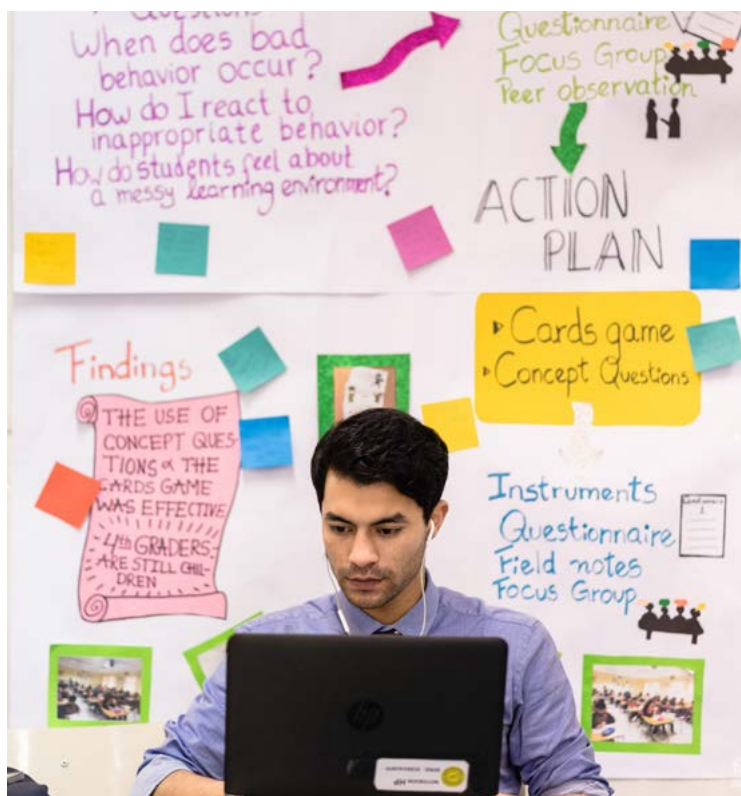


A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research

Richard Smith and Paula Rebolledo



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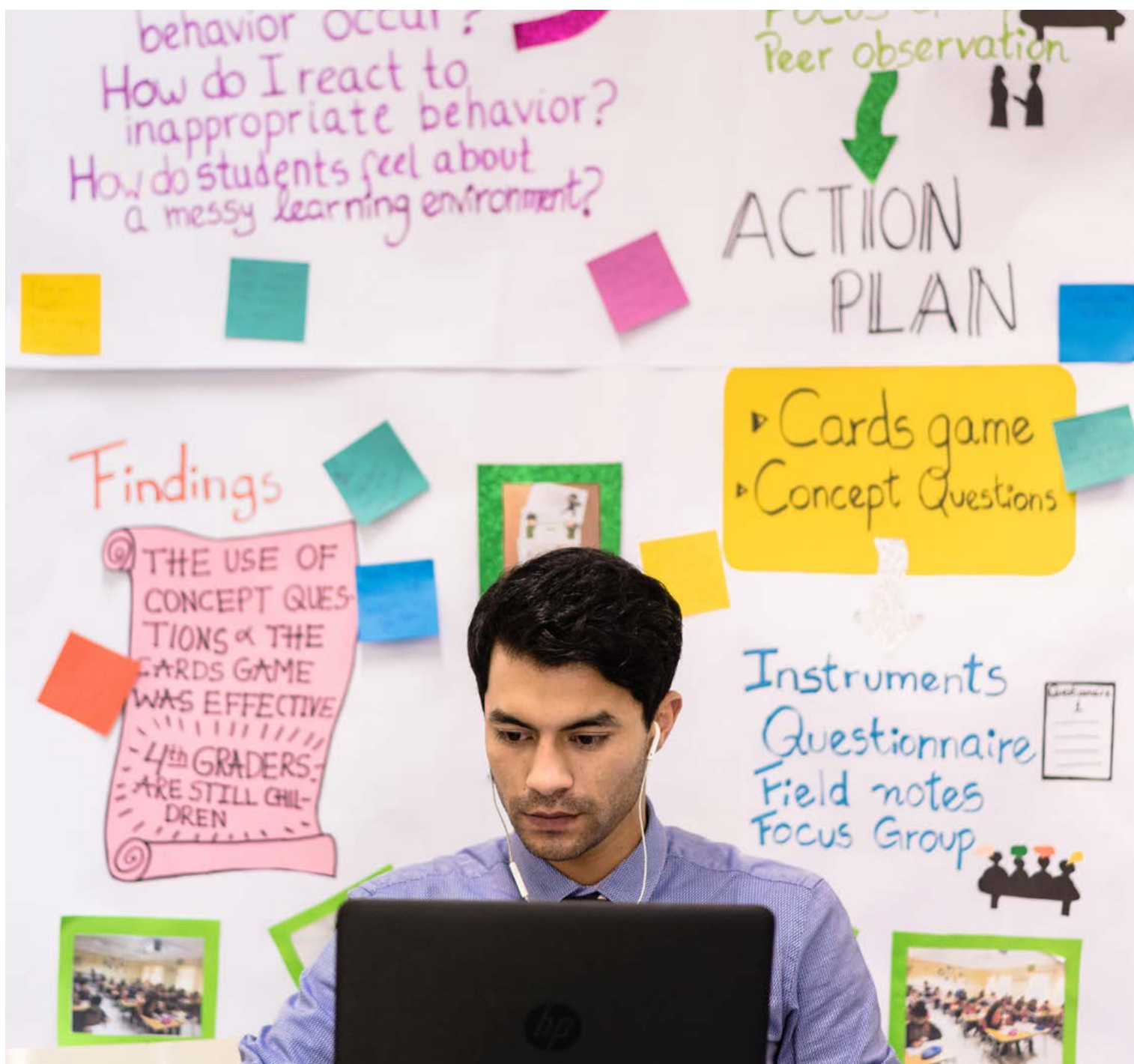
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Introduction

This is a practical handbook, written in a non-academic, teacher-friendly style, to show teachers how they can engage in practitioner research for continuing professional development and for the benefit of their students.

The book is unique in the literature on teacher-research in ELT in being particularly targeted at secondary and primary school teachers working in relatively difficult circumstances.



Difficult circumstances and Exploratory Action Research

Teacher-research has long been considered a desirable form of professional development, and we will go over some of the arguments for this in Chapters One and Two of this book. However, one thing teachers often wonder is: ‘How can I as a teacher find time to do research when I don’t even have time to cope with all the normal demands in my classroom?’.

The kind of practitioner research we are presenting in this book – Exploratory Action Research – has been developed with and for secondary school teachers in classes of up to 40 students, where teachers are teaching up to 40 lessons a week. The original context for this was a project with teachers in Chilean secondary schools (the ‘Champion Teachers’ project – more below). We have strongly in mind the difficulties faced by teachers in such circumstances. In fact, based on teachers’ actual experiences in the projects we’ve been involved with (in Peru, India and Nepal as well as Chile), a major point we want to make is this: Exploratory Action Research can in itself be *an effective way to address and cope with difficult circumstances* (heavy teaching loads, large classes, a lack of material resources, and so on) since it enables teachers to gain a better understanding of their classroom contexts and so develop more appropriate ways of teaching, without waiting for solutions from outside.

We stress in this book, then, that a particular way of doing teacher-research – Exploratory Action Research – is desirable as well as feasible in relatively difficult circumstances.

Teachers often report feeling rather like an octopus in such situations, needing to deal with the many things that are going on at the same time, under continual stress and with continual pressures to act quickly to solve problems. When something is not working, a quite normal response is to try out different solutions until you find one that works. But when problems are multiplied there comes a point where it just isn’t possible to address all the problems you’re facing. What to do in such circumstances? Our main suggestion is to step back from the situation and take a good careful look at the nature of the problem rather than jumping in with a possible solution that hasn’t been thought about enough and may, then, be inappropriate.

So, what we recommend here is *not* adding to your existing burden with extra actions but instead taking a step back, creating a space for reflection and exploration in order to understand a situation better *before* taking action.

In short, in this book we provide an introduction to action research while emphasising that before the ‘action’ that ‘action research’ implies, there is a need for a careful *exploratory* phase. Accordingly, a large part of the book takes you step by step through the careful exploration of a situation, only later coming to the ‘action’ phase which is normally associated with action research.

The Chilean Champion Teachers project – and other contexts

‘Exploratory Action Research’, the approach presented in this book, was originally developed in the context of a joint British Council–Ministry of Education project in Chile which is currently in its fifth year.¹

This programme is innovative in being directed specially at secondary school teachers in a public education system. The ideas developed in the context of this programme have also already shown their worth in India and Nepal (in the context of projects run by the All India Network of English Teachers (AINET), the British Council Aptis Action Research Award Schemes (AARMS) in both India and Nepal, and Gauhati University, Assam. They have also been incorporated into a TESOL CALL Interest Section Electronic Village Online (2017 and 2018) and are being spread via a Champion Teachers programme organised by the British Council in Peru (2017–18).

The Ministry of Education in Chile is planning to distribute this book to secondary teachers in Chile, recommending its use within teacher ‘networks’ (teacher self-help groups). The book will also be promoted (by the Ministry of Education and the British Council in Chile) for use in pre-service teacher education programmes, and will also serve as a suitable introduction to more academic research approaches.

While particularly situated in and appropriate to Chilean experience, and using concrete examples from the Champion Teachers project, we hope the book will appeal also to a worldwide readership of teachers and teacher educators in comparable circumstances.

¹ For more information on the Champion Teachers programme and the development of the Exploratory Action Research approach, see ‘Teacher-research as CPD: A project with Chilean secondary school teachers’ by Richard Smith, Tom Connelly and Paula Rebollo (2014), in *Innovations in the Continuing Professional Development of English Language Teachers* (edited by David Hayes for the British Council); also, ‘Exploratory action research: why, what, and where from?’ by Richard Smith (2015), in *Teacher-researchers in Action* (edited by Kenan Dikilitas, Richard Smith and Wayne Trotman for IATEFL Research SIG).

Style of presentation

The book is targeted in particular at secondary and primary teachers (for whom few such books have been previously produced) and is written in a jargon-free, non-academic style, with many concrete examples.

We have deliberately tried to make this book different from previous treatments of teacher-research in the field of ELT, aiming for as non-academic an approach as possible to reflect the idea that teacher-research is *by* teachers and *for* teachers and their students, not needing to adhere to relatively dry or 'academic' norms of presentation or to standards of rigour which are imposed from outside.

As far as possible, then, rather than prescribing particular activities in the abstract or moving from theory to practice, we proceed from example to recommendation. The examples are real, not invented ones, and they come from teachers in relatively difficult circumstances, not in well-resourced or otherwise privileged contexts. Thus, we refer throughout to cases from the Champion Teachers project, in particular those represented in the companion *Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* book,¹ which readers are encouraged to read to gain further understanding. Instructions and examples are accompanied by practical tasks, with answers to most of these being provided in an Answer Key at the back of the book.

We wanted the book to be visually appealing (well-designed, and including illustrations and photographs) in order to enhance its accessibility, given that the idea of carrying out 'research' can be off-putting to teachers, who may feel that it is not 'for' them.

