – and the practice of action research, with a focus on examples of action research studies conducted by Malaysian academics. Drawing upon our personal and professional experiences in the Malaysian context, we illustrate the philosophy and methodology of action research through the process of making rendang. The three central tenets observed in both domains are contextuality, continuity and quality. Through the lens of these shared attributes and culturally rich practices, our aim is to facilitate an understanding of action research among novice researchers, particularly in the Malaysian context.

Introduction

Rendang is a highly revered traditional dish of Indonesian origin, hailing from the Minangkabau region of West Sumatra (Nurufida et al., 2017). Over time, this delicacy has undergone adaptations at the hands of various Malay communities in Malaysia, making it an integral part of the culinary heritage of both countries (Nahar et al., 2018). Rendang is now enjoyed by millions of people all over the world. This dish is made by slow-cooking meat, such as beef or chicken, with a mixture of spices, herbs and coconut milk. The cooking process can take several hours, and the finished product is a rich, flavourful, and aromatic dish that is a staple of Malaysian cuisine (Zainurin, 2021).

Action research, on the other hand, is a research methodology that is often used in the field of education and the social sciences (Zuber-Skerritt & Fletcher, 2007). It involves a collaborative and cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Lewin, 1946). Action researchers work closely with stakeholders, such as communities, teachers, or pupils, to identify problems or questions, collect data, and develop solutions or action plans (Hinchey, 2008). The goal of action research is to bring about positive change and to improve practices in a specific context (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).
In this article we attempt to shed light on three key tenets that are intrinsic to both domains: contextuality, continuity and quality. Just as each rendang dish is deeply rooted in its regional influences, action research is fundamentally shaped by the cultural, social and historical context in which it is carried out. The significance of continuity and an iterative refinement process is evident in both realms, as they prioritise ongoing learning, adaptability and improvement in their pursuit of excellence. Quality, the third and final commonality, manifests in both rendang preparation and action research through an unwavering commitment to excellence and meticulous attention to detail.

The purpose of this article is to explore these similarities in greater detail and to highlight the ways in which they can help us, particularly novice researchers, to better understand both rendang and action research. While the benefits of action research are widely acknowledged (Glenn et al., 2023), novice researchers often struggle to grasp the intricacies of this methodology. By employing the analogy of rendang, we aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice, making action research more relatable and accessible to beginners. Ultimately, we hope this article will inspire more individuals to engage in action research, instilling a culture of continuous learning, innovation and inquiry in Malaysia and beyond.

**Context**

Action research has been steadily developing in Malaysia since the late 1980s, with a multitude of initiatives undertaken by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (Phaik-Lah, 1997). The third author holds the distinction of being the first individual in Malaysia to complete a PhD utilising an action research methodology (see Zainudin, 2005). The use of action research has proliferated since then, especially among those pursuing doctoral studies. Approximately 21 PhD holders in Malaysia have accomplished their academic pursuits using action research, signifying its growing acceptance and usage within the academic community.

As teacher educators, we have facilitated numerous action research workshops and programmes for Malaysian teachers. For instance, we collaborated during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic to conduct a project on pandemic pedagogy, designed to aid teachers in conducting action research under these difficult circumstances (see Mat Noor et al., 2020, 2021). Despite our various efforts, we noted a recurring challenge: action research was not easily understood by many teachers. Academic jargon and language barriers seemed to present substantial obstacles (Mohd Meerah & Osman, 2013; Othman & Chia, 2016).

To alleviate this, we devised a novel approach, using the preparation of rendang, a favourite dish in Malaysia, as an analogy to elucidate the concept of action research during our workshops. This approach was inspired by a similar study conducted by Zainurin (2021), which explored the rich intersections of gastronomy, culture and symbolism through the lens of rendang. Leveraging personal narratives and an ethnographic methodology, she unravelled the cultural significance of rendang within the Malay community. Her research not only challenged her preconceived knowledge as a Malay, Muslim and Malaysian, but also emphasised the relevance of theory in daily life. We found that our rendang analogy resonated powerfully with many teachers, probably because of the dish’s ubiquity and sentimental value among Malaysians. This gastronomic metaphor served to relate the intricate process of action research to a cherished, familiar practice, making it more relatable and easier to comprehend.

