



CONDUCTING ACTION RESEARCH IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Foreign language teachers develop insights into their students' learning from observing their behavior. Reflective teachers analyze the students' behaviors, identify potential problems, modify their teaching practices, and evaluate the results. Some ideas succeed; others fail—sometimes surprisingly. This process is called action research.

Action research is classroom-based research conducted by teachers in order to reflect upon and evolve their teaching. It is a systematic, documented inquiry into one aspect of teaching and learning in a specific classroom. The purpose of teacher research is to gain understanding of teaching and learning within one's classroom and to use that knowledge to increase teaching efficacy/student learning. Reflective teachers do this every day, only not as carefully and systematically. With training and support, you can learn how to systematize your inquiry from informal reflection and teacher story sharing to formal research.

The following paragraphs give an overview of the process of teacher research. The first step is choosing a research question: it should be specific, answerable, and lead to significant information on an aspect of teaching or learning. Reflective teachers generally have questions in their minds about what they observe in the classroom; this can be a good place to start. If you don't have a question in mind, keeping a teaching journal of observations and questions can provide potential questions. As you choose a question, be sure that it is not too general or too big to be answered given your resources.

The second step is deciding what information you need in order to answer your question and how it can be collected. Data can be collected in a number of ways: by keeping a teacher journal of observations, conducting student interviews, giving out questionnaires, and testing. An instrument may already be available to collect the information; for example, if you wish to assess oral proficiency, the SOPI is a proven assessment tool. However, you may need to develop your own instrument, for example, a questionnaire specific to your classroom practices.

Third, the data must be analyzed. Organized narrative data is perfectly valid in research. Basic statistical calculations are easily mastered and applied. For example, if your research involves investigating differences between male and female students, simple statistical and narrative comparisons can be made.

The next step is to organize and write up the research and results. This can be done informally, for your own information and perhaps to share with colleagues, or more formally, to be shared and disseminated to a wider audience in articles or presentations.

The final step is for the teacher to incorporate the results of the research into classroom practice. Your research will give you a basis for deciding to retain successful instructional practices, modify those that are less successful, or introduce new practices to address problem areas.

Interactive Process Framework: Forming a Research Question for a Teacher Research

Directions: This is a model for the process of defining your research question as the first stage of your teacher research. We are also offering a scenario of this entire process.

Choosing a Topic Area:

What are your interests? What problem would you like to address?

Teacher research begins with an area of interest. It can be broad, but you shouldn't have more than one.

Why? This is the first step of teacher research.

How? Think about something that you have been wondering about in your classroom.

Why are some of the lessons more successful than others?

- Why do some of the students seem to master information much faster?
- Is my knowledge of multiple intelligences being transferred to my classroom instruction?

Then pick the topic of the question that interests you most.

Examples: learning strategies, portfolio assessment or computer technology in the classroom.

Developing a List of Questions Related to the Topic:

What are some questions you have on this topic?

If you have a topic/problem you would like to address, but you are not quite sure what aspect to investigate, coming up with a list of questions is the next step.

Why? In order to help narrow your topic/problem statement to a research question.

How? Keep a journal. (see *Keeping a Research Journal*, p. 5)

Determining Resources: Do I have the resources I need?

This is another phase in defining and refining your research question.

Why? Each teacher research is bound by resource; these need to be taken into account before settling on a research topic. Before you choose a research question, be sure you will be able to answer it. Do you have the resources to do so? Does your school have the necessary equipment for data collection? Are there instruments to measure what your research calls for? If not, are you prepared to develop instruments?

How? Check your physical resources, such as audio/video equipment. Do some reading in the current literature if the data collection instruments are available. Ask relevant people in your school. Exchange ideas with a colleague (one of them might want to collaborate with you, a very powerful form of teacher research).

Examples: Can I collect enough data? Is there a way to measure proficiency that is relevant to my study? How much time, realistically, do I have to spend on this research?

Note: Determining methods of data collection and analysis follows the formation of the research question. Investigating these methods may lead you to re-evaluate the issue of resource availability. For example, if there is no reliable instrument to measure a variable in your study, you need to decide whether you can develop such an instrument or whether you will need to form a different question which does not involve that variable.

Defining Terms and Specifying Variables: What do you mean? What exactly are you researching?