How to use this book

The book has been written to be used by teachers working on their own; in self-sustaining groups of teachers or mentee groups; within teacher associations supporting teacher-research; or in pre-service or in-service teacher education programmes. The only assumption is that readers have some current classroom contact with students, since tasks will require reflection on current teaching experience.

Ideally, you will find someone else to interact with about the contents and to answer tasks together with. If not, try to engage with the book actively and carry out tasks in your mind, checking answers in the back of the book whenever you see the '@' symbol.

Although the book does not constitute a full introduction to 'Research Methods', our own experience with pre-service as well as in-service teachers has shown us that engaging in Exploratory Action Research represents a good, practical first step towards more academic research methods training and research engagement. This, of course, is not the major aim of the book, which is to introduce teachers to the personal and professional benefits of researching their own classrooms, and to show how this can be feasible as well as useful, even for teachers in very difficult circumstances.

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the following people, at different times, in making this *Handbook* a reality: Katherine Hutter, Deborah Sepulveda and Isabel González (British Council Chile); Andrew Chadwick and Tom Connelly (both, formerly British Council Chile); John Knagg (British Council, UK); personnel of the English Opens Doors programme, Ministry of Education, Chile; mentors and mentees in the Chilean Champion Teachers programme past and present, including Claudia Bustos, Lorena Muñoz, Leyla Nuñez, Daniela Gajardo, Camila Villalobos, Javier Avalos, Mauro Saéz, Teresa Ríos, Esteban López and Andrea Robles. We also thank Teresa Perčić, Carolina Cid, Gemma Maldonado and Jeannie Fernández for allowing us to use their stories / materials. Finally, a special word of thanks to Jason Anderson for his work as content editor for the book and, beyond that, for his concrete, creative suggestions for content in several places.

¹ Edited by Paula Rebolledo, Richard Smith and Deborah Bullock (2016). London: British Council. Online: <http://bit.ly/champion-teachers>

Start here!

You may like to try out this self-diagnosis exercise before we begin. It gives an overview of the different kinds of skill and ability ('competency') we hope you will have developed by the end of the book. The exercise is repeated again at the end of the book to help you see what you've learned.

Explanation

The main purpose of the form on the next page is to help you identify existing strengths, and identify areas where you would particularly value professional development and support. The diagnostic tool is based around fifteen 'Exploratory Action Research Competencies'.

Each competency has five levels and you need to decide for each competency which level you are currently working at. It is expected that you will have a range of competencies at different levels, but at the start you may not have many (or any) above Level 0.

Exploratory Action Research Competencies
A. I can reflect on and analyse my practice
B. I know how to improve my teaching
C. I can identify what is good about my teaching
D. I can see what problems are occurring in my classroom
E. I can identify a focus for research into my classroom
F. I can consider how to turn successes, problems and other issues into research questions
G. I can identify appropriate sources of evidence for research questions
H. I can decide how to gather information to answer my questions
I. I can collect evidence to answer research questions
J. I can analyse evidence collected
K. I can incorporate my students' suggestions and/or opinions into my teaching
L. I can design an action plan based on exploration of my teaching
M. I can put an action plan into practice based on exploration of my teaching
N. I can evaluate the results of an action plan
O. I know how to communicate/present research findings orally and in writing

Level 0	I do not currently have this competency.
Level 1	I am beginning to apply this competency.
Level 2	I am applying this competency but have areas which require improvement.
Level 3	I am applying this competency with confidence.
Level 4	I am applying this competency with strength.

Exploratory Action Research Diagnosis

Now please fill out the table below circling a number from 0 to 4 corresponding to the level you are currently working at for each competency.

Competencies	Level
A. I can reflect on and analyse my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
B. I know how to improve my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
C. I can identify what is good about my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
D. I can see what problems are occurring in my classroom	0 1 2 3 4
E. I can identify a focus for research into my classroom	0 1 2 3 4
F. I can consider how to turn successes, problems and other issues into research questions	0 1 2 3 4
G. I can identify appropriate sources of evidence for research questions	0 1 2 3 4
H. I can decide how to gather information to answer my questions	0 1 2 3 4
I. I can collect evidence to answer research questions	0 1 2 3 4
J. I can analyse evidence collected	0 1 2 3 4
K. I can incorporate my students' suggestions and/or opinions into my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
L. I can design an action plan based on exploration of my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
M. I can put an action plan into practice based on exploration of my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
N. I can evaluate the results of an action plan	0 1 2 3 4
O. I know how to communicate/present research findings orally and in writing	0 1 2 3 4

These are the skills and areas of knowledge you'll be developing as you go through this book. So, let's begin!

1. Foundations

You, your learners, your experience and your capabilities, are the major foundations of this book. Understanding your practice, learning from your own teaching, listening to your learners and developing more confidence in your experience and capabilities will be, we hope, the main outcomes of our work together.

In your everyday teaching you engage in many activities; such as planning, instructing, arranging activities, assessing, giving feedback, etc. Those experiences – both successful and more challenging ones – are the starting point of your work through this book. So let's begin by looking at some of them!



1.1 Successful teaching

Paula will share with you a successful experience from her own classroom teaching as an example for the first task.

“Some years ago I was teaching a large group of teenagers in a secondary school. I had to teach them countries and nationalities, which seemed a rather simple task, but it proved to be challenging for them. They not only struggled to remember the words for different countries and nationalities but also had problems remembering their pronunciation. I also had the difficulty of having only a few hours left before the end of the semester with one particular group so I had to come up with a solution fast. Then, I thought of creating a domino game consisting of countries on one side and nationalities on the other. Every time learners wanted to match a flag to a nationality, they had to say something like ‘She is from Spain. She is Spanish’, therefore it required a lot of repetition. After doing this game, I moved to a more communicative task, which they could perform more effectively. I was very pleased with the result. Not only did the students remember the vocabulary of the lesson and were able to move from a controlled practice type of task to a freer communicative task, they were also engaged. I saw them taking notes and this showed me they were working hard, I heard them encouraging each other to pronounce the words correctly. I felt the activity really suited its purpose. I think that, for me, successful teaching is when students are engaged, participating actively, and when they make progress in their learning.”

Task 1.1

Think about a recent successful experience / activity in your classroom. Go over it in your mind’s eye. Tell someone about it if possible.

How do you know it was successful? What did you see, hear and feel that told you it was successful?



I saw _____



I heard _____



I felt _____

What does this tell you about the meaning of ‘successful teaching’ for you?

For me, successful teaching is when _____

Commentary

By asking you to reflect about a successful situation, we are inviting you to recall and describe the different aspects that made this experience a positive one. This exercise can be valuable since you can later use some of these memories to try to re-live this successful event or build new positive events from it.

Keep in mind, that ‘success’ in teaching doesn’t just mean helping students perform better in tests. Success can also be defined in a number of ways which go beyond assessment and which can also be valid. If you ‘see’ students fully engaged and you ‘hear’ their opinions as they actively participate in the lesson; then these signs of success are something you may like to remember and look for in future lessons. These are the kind of signs that we hope you will be seeing again as an outcome of Exploratory Action Research – after all, its main purpose is to help you and your students achieve greater success in the classroom.

1.2 A challenging teaching situation

We have shared with you an example of a successful experience and asked you to share your own. We will now turn to less positive experiences, which can also be effective to trigger reflection about your practice.

We will share with you a challenging teaching and learning situation from Camila Villalobos, a Chilean teacher, as an example for the second task. Camila teaches at a school in Chiloé Island in the south of Chile and she teaches pupils aged 10 to 13.

“There are 28 students in each level approximately and in each grade I have a group of five or six students that come from P.I.E. (Programme for Inclusion in Education) and in each of my lessons these students did not participate and they were not motivated in comparison with the rest of the class. For me as a teacher, all my students are important and I needed to help them all to develop the same competences in English. The majority of P.I.E. students come from the countryside and other islands near to Chiloe Island; many of them never had English as a subject and those who had English did not achieve the competences of their corresponding grade. Most of these students live with foster families as well as in the town boarding school during the week and travel to their houses on the weekends to see their families. I had tried different strategies such as to let them sit with their friends to feel more comfortable, I changed my tone of voice and my body language with them and even encouraged them to ask questions in class by personalising the lessons more, but nothing seemed to work.”

Task 1.2

Think about a recent challenging or unsatisfactory experience in your classroom. Go over it in your mind's eye. Tell someone about it if you're not alone.

Then ask yourself (or have someone ask you):

What made it challenging or unsatisfactory? Which aspects of it proved problematic? What did you see, hear and feel that told you it was so?



I saw _____



I heard _____



I felt _____

Commentary

Teachers experience many challenging situations when things don't work out as we would like them to, but, as with successful situations, we don't usually have the time to sit and think about what happened and why. A first step to doing this can be to think about what tells you things are not going according to plan – in other words, the signs of lack of success.

You have now reflected on one successful teaching situations from Paula's experience, one challenging situation from Camila's experience and two from your own. We have used these situations to show how, by looking at a situation closely, you can identify signs of success or lack of it so that you come closer to understanding the situation. In the next chapter we'll start to see where you can go from here – either expanding on success (as with case 1.1) or trying to solve a problem (as with case 1.2). For now, though, let's think a bit more about the signs that come through your senses about whether something is or isn't working and how you can collect information to understand different situations better.

1.3 The need for information

In the examples you read above, Paula and Camila 'saw', 'heard' and 'felt' certain things that 'told' them something was working or wasn't. In the task, we also asked you to focus on what you saw, heard and felt since it is our senses which tell us (teachers) what is happening in our classrooms. When we 'feel' something, we are also using our intuition, which is nurtured by years of teaching experience.

Seeing, hearing and feeling give us what we have called signs which tell us whether a particular situation is successful or unsatisfactory.

'Sign': n. 'Something regarded as an indication of what is happening or going to happen'¹

Signs of success can include seeing your students smiling while doing a task, or hearing them speak to each other about a task or feeling the task is going well from your own experience. This is useful and valid information. However, signs sometimes only provide a partial view of situations. They can:

- ignore the perception of students
- give information only about one aspect of the situation
- mask other aspects of a situation that cannot be easily 'seen' or heard'
- make us overlook information which can be useful to get new understandings of a situation.

Some teachers we have been working with told us how their initial thoughts about a situation changed when they looked at it more closely, from other perspectives – in other words, when they opened their eyes and ears more and/or 'borrowed' others' eyes and ears. Here are a couple of examples;

"This exploratory research helped me be more aware of what I am doing in the classroom; unfortunately, I had been looking for what my students were doing wrong instead of what I was doing wrong. In other words, we need to have a look at the whole process before judging the students' performance." (Leyla Nuñez)

"From this exploration, the first finding was very surprising for me. Before the research I thought they didn't want me to speak in class. But in their answers to my questionnaire a little more than a half of them said they wanted a class in English. It was a total change of my point of view." (Daniel Santana)

"As a teacher, when we have doubts about our own methods in the lesson, we need to focus on our students' interests before focusing on the content. We usually think that the content is the problem, but it may not be that." (Camila Villalobos)

These teachers realised that by taking a more careful look at a particular situation, their views changed. In other words, the signs they previously had of what was working or not working were incomplete or simply inappropriate to explain a situation. This is why the collection of additional information is important and is needed for understanding a situation better, in greater detail and from different perspectives. The information collected can be useful to make interpretations of a given situation turn into evidence of what happened.