Furthermore, we also conducted a live cooking demo as part of the MARNet Conference 2021 (see the recording at https://youtu.be/6DSXV8mR8Dc). As we prepared the rendang, we discussed its parallels with action research, enabling participants to understand the methodology more deeply. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Many participants found the rendang analogy to be engaging and relatable, enabling them to grasp the intricacies of action research more effectively. The feedback we received was tremendously
encouraging and many participants found that the analogy provided them with a deeper understanding of action research (Mat Noor, 2021).

These shared experiences and successes have driven us to write this article. By describing the parallels between rendang preparation and action research, we aim to demystify complex research methodologies by presenting them through the familiar lens of cooking rendang. This approach fosters a more intuitive understanding of research processes, breaking down barriers and making the concept of action research more accessible, especially to novice researchers in Malaysia. Grounded in practice, these insights bridge the gap between theoretical discussions and practical applications, emphasising the importance of cultural and contextual adaptation in learning.

**Contextuality**

The evolution of the rendang recipe is deeply rooted in the cultural milieu in which it is prepared, reflecting the regional variations and adaptability of the cooks (Abdul Raji et al., 2017). In Malaysia, for instance, the rendang recipe takes on distinct characteristics based on regional influences (Zainurin, 2021). Notably, ‘Rendang Tok’ is a popular variant from Perak, while Negeri Sembilan boasts its fiery ‘Rendang Cili Padi’ (Md. Nor et al., 2012).

Moreover, the cooking methods employed in the preparation of rendang exhibit a wide range of diversity, showcasing the cooks’ ingenuity in adapting the recipe based on available ingredients and resources (Zainurin, 2021). For instance, some Malaysian cooks prefer stir-frying all the spices, onion, garlic, ginger and lemongrass until they become aromatic and glossy before they add the meat and coconut milk (Rajah, 2012). Others adopt a more straightforward approach, combining all ingredients in a single pot and allowing the flavours to meld and intensify through slow cooking (Stevens, 2004).

Such diversity in preparation techniques underscores how rendang’s recipe, in essence, is a reflection of its cultural context, embodying the culinary heritage of the respective regions (Rahman, 2020). It is testament to the recipe’s resilience and adaptability that it has evolved and flourished in diverse cultural landscapes across Malaysia. Similarly, action research is a deeply contextual process, with cultural and historical context playing a significant role in shaping not only the research design but also its outcomes (Koshy, 2009).

The specific methodologies and strategies employed in action research often echo the cultural norms and values of the key stakeholders involved, such as pupils, teachers, parents and the community at large (Kindon et al., 2007). This influence extends to data collection techniques, which may be shaped by regional cultural norms surrounding communication, trust and information disclosure. For instance, consider Pang et al.’s (2017) participatory action research study conducted in Malaysia, involving individuals with learning disabilities. In their work, data were gathered through observations, interviews and document analysis to better accommodate the participants. Given the study’s context, where verbal communication was favoured over written, interviews proved to be a more efficacious data collection method compared to surveys. This demonstrates the impact of cultural and contextual considerations on the selection of data collection techniques in action research.

Similarly, in action research, the way data are analysed and interpreted can also be influenced by cultural perspectives (Tekin & Kotaman, 2013). This is evident when behaviours or responses are subjected to different interpretations based on the cultural lens applied. For instance, consider the participatory action research study by Balakrishnan and Claiborne (2017), which examined secondary school pupils from both urban and rural areas in multicultural Malaysia. They discovered a broad spectrum of opinions within each cultural group, illustrating that even individuals sharing the same ethnic and religious background could possess entirely different viewpoints on various issues. Even more divergent were the perspectives of individuals belonging to different cultures, which poses a unique challenge to action research conducted in multicultural settings. Therefore, cultural context can exert a substantial influence on
research findings and the potential solutions proposed. Understanding this complexity is pivotal in ensuring that research outcomes accurately reflect multifaceted realities within multicultural environments.