Defining Terms: There are often different definitions used for one term in the education field. For example, what exactly do you mean by “collaborative learning”? What does “authentic assessment” mean in your study?

Why? You need to do this so that you and everyone who is involved in and/or is informed by your research knows exactly what you are researching.

How? Reflect on what you really want to know. Consult current literature, textbooks or education/linguistics dictionaries which define operational and theoretical definitions. When you discuss your research, you will need to make your definition explicit.

Specifying Variables: This means that you will break down the general category into its individual components. For example, if your general area of interest is learning strategies, you will need to identify the individual strategies, such as previewing and inferencing.

Why? The researcher needs to choose a limited number of variables in order to focus and conduct research.

How? Consult current literature on the topic, brainstorm with colleagues, refer to your journal.

Choosing One Question to Answer: Which one... Which one?

The last step in determining your research question.

Why? So that your energy and effort will be focused, as is necessary in doing any kind of research.

How? Reflect on your journal, brainstorm with other teachers, get one a World Wide Web list serve and put out some questions. Take into account all the information that you have learned in this process. Above all, choose the question that excites you most; your research will benefit from this enthusiasm and you will find the whole process invigorating.

Please note: This is not a linear process. You can, at any point, start this process again or revisit any of the steps. In fact, this is almost expected in the research process.

Sample Questions:

Following are good examples of teacher research that are feasible or answerable and those that are neither. A “good” question can be defined as a question that a teacher want and is able to answer. It is neither too broad, nor too narrow. The variables can be measured either with a standard instrument or with a reliable, self-made instrument. A “bad” research question has none of these qualities, but it can be converted into a “good” question by going through the process described above.

- Why are my students lazy?

Bad question. Laziness is a broad, subjective and unmeasurable quality. This line of questioning will not lead to a positive change in the classroom.

- Why don't my students do their homework?

Still not a good question. Too broad.

- Which of my homework assignments generate the highest number of returns?

Better. This can be measured. But of what use would this information be to the teacher?

- Why are some of my homework assignments returned and some not?

Much better. This question can be answered by putting homework in categories, recording data on highest and lowest number of returns, and then using student questionnaires and interviews to obtain reasons for returns/no returns. Still, there isn't a real point to the research. Teacher research is supposed to be done to stimulate teacher change.

- How can I increase the amount of out-of-school learning and studying that my students do in French?

- What barriers come between students and the completion and return of their homework?

Both of these questions are good. They can be answered and can lead to teacher/instructional change.

Scenario #1

Bruce is a French teacher in an elementary immersion program. His classroom is student-centered; he uses the whole-language teaching method. One of his concerns is ensuring that all students talk (in French) during class activities. He has noticed that some students do not, and has tried to mentally keep track of these students and spent some time trying to figure out reasons and solutions, but isn't satisfied with this approach. Teacher research appeals to him as a way to investigate this issue.

First, Bruce narrows his topic by brainstorming some questions related to the topic: What kind of classroom activities? How much talking is he aiming for? Does he want to look at boys vs. girls? Morning vs. afternoon variations in participation? Participation in different kinds of activities? Look at some students who participate a lot to find their characteristics and see if the non-talkers have these characteristics? What makes kids talk? He also wonders about how he wants to define oral participation, how he can measure it, and how he can decide what "enough" and "not enough" participation are.

In order to pick one question that he can answer, Bruce decides to keep a journal. He will try to gather general impressions of oral participation throughout the day and also to focus on particular students and on specific activities. He will also do some reading on oral participation in foreign language and general classes and to try to find ways to measure participation.

After keeping a journal for some time, Bruce re-reads what he has written. He has kept his journal on disk, trying to make entries every day. As he thinks about this topic, what he has observed and written, he decides that he wants to look at students' oral participation in small groups and keep data on two of the groups in order to investigate patterns of male and female student-student second language interaction. Bruce hopes then to investigate whether there are gender differences in the quantity and type of interactions. He decides to use an audio cassette recorder on the tables at which each of the groups sit and, based on the data, interview the two students who talk the most and the least. He also considers using student self-assessment to learn students' feelings about participating orally in small group activities.

KEEPING A RESEARCH JOURNAL

Research Journal Purposes: Why should I keep a journal?