¹Oxford English Dictionary

‘Evidence’: n. ‘Information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid; information used to establish facts’.²

Let’s look again at Paula’s example of a successful situation. Even though the things she noticed are valuable, more information can be collected to establish with more clarity all the features of this situation. In her example, Paula said things like “I saw them working, taking notes, I heard them encouraging each other to pronounce the words correctly so I finally felt the activity fit its purpose”. Such signs of what worked, although valid, can be looked at in more detail in order to understand if the strategy was effective, and why. She cannot say for sure, for example, that:

- all students are very active / involved – if not, which ones are, and which ones are not, and why?
- students are using the vocabulary words of the lesson
- all students enjoy the class
- all students’ English level has improved
- all students enjoy classes based on games.

In the case of the challenging situation, Camila realised that although she tried different strategies to reach PIE students “nothing seemed to work” but the following things are not clear:

- what students thought of the different strategies she used
- what students’ lack of motivation looked like
- which activities in class motivated students more/less.

Task 1.3 @

Why don’t we try to help Camila understand her challenging situation better? There is a lot that she doesn’t know for sure. Read the statements below and write ‘know’ if we are certain, and ‘don’t know’ for the areas we don’t yet have enough information about. You can check your answers in the answer key.

1. We _____ the different strategies she used to motivate her students.
2. We _____ the background of the students Camila is concerned about.
3. We _____ what all of her students think about the strategies she used.
4. We _____ what makes Camila conclude students are not motivated.
5. We _____ how students actually react in class to certain activities.

As you have probably realised, there are many things we (and Camila) don’t know for sure about this situation and that we need to know in order to understand it better.

Task 1.4 @

Let’s try a similar exercise with the situation narrated by Paula. If you or Paula would like to understand better the successful situation she talked about in 1.1. what kinds of information could be gathered?

Read some of the signs she got (box A) and then write the letter(s) of the method(s) you think she could use to collect better information (box B). You can check your answers in the answer key. Note: There may be more than one answer for each of 1. to 5.

Box A. Signs

1.	Students are very involved in what is going on _____
2.	Students are very active _____
3.	Students are using the vocabulary words of the lesson _____
4.	Students and teacher enjoy the class _____
5.	Students were pronouncing words correctly _____
6.	Students’ enjoy classes based on games _____

Box B. Ways to collect information

- A. Take notes about what students do and say.
- B. Assess how students’ vocabulary learning has improved with a vocabulary test
- C. Ask students to write their opinions about the lesson
- D. Ask a colleague to come in and take notes on what he/she has seen
- E. Make a video-recording of students in class to look at their behaviour, attitudes and language use.

Commentary

As we suggested above, signs of what’s working and not working are important in your everyday teaching, and reflecting on them can help you develop as a teacher. However, sometimes they only give you a partial view of a situation and to understand it better – and/or change it if necessary - gathering more and better information can be essential.

For this, you will need to go beyond just reflecting about your practice ‘in your head’ and will need to do some ‘research’, gathering as much good information, or ‘data’, as you can to understand a situation more clearly and fully.

² Concise Oxford English Dictionary

One teacher we've worked with says this very clearly:

*"I think when you 'see' something wrong in class, you should stop, reflect on that issue, collect data, analyse it and plan actions according to that purpose."
(Teresa Ríos)*

We will come back to the nature of good information ('data') later in the book. For the moment, though, let's consider an example which illustrates how a teacher can gather information about their teaching in practice.

1.4 What's the value of research?



We want to continue to show you the value of collecting information, and start to show you the value of doing research to understand your practice and possibly to change things. We would like to share with you the following short story of research which comes from a teacher – her name is Teresa Perčić – that Paula worked with in Chile. We think it demonstrates well how empowering research can be for teachers who engage in it, as well as how it can show you things you didn't know before:

"The academic manager of the school where I worked told me to play classical music in all my classes while students were doing a task. I did it and I noticed no difference so I stopped. I was told the school's decision was based on research which indicated it aided concentration and learning and therefore, I had to do it no matter my observations. I was not convinced at all and my colleagues and I decided to play classical music but other kinds of music as well.

Then, I learned about classroom research and the idea of conducting research in my classroom seemed the perfect solution to prove to my headmaster that she was wrong, so I prepared a series of tasks and different kinds of music to play while my students were working. I took notes of everything that happened while my students worked: their attitudes, their behaviour, etc. I later collected their different pieces of work and started

to notice certain differences in their work according to the music I played. I also gave them a survey, a simple kind of questionnaire for them to give me their opinions. Still, I wasn't convinced they understood my questions. Finally, I decided to interview them, so after each activity we did with background music, I asked them about how they felt, if they had trouble concentrating, if they felt the music helped them complete the task and so on.

After collecting all the evidence and analysing it in detail, I gave up. It was true, my students learned better and concentrated more while listening to classical music. They told me they felt relaxed and it helped them think, even more than if working in silence. On the contrary, popular music made them agitated. They said they felt like dancing and singing so they could not concentrate on the task. I informed the results to my colleagues and I had to admit my boss was right. I did not feel I had lost the argument at all! I was proud of myself ... I didn't do what I was told just because.

*I researched it and found answers of my own!!"
(Teresa Perčić)*

Even though she had to agree with the headteacher in the end, Teresa felt empowered because she was no longer just following orders. She felt she was able to make informed decisions about her teaching based on something she discovered for herself. The story also reinforces the point made above that the information you gather can reveal things you did not expect – things which contradict the everyday signs you had previously been getting. This is why teacher-research is different from simply reflecting on what you think has happened in the classroom – it can take you beyond your everyday experience for you to gain new perspectives.

Now let's take a closer look at what Teresa did to gather more information.

She had to compare what happened with and without music, and what happened with different kinds of music. That's why she 'prepared a series of tasks and different kinds of music to play while my students were working'.

But what kinds of information, did she gather about the effect of each kind of music?

Task 1.5 @

Read the story again and fill in the table on the next page with one of the following kinds of information:

- A. Interview notes
- B. Observation notes
- C. Students' work
- D. Questionnaire responses

What did the teacher do?	Kind of information
<i>"I took notes of everything that happened while my students worked: their attitudes, their behaviour, etc."</i>	
<i>"I later collected their different pieces of work and started to notice certain differences in their work according to the music I played."</i>	
<i>"I also gave them a survey, a simple kind of questionnaire for them to give me their opinions."</i>	
<i>"I decided to interview them, so after each activity we did with background music, I asked them about how they felt, if they had trouble concentrating, if they felt the music helped them complete the task and so on."</i>	

Summary and follow-up

Perhaps the main point of this chapter has been that doing 'research' can be useful for teachers. We've already seen how research might be useful in gathering information about something that seems to be already successful or in understanding something that is not working: Now you have begun to see how it can be useful in helping to solve a problem or puzzling situation, trying out a new idea or even in resisting a new idea which a teacher thinks is inappropriate.

We've begun to see how you can understand your own experiences in your classroom more deeply by collecting information. We have begun to call this process of collecting information to answer questions 'research', and will define this a bit more clearly in the next chapter. For now, though, we hope you have begun to see how useful research can be for teachers.

We've been hearing about the experiences of several teachers in Chile, where many of the ideas in this book were first developed, in the context of a British Council / Ministry of Education Chile programme called the Champion Teachers Action Research Project. Champion Teachers are secondary school teachers who voluntarily joined the project, where they were invited to do teacher-research with the support of a mentor. You can find more information about this programme at the following website: <http://championteachers.weebly.com/>

Follow-up

Before you start the next chapter why not read another report by a Chilean Champion Teacher, Teresa Ríos? You can find her story here: <http://bit.ly/teresa-rios>

Think about the following questions:

- A. What did she think was causing her students' inability to speak in class?
- B. What did she learn about her students?
- C. According to what she says here, in what way(s) was doing research useful for her, as a teacher?:

"With this exploratory process I discovered that I was expecting something from my students but I was not giving them something they needed first. I think when you 'see' something wrong in class, you should stop, reflect on that issue, collect data, analyse it and action plan accordingly."

2. What is teacher-research?

In this chapter we learn more about ‘teacher-research’ – research which is initiated and carried out by teachers themselves into issues of importance to them in their own work. We will emphasise that such research is by teachers for teachers (and their students), being carried out for purposes of professional development and improvement of teaching and learning, not primarily for academic purposes. It can therefore follow some rules of its own, and does not need to mimic academic research – it is research, but of its own kind.



2.1 Demystifying research

In the last chapter, we showed how, by collecting information, you can explore and understand your practice in more depth, and potentially change things for the better. Collecting information or 'data' is an important feature of research.

However, many teachers have an image of research which differs from the process we are explaining in this book.

Here are some of the images teachers say they have of research:



Images by: Mat Wright.

Teachers often associate research with scientists, and with science. However, research is not just done in laboratories and universities or for 'scientific purposes' only – it can also be done by teachers and learners to gain a better understanding of the dynamic nature of classroom life and possibly to bring about change.

Here is an alternative image to represent better the nature of research into classroom life:



Image by: Rick Carey/Shutterstock.

In this picture, the diver is carefully looking at a richly diverse and beautiful coral reef, something which needs to be explored in its real surroundings not in a laboratory.

Now, how about this one?:



Here you can see learners talking to one another in a real classroom environment. Exploring what they do, what they say, and what they think, is as fascinating and rich as examining the coral reef under the sea's surface. The fact that we see our students every day doesn't make them less interesting! In fact, we recently came across this quotation:

*"Where the classroom has a culture as complex as the coral reef, the teacher cannot afford to be anything but a researcher."*¹

So, we hope you can see that a laboratory is not the only place where research can be carried out. And in this book we are stressing the idea that teachers themselves can research their own teaching and learning situations. However, there are two further common misconceptions about research that we need to address. Below, you can see two more images that teachers often associate with research:

Misconception 1. Lots of reading

It is common to think that research involves lots of reading. This is possible but not necessary in all kinds of research. We will show you in this book how referring to other people's ideas about a particular topic may be useful, but it is not as important as looking at your classroom closely and collecting information from it. Also, reading can come later – you don't need to read or write a review of what 'the literature' says about a topic before starting teacher-research!



Misconception 2. Writing a paper

This is another misconception we need to clarify. You do not have to write a paper about your research. You can always present your research project to your colleagues at school or to a wider audience at a conference. As we will show, you do not need to write for this purpose, you can use images and posters accompanied by talking to explain what you did.

¹ Holliday, A. (1994). *Appropriate Methodology and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 31.

2.2 But what is research?

A useful short definition of research is the following:

'Research': n. 'The organised, systematic search for answers to the questions we ask'.²

Another definition of research is: 'systematic inquiry made public'.³

You can see that the word 'systematic' is used in both of these definitions. In other words, research needs to be planned, following an organised procedure. A definition proposed by David Nunan also stresses this. Nunan defines research as 'a process of inquiry consisting of three elements or components: (1) a question, problem, or hypothesis, (2) data, (3) analysis and interpretation of data'.⁴ Here Nunan makes reference to the collection and analysis of 'data', in other words relevant 'information'. Look at this definition for clarification:

'Data': n. 'You can refer to information as data, especially when it is in the form of facts or statistics that you can analyse'.⁵

Task 2.1 @

Now that you have read some definitions of research, consider the situations below and tick the ones you think can be considered examples of research.