Furthermore, historical context is another key factor influencing action research. The problems or issues being investigated through action research do not exist in a vacuum (McNiff, 2013). They are often the result of historical events, traditions, or policies. An illustration of this is Puteh-Behak’s (2014) study, which applied a participatory action research approach to her work with polytechnic teachers. She discovered that executing participatory action research in a hierarchical setting posed considerable challenges. The participatory action research philosophy, which strives for equality among research team members, clashed with the fundamental principle of a hierarchical society that acknowledges, accepts and regards inequality as normal. As a result, she needed to confront historical factors such as social policies and economic conditions that have played significant roles in shaping the experiences of her participants.

Therefore, understanding the cultural and historical contexts, much like understanding the nuances of rendang preparation, is vital for action researchers. This knowledge enables a more nuanced interpretation of data, leading to solutions that are not just effective but also contextually relevant, just as each rendang variation is a delightful testament to its region’s culinary heritage.

**Continuity**

In Malay culture, mothers and grandmothers are highly respected for their proficiency in the art of rendang preparation (Md. Nor et al., 2012). They embody the ethos of continuous learning and refinement. For example, rendang is a staple dish during Eidul Fitr, an annual celebration (Md. Sharif et al., 2015). Consequently, every Malay household endeavours to cook rendang each year. Those who invest time in the kitchen –like our mothers or grandmothers – continually refine their techniques, adapt their recipes and are receptive to novel ideas. They comprehend that culinary excellence arises from continual evolution and iterative enhancements and remain open to new methods in the pursuit of creating a delicious rendang.

The process of making rendang is characterised by constant experimentation, adjustment and fine-tuning. Initial attempts may not always meet expectations, but through reflective practice, these adept cooks identify shortcomings and incrementally refine their approach. Take for example the flavour profile of the dish; if the flavour of ginger is found lacking in the rendang, subsequent iterations would see an increase in the amount of this key spice (Indriani et al., 2022). Such careful modifications to the spice mix and cooking time are not viewed as burdensome chores, but rather as essential strides on the path to achieving the perfect rendang.

Furthermore, feedback plays an important role in perfecting a delectable rendang dish. Good cooks are proactive in seeking critiques and suggestions from those who sample their rendang. Every piece of constructive criticism is treated as a valuable asset, a catalyst that fuels their culinary growth. This nurturing of an ongoing cycle of feedback and improvement, akin to a virtuous circle, continuously propels their culinary evolution. Over time, the continuous iterations – each piece of feedback received, each reflection made and each adjustment implemented – result in a rendang dish that has been meticulously honed to perfection through community participation.

Just like the spirit found in the Malay kitchen, action research also encapsulates a spirit of lifelong learning (Fleming, 2011). This continuous process is committed to expanding knowledge and honing skills for more effective research conduct. Through active reflection on and critical examination of experiences and findings, valuable insights can be harnessed for future growth. For instance, this concept is well illustrated in the second authors’ study (see Ahmad, 2016), which involved two ESL teachers on a transformative journey while implementing shared reading interventions among primary school pupils. Shared reading is an interactive method whereby students all read the same text under the guidance of a teacher and
discuss it in group sessions. In this particular study, over the course of ten months, a significant evolution in the teachers’ instructional behaviours was observed. The discussions between the principal researcher and the two teachers during guided reflections were instrumental in effecting considerable shifts in their beliefs and understanding of how they conduct shared reading sessions. Such studies reinforce the potential of collaborative action research as a powerful tool for learning and development.