- To improve observation skills
- To help focus observation
- To provide a record of observations, to yield research questions and further information on the research topic, or to focus research questions

Journal Contents: What goes into a research journal?

- Classroom observations/notes
- Brainstorming sessions
- Notes from current literature
- Results of ERIC and other searches on databases (print outs or notes)
- Information from the World Wide Web

Journal Keeping Procedures: How do I keep a research journal?

- Focus on areas that interest you: activities, interactions
- Focus on one student all day or at one activity
- Take notes either during or right after class
- Write down the results of brainstorming with colleagues and information from current literature
- Do a database search or a Web search on your topic
- Reread and reflect upon your journal; make notes or assess reflective journal entries
- Date all your observations and notes
- Keep a photocopy of your journal (photocopy or disk back-up)

Means of keeping a journal: How do I record my observations?

- Computer and disk
- Pen(cil) and paper; wire-bound notebook or three-ring binder
- Audio cassette recorder and tape

Time: How much do I need?

- We suggest that you add to your journal at least twice per week, spending approximately one hour per session. If you are recording classroom observations, doing this right after or during class is useful in that the observations are fresh in your mind and that this time is just tacked on to the teaching hour, so it doesn't need to be found later.

End Product: What do I do with my journal?

- After going through the process, it should be possible to write a summary of the journal and form a research question.

Action Research: Data Collection Sample Research Instruments

Different instruments gather different types of information. The following instruments are designed to collect data on students' strategies use. How do they differ in information collected?

SAMPLE INSTRUMENT #1: CLOSED QUESTIONNAIRE MULTIPLE CHOICE

Student directions: Indicate how often you do the following when reading in a foreign language:

1. Before you read do you think about what it will be about?
Almost Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Almost Always
2. While you read, do you imagine pictures in your head or imagine you are part of the story?
Almost Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Almost Always
3. When you read a word you don't know, do you try to figure out its meaning by looking at the rest of the story?
Almost Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Almost Always
4. After you read, do you think about how well you understood it?
Almost Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Almost Always

SAMPLE INSTRUMENT #2: CLOSED QUESTIONNAIRE: RANKING

Student directions: Put the following learning techniques in order with 1 being the technique you use the most often and 4 being the technique you use the least.

- _____ Reading with a dictionary
- _____ Writing down key words when reading
- _____ Imagining pictures in your mind when reading
- _____ Guessing the meaning of new words when reading

SAMPLE INSTRUMENT #3: OPEN QUESTIONNAIRE

Student Directions: Answer the questions about what you do to help yourself read in *language*.

1. What do you do before you start to read in *language*?
2. What do you do while you are reading in *language*?
3. What do you do if you don't understand something when reading?
4. What do you do after you finish reading in *language*?

SAMPLE INSTRUMENT #4: GROUP INTERVIEWS

Student Directions: In groups of 3-5 students discuss the following questions. Responses may be tape recorded, video taped, or summarized in writing by a note taker.

Reading:

1. What strategies do you use most when you're reading *language*?
What do you do to understand?
What do you do if you don't understand or it doesn't make sense?
2. Why do you use _____ (*the technique*)?
3. How does it help you learn?

SAMPLE INSTRUMENT #5: INDIVIDUAL THINK ALOUD INTERVIEWS

Teacher Directions: Give student a reading task in the target language. As student reads, ask him to think aloud/tell you his thoughts about reading. Tape the interview. Use the following prompts to help the student think aloud:

- *What are you thinking about? What's going through your mind?*
- *Can you tell me more?*
- *What are you looking at? Why?*
- *How did you figure that out?*
- *How does that help?*
- *Is there anything else you'd like to add about what was going through your mind?*

SAMPLE INSTRUMENT #6: LEARNING LOGS

Student Directions: Keep a weekly record of your language learning tasks and strategies.

Date	Language Task	Strategy (ies) you used	Effectiveness of the strategy (ies)—Did it help? Would you use it again? When?

SAMPLE INSTRUMENT #7: OBSERVATIONS

Teacher Directions: Use the observation form to take notes on students' strategic behaviors.

Date:	Time began:	Time ended:	Number of students present:
Description of Activity:	Strategies observed:		Additional Notes:

Teacher as Researcher Bibliography

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