- 1. Luis needs to buy a flight ticket to go from Bogotá to London on the fastest and cheapest route. In order to find what he is looking for, he searches in a number of airlines' websites online and also in other websites to choose the most appropriate flight for him. He makes notes about a number of choices which he later compares before buying the ticket.
- 2. Francis realises he cannot see any of channels offered by his cable provider. He only sees a black screen. He wonders how to get the channels back on his TV so he presses several buttons on his remote and nothing happens. Then, he remembers that he was given a guide for the cable set box. By looking for the instructions on how to re-configure cable channels, he manages to watch his favourite channels again.
- 3. Claudia decides to change her desktop computer since it has been working slowly recently. She decides to buy a laptop which is light enough to be carried around but with good RAM capacity and speed. A week later, she goes into a shop and buys a desktop computer which she finds on sale.

As you can see, we do engage in research in everyday life. So, research is not only done by academics, it is also an essential part of our everyday lives. Now, let's consider some classroom examples.

Task 2.2 @

Read the following classroom situations and choose the ones you think show examples of research.

- 1. A maths teacher has decided to start using group work in class to allow her students to work collaboratively and talk to each other to solve the tasks. However, she notices that students are not working in groups properly; they do not finish the tasks assigned and one or two students per group do all the work. Because of this, she decides to stop doing group work since she feels this approach is not effective in her class.
- 2. An English teacher usually uses videos in her classes. Lately, she has noticed that students are not really engaged and do not finish the tasks assigned. She asks her students and finds that students consider the language in the videos too advanced and they have difficulties understanding it. She asks a colleague to check the videos. This colleague confirms what the students had told her. As a result, she begins to choose the videos more carefully, based on students' level, as well as providing them with the language they need to understand the videos.
- 3. A science teacher receives a visit from his school inspector. After the visit, the inspector tells the teacher that every time he asks questions, the same group of five or six students answer and that he should try and make all his learners participate more actively. After this, he decides to direct his questions to quieter students and to allow more confident ones to volunteer freely.

Commentary

So, to recap, research has the following characteristics;

1. question(s) to be answered
2. systematic collection of data
3. analysis of the data
4. answer(s) to the question(s)

Throughout the book, we will take you through the different parts and processes involved in doing research but it may be important here to remind you that collecting data is an essential part of research, followed by its 'analysis'.

'Analysis': n. 'Detailed examination of the elements or structure of something'.⁵

As we've been stressing, research is not something only scientists do. We do it in our everyday lives, and it can be done by teachers, in which case we are talking about 'teacher-research': research initiated by teachers into their teaching contexts.

² Hatch, E. and Lazaraton, A. (1991) *The Research Manual: Design and Statistics for Applied Linguistics*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, p. 1.

³ Stenhouse, L (1978). 'Applying research to education'. Paper given to the British Educational Research Association. Stenhouse Archive, University of East Anglia, p. 1. ⁴ Nunan, D. (1992) *Research Methods in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 3.

⁵ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/data>

2.3 What does teacher-research look like? Lorena's story

Let's see whether the characteristics identified above apply in the case of one of the Champion Teachers we have worked with.

Read this story of research by Lorena Muñoz, told in her own words, and complete the table which follows it with notes.

"I am a teacher at a High School in Osorno working with students who have a high level of vulnerability. I teach from 9th to 11th grades and I have more or less 38 to 40 students per group. The 9th grade students are between 14 and 15 years old. In this context I noticed they were not working properly in listening activities. In lessons I observed that they didn't do the activities and I wanted to know the reason why.

I chose four questions to work with during the exploratory research process:

- 1. In which listening activities do my students listen better?*
- 2. How is listening presented during the lesson?*
- 3. What kind of information are my students able to identify from the listening material?*
- 4. How does the length of the listening material affect students' performance?*

In order to collect information, I conducted a survey and discovered that they found the topics interesting, which was surprising for me; songs were the activities they liked the most. They were able to listen and understand the teacher's instructions. Then I carried out a focus group discussion to find out what they found difficult or easy when listening. They told me that they found the recordings too long and could not complete the activity. That is why they got frustrated and became distracted.

They also said songs were easier because they were shorter and they could complete the tasks. I also organised a session of formal peer observation where a student-teacher observed pupils' behavior during listening and the instructions given by the teacher. He confirmed the findings and also noted that students listened to the instructions and demonstrated that they knew what to do.

I decided to start working with the audios as if they were songs. I divided them into sections and created activities such as order the information, filling in the gaps, etc.

By the end of two weeks I observed several changes. The first one was that they actually did the activities, handouts were completed with the correct answers and I could observe many hands up to participate in the lesson. I conducted another survey in which students answered that working with the listening materials as if they were songs allowed them to work better. They also said that they were able to identify information from the text and that the activities they liked the most were underlining the correct word, filling in the gaps and crossing out the odd one out. They still found it difficult to order the information because sometimes the material was too fast. The focus group participants mentioned that they now felt motivated and more successful because they were able to do the tasks, and do them well. This was confirmed by another peer observation, where the student-teacher told me that students were able to focus on the activities and they did not get distracted by anything else.

As a reflection I learned that conducting action research can be helpful to improve my teaching practice and my students' listening skills. Students are able to improve listening skills if we, as teachers, implement strategies according to their needs. I was able to see a change which motivates me to continue working like this. From now on, the way I teach listening will be different according to what the group requires. Finally, I realised that with a simple action I can change and improve what I am doing in the classroom."

Task 2.3 @

Answer these questions according to Lorena's story:

1. What were Lorena's initial concerns?	
2. What were Lorena's initial questions?	

We mentioned above that research has the following characteristics;

1. question(s) to be answered
2. systematic collection of data
3. analysis of the data
4. answer(s) to the question(s)

Were all these things present in what Lorena did?

Answer: Yes!

Who made the research decisions?

Answer: Lorena, the teacher.

So this is research – and it is research initiated and carried out by a teacher: in a word, teacher-research!

Commentary

Lorena, a teacher, did research – for herself and for her learners. She starts with some puzzles – some questions (her own!) – including ‘In which listening activities do my students listen better?’ and ‘How is listening presented during the lesson?’ and she found answers by gathering ‘data’ – from having one colleague observe her class and from asking students. She considered this data carefully (‘analysed’ it) and came to some conclusions about what areas to improve in the way she developed her lessons on listening.

Summary and follow-up

In this chapter we considered the way teachers often think research is not really ‘for them’; and we tried to demystify research, by breaking it down into stages and by showing how one teacher – Lorena – engaged in research which proved to be very useful for her and, potentially, for her students. This is teacher-research – research initiated and carried out by teachers themselves into issues of importance to them in their own work.

Follow-up

We invite you now to read the story of another Champion Teacher; Leyla Núñez. She was interested in understanding her students’ writing abilities. Find her complete story here:

<http://bit.ly/Leyla-nunez>

In her story, Leyla gained insights from her colleagues. How did she do this? In what ways do you think this is / is not valuable? Leyla also collected information from her students. What did she learn from this information? Finally, do you agree with the action plan she proposes? What would you add to her plan?



Champion Teacher; Leyla Núñez

3. What is Exploratory Action Research?

In the last chapter, we considered the general characteristics of research, and also saw what ‘teacher-research’ can look like and why it might be beneficial. In this chapter let’s look in more detail at what is involved in a teacher exploring her own practice and then acting on her findings to improve the situation, in a process of ‘Exploratory Action Research’.



3.1 The value of ‘exploring’

Exploratory Action Research, as explained in this chapter, is a way to explore, understand and improve our practice as teachers. We will first discuss the value of ‘exploring’ and later we’ll move on to show how this can contribute to appropriate forms of ‘acting’ for change. Let’s start by looking at two example situations which involve a teacher managing a puzzling or a challenging classroom situation.

Task 3.1 @

Answer the question below about these situations. You can check your answer in the answer key.

1. A teacher feels her students are not motivated enough in her class. She wonders whether she could improve this by using videos in her class so she decides to plan a lesson including videos showing songs, funny clips and film extracts.



2. A teacher has noticed that his students’ speaking abilities are limited since they hardly communicate using the target language. In order to change this situation, this teacher decides to add more group work to his classes.



What do these situations have in common?
Choose (a), (b) or (c)

- A. Teachers in both examples collected data about the situation.
- B. Teachers applied some sort of ‘intervention’ or ‘action’ to solve the situation.
- C. Teachers didn’t do anything to solve or understand the situation.

Commentary

Acting quickly is an essential teacher skill, but it might also be important to consider whether you’re acting ‘right’, especially for the most important decisions. In example 1 above, the teacher decided to use videos, probably in the belief that videos would be motivating in themselves. But what if students’ lack of motivation was more related to the fact that they weren’t allowed to be active in class rather than the type of materials? The teacher didn’t ask the students about this before deciding on using videos.

In fact, one teacher in the Champion Teachers programme in Chile was also interested in increasing students’ motivation but the data she gathered made her realise that her focus should change to how to give her students more opportunities to speak English in class: “The information I collected told me that I was not giving them enough time to practice. I was only giving one speaking activity per class or once a week.” So in her case, an intervention related to technology would not have solved the situation.

In example 2, the teacher asked students to work in groups to increase speaking in class but what if students were not speaking out because they didn’t have the language needed to communicate or weren’t interested in the topics being discussed in class? The teacher didn’t check their speaking abilities or interests before asking them to work in groups, or whether they would feel comfortable with this new format.

Read the following dialogue, which has been adapted from a real conversation between two teachers talking about a solving a puzzling situation.

- A:** Last year, I had to choose the titles for my class graded readers and I didn’t know which ones to choose.
- B:** You had a catalogue with titles right?
- A:** Yes, I had the titles but I didn’t know which ones my students would like.
- B:** I see. What did you do then?
- A:** I showed the titles of the readers to my students and I asked them to choose their favourite. They chose a story about animals! I could have never predicted that.
- B:** Why? Which one did you think they would choose?
- A:** A story about UFOs, ghosts or something like that. Never animals!

The examples in Task 3.1 above briefly illustrate situations where teachers attempt to solve situations or answer a question by immediately leaping into action. Unlike those situations, in the dialogue above you can see how the teacher answered her puzzle by collecting data. In this case she explored an unclear situation by asking her students. She even reported her surprise when realising that her own choice would have been a different one. This only proves that, sometimes, taking a decision too quickly and without exploring the situation further, can involve incorrect assumptions or simply assumptions which may be based on signs and intuition (as discussed in Chapter One) instead of reasons why this situation is happening, as can be explored through the collection of data.

3.2 Exploratory research: Andrea's story part 1

Let's look at an example of how a situation can be explored before attempts are made to resolve it. And we will see how exploring can be built into everyday practice in Andrea's story, which she tells in her own words:



My name is Andrea Robles, I am an English Teacher from Iquique, Chile. I consider myself a teacher who looks for new things, ideas, techniques and I tend to reflect about my teaching practice.

"I decided to start this research because I had a puzzle about my wrapping-up activities. I felt that my closure was not efficient or maybe my activities did not engage students until the end to ensure their learning and the reaching of my class objective: I realised that I tended to prepare my classes giving special emphasis to the warm up and the main activities and I wondered if the wrapping-up was as strong as it should be.