Much like the preparation of rendang, which thrives on iterative refinement and continuous adjustments, action research benefits significantly from an adaptive refinement of methods (Ivankova, 2015). It does not yield to despair when initial results do not align with expectations. Instead, these instances are viewed as opportunities for the re-evaluation and adjustment of methods and approaches. As exemplified in Thambu’s (2017) study, forum theatre – a type of theatre developed by Boal (1985) that seeks to raise awareness of oppression and achieve social aims – was harnessed as a teaching technique within a moral education framework, orchestrated over three cycles. Each cycle encompassed the enactment of a scripted conflict, followed by group discussions to formulate alternative solutions. Upon the completion of each cycle, the gathered data were analysed to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the forum theatre approach in enhancing moral understanding. These insights paved the way for improvements, which were integrated into the following cycles. Ultimately, the study aimed to amplify the efficacy of teaching methodologies, enrich learning experiences and foster moral development through a process that was iterative, reflective and participatory in nature.

Feedback, an integral part of the culinary process, holds similar importance in action research. The input received is highly regarded, and feedback from a variety of stakeholders, including practitioners in the field, policymakers and community members, is actively solicited (Stokols, 2006). This effort deepens the understanding of the research context and enhances the relevance and impact of the work. For instance, the third author’s study exemplified this concept (see Zainudin, 2005). It centred around non-specialist physics teachers in Malaysia and how their teaching methods could benefit from the hands-on assistance of experienced Physics teachers. In the study, feedback played a crucial role. It was collected using a variety of methods and analysed using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The insights gained from this process informed subsequent adjustments and enhancements, improving the teaching methods and, by extension, the learning experience. This iterative feedback loop, similar to that used in rendang preparation, illustrates the power of feedback in driving continuous refinement and improving outcomes in action research.

In short, the preparation of rendang and the process of action research both embrace the journey of learning as an ongoing quest. Whether it is unearthing a unique spice blend for rendang or developing a groundbreaking research methodology, they acknowledge the boundless potential for new discoveries. Remaining engaged in reflective practice and staying receptive, they regard each challenge as a stepping stone towards learning and growth. In both fields, it is not just about the destination; the journey itself, filled with endless exploration and continuous improvement, holds profound value.

**Quality**

Rendang’s creation journey is a symphony of components working in harmony. It sees various elements fusing to culminate in a singular, mouth-watering dish. Typically, it is not an individual task; the process comes to life during communal events such as Eidul Fitri or Malay weddings. As families and friends gather to prepare and enjoy rendang, they share in the labour and the feast, fostering a sense of togetherness (Perry, 2017). The dish demonstrates how collaboration can amplify the goodness of things. This shared endeavour goes beyond the confines of the kitchen, imparting valuable life lessons about teamwork and unity.

The art of making rendang surpasses ordinary culinary practices – it is a testament to the commitment to create something extraordinary. It
Involves an intricate process of choosing spices, blending ingredients and slow cooking, all of which require patience, care and an eye for detail (Stevens, 2004). This painstaking attention to quality is what sets rendang apart. It is not solely about the end product, but the journey it takes to reach the goal, instilling lessons of meticulousness, continuous refinement and patience (Rajah, 2012). These virtues extrapolate beyond the kitchen, seeping into various facets of life, underscoring the importance of quality in all we do.

The impact of rendang is felt far beyond the dinner table. It is a dish known and loved all over the world. But it is not just about the taste. Rendang shows the value of hard work, attention to detail and never-ending refinement. These lessons can inspire people everywhere. It is not just a dish, it is a story of how working together, taking time and paying attention to detail can lead to great results (Zainurin, 2021).

Similarly, action research is deeply rooted in collaboration. It requires the collective efforts of various stakeholders, actively involving them at every step of the journey—from gathering data to formulating solutions and implementing changes (Mat Noor & Shafee, 2021). This participatory approach encourages an interactive and hands-on process, where all participants are not mere observers but active contributors to the progression of the research. To illustrate this, take Yoon and Gruba’s (2019) study on constructive alignment in blended language programmes as an example. In the study, the researchers did not stand on the side-lines; instead, they immersed themselves in the academic terrain, aligning with university lecturers at all implementation stages of the programme. This alliance did not just give the researchers a wealth of insightful data; it also created a co-understanding platform, leading to lasting and significant modifications, marking stages from initial proposal to eventual adoption—a perfect example of action research’s iterative nature. Moreover, varying user attitudes towards the new system in the study showcased the need for continuous refinement, thus reinforcing the unending cycle of learning embedded in action research. Just as carefully chosen and prepared ingredients result in a rendang dish, action research necessitates meticulous attention to detail, thoughtful planning and patience.