But my first question was: What is a wrapping-up? I had an idea about it: a wrapping-up for me was the last activity of the class, in which students verbalise, show or present what they learned. But maybe it was not. So I started surfing the web in order to find some information about it. I found a website, www.busyteacher.com. That website has many articles written by teachers about different topics. Fortunately I found one that concerned the topic I was looking for. In that article, the teacher mentions that a wrapping-up is the last activity and it must be done by the students. In this part of the class the teacher has the role of a facilitator.

In that point I felt that what I thought was similar to what that article said, so I felt kind of relaxed to be not so "lost". However, something that called my attention was that the teacher has a secondary role as a facilitator and that the learners are the protagonists and the most important of all is that the information must come from the students and not from the teacher.

After that action, I decided to also ask some colleagues about this topic. I thought that their opinion could be

useful because I still had questions that I needed to answer. I asked them the following:

1. *What are the components of a wrapping-up activity?*
2. *Is it important to wrap up a class? Why?*
3. *What are the main difficulties you face in this phase of the class?*
4. *How do your students react when you wrap up classes?*

Their answers, overall, were that the components of a wrapping-up activity are (a) remembering the objectives; (b) naming the contents of the class; and (c) making a summary of the class. Two thought that wrapping-up was not very important but two felt it was important, for the teacher to know up to what point the objectives had been reached and for students to clearly know what the class was about and if they had reached its goal. The main difficulties reported by my colleagues with regard to wrapping-up were lack of time and student misbehaviour, with students typically not paying attention to this part of the class.

After this short questionnaire, I understood even more clearly that students' participation is crucial – this part of the class has to be motivating and student-centered – and that one of the most important problems is time. I also realised that it is very important to keep in mind the class objective at all times, so I can know how much my objectives are achieved.

I reflected on my teaching practice and I identified some of the features of my wrapping-up activities and compared them with how I thought a good closing should be:

My Closings	My Ideal Closings
<i>I tended to ask open, undirected questions, not using nomination in this part of the class.</i>	<i>All the children should have the chance to participate.</i>
<i>It lasted 5 minutes.</i>	<i>They have to show their learning.</i>
<i>I tended to use the same questions class after class, with the result that my students knew that the class was about to end. My questions were: 'What was the class about? And what can you tell me about this class? What did you learn?'</i>	<i>Motivating activities.</i>
<i>"I decided to interview them, so after each activity we did with background music, I asked them about how they felt, if they had trouble concentrating, if they felt the music helped them complete the task and so on."</i>	<i>Activities that help them to remember the contents the following class.</i>

After all that process I decided to start my “real research” – that is how I call it – which has relation with my students. Firstly, I wanted to know more about how my students react at the end of the lesson. So I did a class and I asked a colleague to observe me doing the class, paying special attention to the wrapping-up and the reaction of my students. He took some notes and we had a meeting to share the findings.

I did my class and I noticed that my students were not really engaged with wrapping-up. Moreover, not many of them wanted to participate and some of them did not listen to their classmates talking about what the class was about. In fact, the ones who participated in that stage were the same ones who really like to participate usually without me asking them directly.

After that, my colleague and I had a meeting and he said that he noticed that most of the students started tidying up their desks and getting ready to leave and only a few paid attention.

That was it ... something clicked in my mind! I felt everything added up – what I felt was right: something was not working in my closing stage.

The next class I gave students a piece of paper and I told them to write what happened the previous class, I did that in Spanish so all of them had the same chances to express their ideas. These were my findings:

- 23 did not remember
- 3 did not answer
- 8 answered correctly

Most of the students did not remember and those who did were the ones who really like to participate in classes.”

Task 3.2 @

How did Andrea explore the situation she identified? Check your answers in the answer key.

Read the following text and fill in the gaps using the words provided:

data reflected
understand observe
questionnaire
closed questions

Andrea decided to do this research because she didn't know whether the way she (1) _____ her lessons was effective. In order to clarify this situation, Andrea came up with some (2) _____. Then, in order to answer her questions, she gave a

(3) _____ to her colleagues, she searched the web, and she decided to ask a colleague to (4) _____ her lesson. She also asked students to recall what they remembered from the lesson. After Andrea collected all the (5) _____ she needed, she (6) _____ on the situation and was able to (7) _____ the situation better.

Let's look more closely at Andrea's experience and try to understand it a bit more. She starts with what she calls a 'puzzle' – not a definite 'problem', in her case, but something that doesn't necessarily require an immediate solution. Rather than immediately trying out new ways of ending her class, she decided to explore the situation.

In a sense, she 'made the familiar strange' by doing so – she saw it in a new light. It is difficult to stand back from the problematic or puzzling situations we face but it can be very effective. Teachers are often tempted to jump in and solve things – but stepping back is also important.

But what do you do when you explore? If you look at Andrea's exploration, we can identify the following stages, which together characterise 'exploratory research':

A. Plan to explore [plan questions and how to get data]

This is the stage where you review your practice and decide on an area or situation you will focus on. Here you also think about the questions that need to be answered and you plan how to gather information to answer the questions being asked.

B. Explore [gather data]

Here you collect data to clarify the situation you identified. The important thing is to gather data in an orderly fashion so that you can analyse and interpret it effectively.

C. Analyse and reflect [answer questions on the basis of data]

This is the stage where you analyse the entire process and reflect on what has happened. Here is where you will be able to clarify the puzzling or challenging situation you identified in order to later make an action plan if needed.

Task 3.3 @

Based on the stages above, read the summary of the things Andrea did during her exploration and match them with the corresponding stage. (The order of activities is mixed up, and there is more than one activity on the left for both A. and B. on the right.) You can check your answers in the answer key.

1. Posing questions to help her clarify her issue.

2. Asking a colleague to observe her lessons.

3. Clarifying what it is meant by 'wrapping-up' on the web

4. Analysing all the information she obtained and making conclusions about the effectiveness of her 'wrapping-up'.

5. Identifying the ending of her lessons as a possibly problematic area of her teaching.

6. Giving a questionnaire to her colleagues asking them for their perceptions of 'wrapping-up'.

A. Plan to explore

B. Explore

C. Analyse and reflect

3.3 Action research: Andrea's story part 2

We've seen what research to explore a particular situation looks like. For some people exploring the situation can be enough (they might even find it helps to solve the situation) and we'll be focusing on this kind of exploratory research for the next few chapters (until Chapter Six, in fact). But in this book we'll also consider how such research can become 'action research' – how you can attempt to bring about some change and systematically observe what happens.

Let's go back to Andrea and her example about how she wrapped up her lessons. Here is how Andrea carried on with her research:

"In that moment I decided that something must be done, I had to make a change in order to change that situation. So I asked the same colleague to go to my classroom again and observe my class, take notes and meet me again to talk about the class.

This time I decided to change the activity ... I started thinking 'what is useful for me when I study something that I want to remember later?' and I realised that the activity that is effective for me is a Mind Map. I did my class as usual, and at the time I had to close the class I took more time for it; I started that activity ten minutes before the bell. I asked them to do a pair work in which they had to do a map with all the things they learned in class. They talked with their partners, took notes, used colors, etc.

I chose a group at random to explain their map in front of the class, they drew their map, they explained it, and surprisingly some other groups started adding information from the class, examples they created, and also some things they had previously learned, I noticed something changed because many of them were participating in the last activity.

In the meeting with my colleague, he told me that he noticed that all the students were engaged with the activity, they were sharing their ideas in their groups, they gave their opinions, adding extra information, and he saw that all the students were really motivated, even the ones who did not pay attention in the previous class.

The next class, I repeated the same procedure from the first observed class – I asked my students to write on a piece of paper (in Spanish) about what they remembered from the previous class. Their answers were:

- 30 of them remembered the contents of the previous class (and most of them remembered the activity of the map);
- 4 of them did not remember.

Most of them could remember the previous class, so if I came back again to that content the learning could be linked to the previous class and learning could be meaningful. I realised that if I make a change in my class, I can change a complete situation and, the most important of all, changes are not really difficult to do and have an impact on my students.

I think I need to research more and reflect more, but what I am really sure about is that wrapping-up activities are very important. I need to sit and look for activities in which students can reflect on their own learning – the teacher here disappears and a helper appears at the same time. I dare to say that wrapping-up activities must develop metacognition in my students.

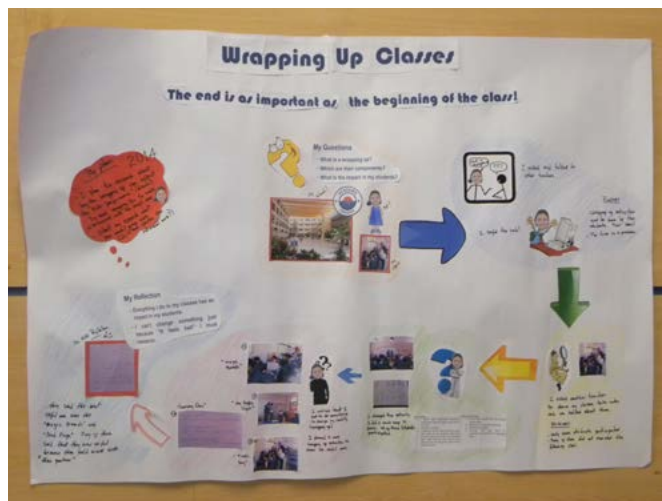
I have more questions in my mind – I will do some extra changes, research again, and share my findings again!”

Commentary

Here you can see how Andrea moved from exploration to action by using the information she collected during her exploration to inform her later actions. For example, since her colleague told her that she always used the same strategy (asking a question to students), she decided to vary the way she ended her lessons. From the information she collected, she learnt that students need to be helped to remember, and this is why she decided to use mind maps to aid their memory. In conclusion, Andrea explored the situation and later acted on it on the basis of the understanding she had gained. She also collected further data to see whether the changes she made were working.

Task 3.4 @

Look at the following sequences of events describing what a teacher did in a given situation. Decide whether these teachers attempt to explore the situation or immediately act on it. Check your answers in the answer key.



1. A teacher notices that her students insist on using their mobile phones in class. In order to address this situation, she plans activities where students can use their mobile phone for language learning purposes.

- A. The teacher explores the situation first
- B. The teacher immediately acts on the situation

2. A group of colleagues are having some difficulties managing a group of students. They asked students, and they claimed that they didn't enjoy working so passively at their desks.

- A. The teacher(s) explores the situation first
- B. The teacher immediately acts on the situation

3. A teacher wants to teach her students a song. She wonders what song they might like, so she gives a survey to her students to know. Based on this, she decides to teach students a current pop song.

- A. The teacher explores the situation first
- B. The teacher immediately acts on the situation

The 'action' part of Andrea's research contains some of the same elements (data collection, analysis and interpretation) as the exploration part of her research, except that they focus on evaluating the 'action' being carried out rather than on exploring the situation more broadly. The stages in the action part of her research, then, can be identified as:

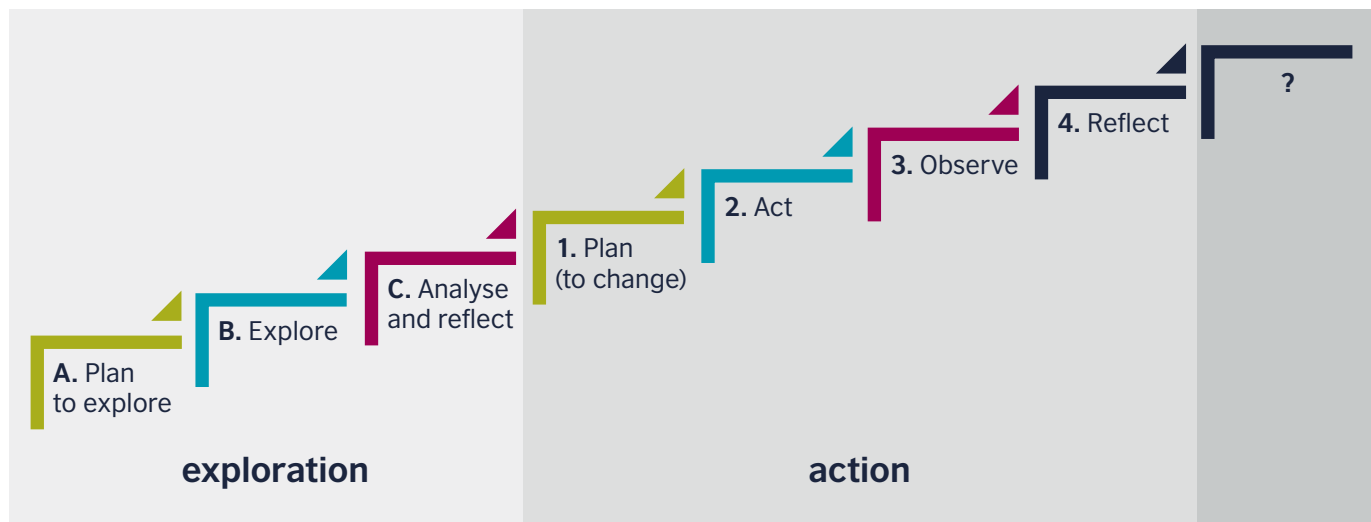
1. Plan (to change)
In this stage you decide what to change and plan how to collect further data to see what happens.
2. Act [implement the change]
You apply the change ('intervention') you have planned.
3. Observe [see what happens – with data]
You collect data either while the intervention is taking place or after it, and you analyse it.
4. Reflect [interpret what occurred]
This is the stage where you interpret what has happened, reflecting particularly on the effects of the intervention and considering any further actions that seem necessary. Of course, you might decide that further research is needed – so you can go back to (A.) to explore further or (1.) to engage in further action research.

3.4 So, what is Exploratory Action Research?

Exploratory Action Research occurs when exploratory research (as in part 1 of Andrea's story (3.2 above)) is followed by action research (as in part 2 of Andrea's story (3.3 above)). In other words, the whole process looks like this:

A. Plan to explore [plan questions and how to get data]
B. Explore [gather data]
C. Analyse and reflect [answer questions on the basis of data]
1. Plan (to change)
2. Act [implement the change]
3. Observe [see what happens – with data]
4. Reflect [interpret what occurred]

We can also picture Exploratory Action Research like this ...



Steps of Exploratory Action Research

Task 3.5

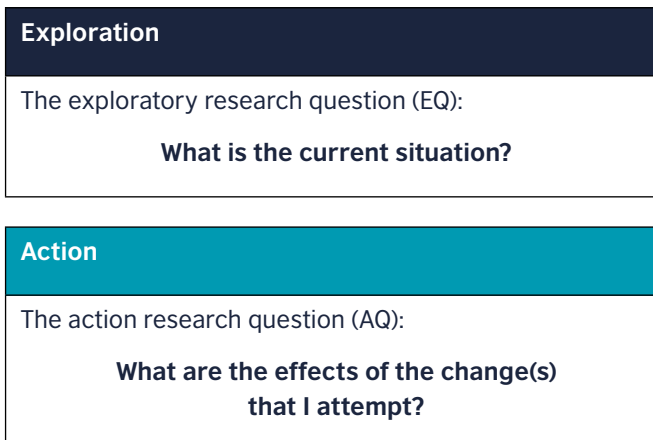
As emphasised above, we believe that sufficient exploration is very important before you engage in action research. Why? Note down one or two of your own reasons before reading on. Hint: don't forget the stories you've already read, for example in Tasks 3.1 and 3.4!



There are at least three good reasons for exploring a situation before planning action to change it:

- 1) Before we can decide what to do, we need to understand the current situation. As teachers, we often think we understand what is happening in our classrooms, but this is not always the case. The problem-solving examples in Task 3.1 (and associated commentary) show that, without exploration, we can easily take the wrong action and even make things worse.
- 2) In order to decide whether our action has been successful, we need to compare what happens with the situation as it was before we acted. By exploring the situation and collecting data, we will have enough information about the initial situation to do this. Another, related, advantage is that we can often use the same way of collecting data after a new action, making it relatively easy to compare the situations.
- 3) It may not be very difficult to combine exploration in your classroom with your everyday teaching. It shouldn't increase your workload too much and should go well together with what you normally do. Exploration essentially means looking at your situation in a different way, or in more detail, and this, as we've seen, can be advantageous for a number of reasons.

As we saw in Chapter Two, and in Andrea's story in this chapter, research begins with and grows out of questions. we ask ourselves. So it may be useful at this point to highlight the way Exploratory Action Research has two separate basic research questions, which relate to the two separate phases shown in the 'Steps of Exploratory Action Research' diagram – Exploration and Action:



Only these two main questions are necessary for Exploratory Action Research. We can make them more specific and detailed, but everything we do should aim to answer these two questions.

At this stage you may have questions about the questions! You may be wondering how an interest or challenge that you've identified can be explored with these questions, or you may want to see examples of more specific questions. Don't worry! These are coming soon. In the remainder of this book, we will look into each of the steps of Exploratory Action Research in more detail, as follows:

Exploratory research

- Clarifying your problem, interest or puzzle, and deciding on your specific questions [Chapter Four]
- Collecting the data that you need to answer the questions [Chapter Five]
- Analysing and interpreting the data to answer the questions and understand your situation better [Chapter Six]

Remember that these three steps may be enough - the new understanding you gain can help, in many ways, on its own. Alternatively, you may want to take it further, into action research:

Action research

- Planning to make a change, and then making the change [Chapter Seven]
- Observing what happens, evaluating the change, and reflecting on what you want to do next [Chapter Eight]

Summary and follow-up

In this chapter we've looked at the value of exploring, and noted that teachers' perceptions of situations don't always match realities, especially when they're immersed in the day-to-day challenges of teaching students. With Andrea's story, we've noticed how the actions she took were only possible after she'd explored and understood the situation she was facing. We have identified seven steps in the Exploratory Action Research process, three for exploration and four for action, and we've also looked forward to the remaining chapters of this book.

Follow-up

We would like to invite you to look back at Lorena's story from Chapter Two but in greater detail this time, via the following link: <http://bit.ly/LorenaMunoz>

Here she describes her complete Exploratory Action Research project. Complete the table below with notes about what she does in each step. The first step has been provided as an example.

Exploratory Action Research step		What did Lorena do?
A	Plan to explore	She noticed a problem with listening activities and decided on four questions to work with.
B	Explore	
C	Analyse and reflect	
1	Plan (to change)	
2	Act	
3	Observe	
4	Reflect	

4. What shall I explore – and what are my questions?

By now you should have a reasonably clear picture of what Exploratory Action Research looks like – in theory, and in the practice of several teachers whose stories you've been introduced to. If you want to get an even better idea, you could read more of the stories about teachers in the Chilean Champion Teachers project, in the companion book we've been referring to a lot, and will continue to refer to throughout this handbook, *Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Research* (<http://bit.ly/champion-teachers>). When you're ready, read on to find out how to get started with your own research!

How to motivate my 10th Grade Students to WORK during my class?

What are the activities my 10th graders like the most?

- Q: 36% No fav, 36% Nothing, 72% 🤔
- Would? 33% Music, 18% Groups, 18% hands & Drawings

What do my 10th graders do during the English class?

- 42% DO NOT PAY ATTENTION 🤔
- 28% WATCH THE PHONE 📱

What do my 10th graders expect from the English class?

- Q: 22,2% "FUN" 😄

How do I react when my 10th graders do not work in class?

- "REPEAT" 🙅
- "CLEAR" "NICE" 🙌

Actions

🎵 + 👥 + 🙌 = 75% Yes! 👍

Participation?

- Regular class x 19 🤔
- MUSIC x 13 🤔

4.1 Motivations for doing research

In the last chapter, you read how Andrea's research topic did not come from what she had read or from someone else's suggestions but started from a concern that she had about her own teaching. In Chapter Two we also discussed how teacher-research is primarily for teachers (and their learners) themselves, and so should be carried out in ways that are manageable for them, not being an added burden. It is only logical then that the main motivation for your research will come from you, from your own experience, purposes and needs, and not from the outside.

You are possibly thinking; "But, how do I start? There are so many things going on in my classes – so many issues to address, so many problems to solve, so many puzzles to resolve. First, it is important to keep in mind that your research can originate from a) a success story, b) a puzzle or c) a challenging situation:

A. A success story: Something that worked and you would like to explore further.

For example:

You noticed that using short stories to develop reading comprehension improved your students reading skills. You may now want to know what aspects of your students' skills improved or what kind of stories were more successful. You may also want to explore whether other narrative genres (such as comics) can have the same desired effect.

B. A puzzle: Doubts or questions you have about your students and their learning.

For example:

Your students have expressed to you on a number of occasions that they get bored in class. You observe them for a while and you notice they are not engaged during your lessons even when you plan more active activities. You would like to know what they think about the class and how lessons could become more engaging for them.

C. A challenging situation: Something that didn't work – you would like to know why.

For example:

You began to use role-play in class to help your students become more confident speaking the language. However, they didn't respond well to the activity and they tell you they still feel embarrassed and anxious when speaking in front of people. You want to know why this happens.



Most teachers have many issues they would like to address and a useful way to start narrowing down your focus is by thinking of different areas or categories of classroom life. We have adapted some categories originally suggested by Michael Wallace¹ in the following list:

A. classroom management: situations relating to students' behaviour, classroom organisation, etc.

B. appropriate materials: issues that you may have with a textbook, reading books or technological resources and equipment

C. particular areas of teaching: situations related to skills teaching (e.g. writing), content (e.g. grammar or pronunciation) or overall approaches (e.g. task-based learning)

D. students' attitudes, achievement or motivation: issues relating to students' interest, progress etc. Here you could also include issues relating to student-teacher rapport

E. other

¹ Wallace, M, 1997. *Action Research for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Task 4.1

Using the categories suggested above, complete the following table with notes on particular issues you might wish to explore further (in the case of a success you could build on), to clarify (in the case of a puzzle) or to solve / improve (in the case of a challenging situation).

Category	Your own issue(s)
A. classroom management	
B. appropriate materials	
C. particular areas of teaching	
D. students' attitudes, achievement or motivation	
E. any other	

Task 4.2 @

Read again the stories shared by Andrea and Leyla (cf. Chapter Three). Identify the main motivations these teachers had for their research (success story, puzzle or challenging situation?) and decide which category of classroom life (from a. to e. in Task 4.1 above) their research was most related to.