Action research, far from being merely an academic exercise, boasts profound real-world implications (Reason & Bradbury, 2015). It is not solely about knowledge acquisition, but rather, about applying that knowledge to instigate genuine and positive change (McNiff, 2013). Its relevance extends beyond the immediate participants, wielding the potential to influence larger communities and sectors, emphasising its far-reaching utility and impact. A prime exemplification of this comes from the first author’s study (see Mat Noor, 2022). Undertaking the dual role of a ‘teacher-researcher’, he simultaneously explored pedagogical theories and honed these practices within his classroom. This unique vantage point permitted him a direct line of sight into the practical implications of his methodologies, resulting in tangible enhancements to his pupils’ learning experiences. The inquiry teaching strategies that he formulated, seamlessly integrated into the Malaysian primary science curriculum, moved beyond theoretical constructs into tangible pedagogical tools. His experience serves as a compelling testament to the potency of...
action research, demonstrating its capability to develop pragmatic solutions to intricate, real-life challenges.

In essence, the process of preparing rendang reflects the collaborative, iterative and impactful nature of action research. Both practices emphasise the value of cooperation, meticulous attention to quality and constant betterment, principles that ultimately lead to far-reaching, tangible outcomes. The correlation between rendang and action research offers a compelling understanding of how collaboration, continuous improvement and potential for widespread impact are essential elements in the creation of both a delicious dish and influential research.

Conclusion

In this article, we have attempted to juxtapose action research philosophies and methodologies and the preparation of cooking rendang, an iconic Malaysian dish known for its cultural richness, complex process and unparalleled quality. Over the years, we have provided professional development workshops and programmes aimed at acquainting Malaysian educators with the principles of action research. These experiences have offered us a profound understanding of the various nuances, challenges and rewards associated with this unique research philosophy and methodology. The decision to interweave action research philosophies and methodologies with rendang creation was not arbitrary. It was an inspired attempt to shed light on three key tenets that are intrinsic to both domains: contextuality, continuity and quality.

Contextuality is showcased in rendang’s regional variations, reflecting how action research adapts to cultural and historical contexts (Johnsen & Normann, 2004). Continuity is embodied in the iterative refinement of rendang recipes and action research methodologies, both of which harness feedback to enable improvement (Coghlan, 2019). Quality is emphasised in the communal preparation of rendang and the collaborative, meticulous approach of action research, underscoring the shared commitment to real-world impact and positive change (McNiff, 2013). This comparative analysis between rendang and action research illuminates how regional traditions can serve as a metaphor for academic and professional pursuits, providing unique insights into the latter’s principles and practices.

To conclude, action research is a context-driven methodology that is designed to adapt to the cultural, social and historical contexts in which it is conducted. This allows the research to produce outcomes that are not only effective but also relevant to the specific region (Coghlan, 2019). This iterative process involves constant refinement, active reflection, embracing feedback, and adjustment based on learning, much like fine-tuning a recipe (Lewin, 1946). It values active participation from all stakeholders, fostering collaboration and unity in the pursuit of knowledge and solutions (Reason & Bradbury, 2015). The commitment to quality, rigorous planning and execution is paramount in ensuring the research’s validity and reliability (Herr & Anderson, 2015). More than a mere academic exercise, action research is a journey of continuous improvement and exploration, with its real-world impacts extending beyond the immediate participants to influence larger communities and sectors (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). It underlines the importance of the research journey, viewing each step as crucial in contributing to the overall quality and effectiveness of the research (Schön, 1992).

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Dr Fariza Puteh-Behak for her valuable feedback, which further strengthened this article.

ORCID

Mohd Syafiq Aiman Mat Noor
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4123-7357

Satirah Ahmad
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0462-7050

Zailah Zainudin
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5118-606X
References