1. Andrea's story about ending lessons	
Motivation and category:	

2. Leyla's story about writing	
Motivation and category:	

Whether you start with a problem, puzzle, doubt, worry or even success, you will need to decide on one of these to focus on (since you cannot address all issues which are of interest to you at once), and then you need to come up with some questions related to your focus. In the rest of this chapter we'll first be helping you to find a focus. Then we'll move on to how to formulate 'good' questions, and then you'll be almost ready to start your own research.

Narrowing down to a particular topic and deciding on questions can be hard – sometimes it's the hardest part of the research process, as there are so many interesting things in classrooms that can be researched!

4.2 Your own motivations – and narrowing down your focus

The motivations we suggested above can lead you to understand your classroom, your students and your teaching better and/or change them, via teacher-research. To do research, though, you first need to choose a particular topic, in other words narrow down to a major focus from all the possible focuses you could have. The following activities will help you do this:

Task 4.3

Bearing in mind your answers to Task 4.1, try to write sentences for each of the following situations:

a) Things that worked and you would like to explore further:

I am happy about _____

b) Doubts or questions you have about your students and their learning:

I am unsure about _____

c) Things that didn't work – you would like to know why:

I am unhappy about _____

You may have found that there are several topics that you would like to explore and feel are worth pursuing further. However, some topic areas are likely to be easier to approach and/or are more relevant than others for you and your learners. To narrow down your list, we suggest considering what we call 'MUSE': the extent to which each possible topic for research is **Manageable**, **Urgent**, **Significant** and **Engaging**.

Manageable:

This is a criterion that is usually neglected but which it is important to keep in mind. It is very important that you choose a research topic that you can actually explore by yourself in the time that you have available. You may be interested in finding out more about the use of the ELT curriculum or the textbook in your locality but you need to consider whether you can carry it out. If you would like to explore the different classroom layouts that would allow for



a more effective class, then you need to think whether you can actually change the layouts in your classroom. If the answer is 'no' in these cases, then it could be better to consider an alternative topic area.

Urgent:

There are issues that you may need to address as soon as possible for a number of reasons, for example when something is affecting your or your students' emotional well-being and maybe also having an impact on their learning. If, for example, you have been teaching a group of learners for some months and notice no improvements due to their behaviour, then looking at this situation may be more urgent than exploring other areas, particularly when time is also a factor.



Significant:

The area you focus on also needs to be significant, meaning it is something that you, your learners and maybe also your school can benefit from. For example, if you notice that your learners can read and write appropriately for their level but cannot communicate in spoken form then you may want to address this issue. This may not be a pressing need to be addressed quickly (unlike if it is 'urgent') but it is significant since you know your learners need to develop oracy as well as literacy. Similarly, if you have noticed that classroom management is a general issue of concern in your school, then a topic in this category could be considered significant.







Engaging:

It is important that the topic that you choose is interesting for you and is something that you are willing to focus on and spend time on. If you focus on an area you have simply read about or been told you 'should' focus on, the research process may become a burden. Ideally, Exploratory Action Research is an activity that both you and your learners will enjoy.



Task 4.4

Look at the ideas you wrote about in task 4.3 as possible motivations for doing research. Now evaluate them according to the MUSE criteria by placing ticks (or scores out of 5) in the grid below. Hopefully, one of your topics will tick all the boxes!

				
	MANAGEABLE	URGENT	SIGNIFICANT	ENGAGING
1				
2				
3				

If you are still not sure about a possible topic, keep a journal for a week, using the following format to guide your thinking.

1. Something I liked about my class today
2. Something I am unsure about from my class today
3. Something that didn't work well in my class today

After one week, go back to your journal and read your ideas. You may find a potential topic there. If you don't, do not despair, it is better to take your time and continue writing in your journal until you feel good about the area you will research. It is also advisable to talk to your colleagues about situations that are puzzling or disturbing you. This can help you choose a good area to focus on.

4.3 From topic to exploratory questions

In the previous chapter, we presented Exploratory Action Research (EAR) to you as a way to explore, understand and potentially change your practice.

A good way to start your EAR project is to take your topic / area of focus and to 'unpack' it. By this we mean, exploring inside it further. To use another analogy, this process can be compared to peeling an onion.



Before we start peeling an onion, what we see is the outer layer – what is evident to our eyes. After that, layer after layer is uncovered as we peel the onion.

If we apply this process to our possible research topic, the result will be a series of questions that can help us get to our main question or questions and then help us 'see' what is not immediately evident. Sometimes, because we are so immersed in a situation, it is hard to think of ways to uncover the issue. Here, the help of a critical friend is highly useful and recommended. A critical friend can be a colleague you trust or a mentor (an experienced colleague that you can go to for guidance). In the previous chapter you read Andrea's account of her research into ending lessons. Andrea had a mentor who supported her during her research.

Below, you will find an extract from the conversation Andrea had with her mentor when she started. You will see how, in this dialogue, the mentor helped Andrea 'peel the onion' and start to establish research questions:

Dialogue between Andrea and her mentor

Andrea: *My main concern is how I finish my lessons. I just feel it is not effective.*

Mentor: *When you say how I 'finish my lessons', what part of the class is it exactly and how long does it take?*

Andrea: *It's the very last bit, the last five minutes of my lesson.*

Mentor: *When you say, 'it's not effective', what do you mean exactly? What is it that you don't like about it?*

Andrea: *I don't know, I just feel it's not right. I can feel it's not working out. When I finish my lessons I don't see what I would like to see. I don't think it's good.*

Mentor: *But what do you mean by 'good'? What's an 'effective' ending of a lesson for you?*

Andrea: *Mmm... I think it should capture the main topics of the lesson. I've also read that it shouldn't take too long.*

Mentor: *I see. Have you asked your colleagues about this?*

Andrea: *Not really.*

Mentor: *Would it help to read about it? Maybe asking your colleagues as well?*

Andrea: *Yes, that's a good idea.*

Mentor: *Have you asked your learners what they think about this part of your lessons?*

Andrea: *No. I hadn't thought of asking them. I could do that as well.*

Mentor: *What is it that you do in that part of lesson?*

Andrea: *I ask my students to summarise the main points of the lesson.*



Mentor: *How do you do that?*

Andrea: *I ask them what they learned that day, but maybe that's not working.*

Mentor: *Are you fully aware of what you do? Could you make a list of what you do?*

Andrea: *Well, it happens really fast.*

Mentor: *Would it help to look in more detail at what you do?*

Andrea: *Yes, of course. There are things that I may do that I don't notice.*

Mentor: *From this puzzle that you have about wrapping-up, then, what are the things you need to get more information about, then?*

Andrea: *I think I need to find out what an effective ending of lessons would ideally look like. I also need to know what actually happens when I finish my lessons. And I think I should find out more about what the students think about this part of our lessons.*

The dialogue that you have just read illustrates how Andrea became able to focus the exploration phase of her EAR with the help of her mentor. This is something that you can also try to do with the help of a critical friend and/or by yourself.

Task 4.5 @

The conversation on the previous page between Andrea and her mentor illustrates how various questions can be asked about a given situation. Based on this conversation, what do you think Andrea’s main exploratory questions could be?

1	
2	
3	

Look in the answer key to discover the research questions she actually set out to answer.

4.4 Teresa’s exploratory questions

As you have seen, in order for you to understand a situation better and gather data effectively, it is important to have a particular question or questions in mind which you will later – with evidence – be able to answer.

Here is an example from a Chilean Champion Teacher, Teresa Ríos, in her own words (you have read a third-person account of her research already, if you did the follow-up task for Chapter One). Teresa is a high school teacher, who was concerned about her students not speaking English in class. Read her description and pay attention to how, from her main topic area, she proposes exploratory questions (EQs).

“I believe it is very important for my students to use the language they are learning: they can read and write simple texts but I noticed that my students did not speak in class as was expected. I was afraid that they did not have enough vocabulary to communicate what they ought to, that they were not easily communicating orally their thoughts or opinions or whatever they wanted to say. I wanted to know why my students did not speak in class. Why was it so hard to them to use the language orally?”

I needed my students to speak in class, because the national curriculum says that we need to emphasise speaking.

I wanted to make sure what the problem was for them in using the language they are acquiring or they have been acquiring since they started English at school, using simple patterns. I know speaking is one of the most difficult skills to develop.

In order to develop this project, my initial research questions were:

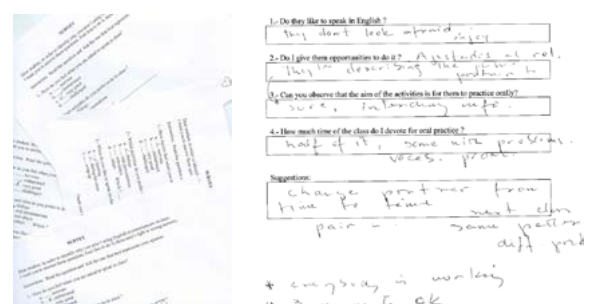
- *Why is it that my students do not speak in class?*
- *Do my students like to speak in English?*
- *What opportunities do they have to speak in class?*

Having these questions in mind, I needed to reflect on my teaching so I asked two of my colleagues about the kind of activities they do to have their students practise orally. Simple questions like ‘What strategies do you use in class to make students speak more freely?’. Both answered “dialogues”, guided ones at first, then personalizing them.

Secondly, I prepared a survey to my students in order to collect data about the activities they liked most and when (at the beginning or the end of the class) they liked to speak or have oral activities. Three questions about how they feel, and what activities are their favourite ones in class.

Then, I invited a fellow teacher to observe my class and check which activities I was doing to have my students practice orally. I handed him a sheet of paper with some questions to lead his “critical-friendly-visit”.

I also had informal conversations, after the surveys, with my students about the activities they like most/least, and what they did like to do orally.



After the strategies mentioned above, I found out some interesting things about the activities they liked most: they preferred small plays and dialogues, and one thing that was appealing to them was tourism. One of my students mentioned the need they have to speak when they meet a tourist in the city. We live in an area where tourists are common and my students mentioned they wanted to learn how to talk to a tourist, and how to give them some directions, instructions or orientations to get to places in the city.

They said that they would like to speak more in class.

My colleague mentioned that students only worked with one partner and they did not have more opportunities to talk. He suggested they exchange partners.

The information I collected told me that I was not giving them enough time to practice: I was only giving one speaking activity per class, or even only once a week.”

In the story above, you were able to see how Teresa decided to start her research by exploring her problematic situation further, asking herself questions which could help her do this. Teresa’s main exploratory question was the following:

- Why is it that my students do not speak in class?

And she had a particular interest in two things:

- Do my students like to speak in English?
- What opportunities do they have to speak in class?

As you can see, these questions attempt to:

- A. Clarify and understand the main issue
- B. Give a sense of direction to the research process
- C. Assist the teacher find answers in her own context before leaping into action

4.5 Your own questions

In order to come up with your own exploratory questions, you can think of questions which (1) explore your own perceptions, (2) explore others’ perceptions (in particular, students’) and (3) explore behaviour (your students’ and also yours!).

1. Exploring your own perceptions is important for identifying why a situation is important to you, what you understand about it and what you expect, particularly if you are unhappy with it. In the case of Andrea in Chapter Three, she needed to understand what a wrapping up was in order to establish why she was dissatisfied with the way she developed this stage in her lessons. Consequently, she needed to explore her views of an effective wrapping up.

2. Exploring others’ perceptions is also an important focus, since you need to know what your learners (or sometimes parents, or your colleagues) think and/or feel in a particular situation in order to fully understand it. In 4.4 above, Teresa asked her students about their preferences regarding speaking tasks, since she felt students were not communicating effectively in English in her class – in other words, she asked students what they thought of activities in order to understand this situation from their perspectives.
3. By exploring your students’ and also your own behaviour, you will get a clear picture of what actually happens in the classroom; what you do and what your students do. Both Andrea and Teresa had this focus on behaviour: Andrea looked at the way her students behaved at the end of the lesson and Teresa explored what she and her students did to practise speaking. In this way, both Andrea and Teresa obtained important and, in some ways, surprising data about what they do, the way they teach and the way their students react to their teaching.

Exploring my perceptions

E.g.

What do I mean by _____?

What do I think / feel about _____?

Why do I think _____ happens?

What do I want to see happening instead of _____?

Exploring others’ perceptions

E.g.

What do my students think / feel about _____?

What do my colleagues think of _____?

Exploring behaviour

E.g.

When/How often does _____ happen?

What do I do / say when _____ occurs?

What do my students do / say when _____ occurs?

Task 4.6 @

Let's practise asking questions using the categories and question frames above, using one situation. Look at the example and then pose a question for the topic provided. Check the answers in the answer key.

Example:

Topic: My students speak in English only to me but not to each other.

Exploring my perceptions

In what parts of the class do I think students speak to me?

Why do I think it's important for them to speak to one another in English?

Exploring others' perceptions

What do my students think about this?

Exploring behaviour

In pair work, which students do and don't speak in English?

In pair work, when do they start speaking in English?

Now try to write some questions in the chart below for another provided topic.

Topic: I often have too little time at the end of the class to explain homework clearly.

Exploring my perceptions

Exploring others' perceptions

Exploring behaviour

In Andrea's example – which you read in the previous chapter – and also in Teresa's example in 4.4, you will have found that there are two or three main EQs being asked, under two or all of the three categories (own and others' perceptions; and behaviour). This is not necessarily always the case but it is good if you both try to keep your questions to a manageable number and attempt to look at an issue from different perspectives.

Let's try with your own topic now!

Task 4.7

Write down your main topic area (from Task 4.4) and then propose your own exploratory questions using the examples you have read as guidance and also the question frames provided in this section.

The area I will focus on is _____



1. _____ ?

2. _____ ?

3. _____ ?

4. _____ ?

4.6 SMART questions

It's important to try to make your research questions as good as they can be before you continue the research process. But what do we mean by 'good'? One way of thinking about this, as with goals in general, is to see if your exploratory research questions are 'SMART'.¹ Good exploratory research questions are:

STUDY-ORIENTED

MEASURABLE

ACCURATE

REALISTIC

TOPIC-FOCUSED

1. Study-oriented:

Oriented towards the study or examination of a situation rather than towards action upon it. Since, at this stage, the questions to ask are exploratory questions, the focus should be on exploring a situation in order to understand it, rather than on taking action to change it immediately. For example, not 'How can I improve my students' writing?' (even though this might be your overall concern) but instead 'What am I doing now to support my students' writing skills?'

2. Measurable:

Possible to answer; some things are interesting but not easily observable or easy to record and are therefore hard to measure. For example, not 'What goes on in students' heads when I ask them a question?' but instead 'How do students say they feel when I ask them a question?'

3. Accurate:

Specific, concrete and well-defined, not too general or vague. Also, 'down to earth', so that you are able to answer the question by, for example, looking at your classroom or thinking about your practice or asking your students. For example, not 'How motivated are my students?' but instead 'What activities do my students say they like/dislike in class?'

4. Realistic

Feasible to answer, not too idealistic; some things may be measurable but not by you, or even by you in a team, within the time you have available or within your individual capabilities. Ask yourself: 'Am I going to be able to answer this question myself?'. For example, not 'What were the intentions of the textbook writers in including these particular topics in the coursebook?' but instead 'What do different teachers say they do when they come to the topics about teenage drug use, unwanted pregnancy and refugees?'

5. Topic-focused

Related to your overall topic; there are lots of questions which are interesting to attempt to answer, but you should try to keep focused on your central topic, and leave other questions to another time. For example, if your main topic is how to improve the instructions you give for activities, not 'What kind of speaking activities help students to speak more?' but instead 'How do I give instructions for different kinds of activities?'

Task 4.8 @

Look at the following questions and decide whether they are 'SMART' or not. If not, which of the SMART criteria do they fail to meet? You can check your answers in the answer key.

Exploratory question	SMART?	Criterion
1. What affects my students' learning English?	No	Not realistic or measurable
2. When do my students use English to communicate with each other?		
3. Why don't my students learn?		
4. How many times do my students use their dictionaries when doing their homework?		
5. How can films promote my students' motivation?		
6. How often in my lesson do my students work in pairs?		

¹ Our definition of SMART is modified from the original.

Task 4.9

Have a go, with a partner, in a group, or on your own, at 'SMARTing' the exploratory research questions you wrote down at the end of section 4.5 (in Task 4.7) above. How can you make them more Study-focused, Measurable, Accurate, Realistic, Topic-focused? Write down your revised questions here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Task 4.10 @

Go back to task 4.8. Try to rewrite the questions you identified as not SMART, to make them SMART-er.

Exploratory question	Edited question (only those which need improvement)
1. What affects my students' learning English?	
2. When do my students use English to communicate with each other?	
3. Why don't my students learn?	
4. How many times do my students use their dictionaries when doing their homework?	
5. How can films promote my students' motivation?	
6. How often in my lesson do my students work in pairs?	

Task 4.11

Leave your own questions in 4.9 above to 'rest' for 24 hours. Then, look at the questions and 'SMART' them again. Also, this time, ask a critical friend or a mentor to look at them and SMART them as well. Write down your revised questions here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Summary and follow-up

This chapter took you, step by step, through a process from having various concerns in your mind to deciding on one of them to focus on (via MUSE); to devising research questions which explore your own perceptions, others' perceptions and/or behaviour; and then to making your questions as 'SMART' as they can be. Deciding on research questions is one of the most difficult, and yet most important parts of the (teacher-)research process. Questions are never 'perfect', though, and it's probably time to move on. We will move forward, in the next chapter, to deciding on what kinds of information, or 'data', will help you answer the research questions you have come up with.

Follow-up

In her story, Daniela came up with a set of exploratory questions in order to understand her situation better. To prepare for the next chapter, we suggest that you read her story here: <http://bit.ly/Daniela-Gajardo>

Fill in the boxes with notes about the different things she did in her research. Alternatively, ask and answer the questions with a colleague:

Daniela's research	
1. What did she decide to explore?	
2. What questions did she ask?	
3. What did she do to gather information?	
4. What information did she get?	

5. How can I explore?

By asking yourself questions (or by having someone else ask you questions), as you did in the last chapter, you've already begun to explore the situation you chose to focus on, in the sense that you've begun to think carefully about it and have become more aware of what you do and what you don't know. In this chapter, we will suggest how you can continue to reflect in this way and will also suggest some ways you can look for external sources of information to answer your exploratory questions.



After briefly revisiting Andrea's story, we will learn about twelve different kinds of data source that teachers have found it realistic to use in Exploratory Action Research. We will then see how Mauro – another Champion Teacher – gathered data to answer his research questions, and we will also see how useful it can be to combine several different sources of information. On this basis, we provide some tasks to help you decide how to gather data to find answers for your own research questions.

5.1 Different sources of information

Let's recall Andrea's story, which we first came across in Chapter Three. Her exploratory questions (EQs) were:

1. What is a wrapping up?
2. What are the characteristics of my wrapping up?
3. How do my students react in that part of the class?

Once she had gathered enough information to answer these questions, she decided to try various new ways of wrapping up her class. As we saw at the end of Chapter Three, the basic 'action research question' (AQ) is always:

4. What are the effects of the change(s) that I attempt?

Andrea didn't clearly state this question in her report, but it's clear that, after she explored the situation, she decided to try out different activities at the end of her lessons, and in each case, tried to see how effective these activities were. In order to do this she compared what happened with what she had previously discovered.

Task 5.1 @

What, more precisely, did she do to try to answer her research questions (1., 2., 3., and 4.)? Write (a), (b), (c) and/or (d) next to each question in Box A below... [Hint: (b) and (d) can be used more than once]

Box A. Andrea's exploratory and action research questions:

- | |
|--|
| 1. What is a wrapping up? |
| 2. What are the characteristics of my wrapping up? |
| 3. How do my students react in that part of the class? |
| 4. What are the effects of the change(s) that I attempt? |

Box B. What did Andrea do to gather information?

- | |
|---|
| A. surfed the web for answers. |
| B. asked a colleague to observe her class. |
| C. asked some colleagues about wrapping up. |
| D. asked students' reactions |

As you've seen, Andrea used different kinds of data to answer different exploratory research questions. And when it came to the action research part of her research, she used similar data sources, so that she could clearly see the effects of her new activities.

In this chapter we'll be looking more closely at the different possible sources of information you can use, how you can access them, and how you can match them effectively to your research questions.

Remember, we are concerned with ways of researching which don't place too much of an extra burden on you as a busy teacher. Here, then, are some sources of information that secondary school teachers have actually managed to use without much extra work in the projects we've been involved in:

1. Your own written reflections and/or notes	2. Other people's written ideas on the topic
3. Notes from informal conversations with colleagues	4. Reflective writing by students
5. Notes or recordings of focus group discussions	6. Notes or recordings of interviews / chats with individuals
7. Responses to a questionnaire	8. Lesson plans and materials
9. Lesson recordings	10. A critical friend's notes about your lesson
11. Pictures of your class	12. Students' performance on tasks (written or recorded)

Let's see now what using each of these sources involves, and let's consider some basic advantages of each of them – in other words, what they can be used for (it's important to remember that you won't be using all of them – just selecting from among them to suit your research question(s)). As you go through, make a mental note of whether each kind of data seems best suited to answering questions about: your own perceptions; others' (e.g. students') perceptions; or actual behaviour or performance.

1. Your own written reflections and/or notes.

Reflective writing by you (e.g. immediately after a class, perhaps in note form, and/or in fuller sentences when you're at home) is a good way to explore your own perceptions in relation to a particular topic or question – for example, self-questioning what you mean by something. Andrea used reflective writing to ask herself what an 'effective' ending to a lesson meant to her, for example.

Unless you already keep a diary or reflective journal about your teaching, it can be difficult at first to start to write about your thoughts and feelings. If so, try writing in notes at first, and don't forget that the writing is just for you – you don't need to show it to anyone. Try to write as 'freely' as you can, as thoughts come to you, without worrying about punctuation, grammar etc.: so long as you can read it later, that's fine. It can be hard to find time to write reflectively, but even 20 minutes doing it is time well spent!

2. Other people's written ideas on the topic

Besides keeping notes of your own perceptions of a situation, it is also useful to know what other people have written about the topic. By reading, you can compare other people's views with your own and also learn more about the topic you will explore. Andrea did this when she decided to find out more about the meaning and role of 'wrapping up'.

What she did was to surf the web to look for information about it and she found some good websites which suggested that a wrapping-up was effective when it involved students and was focused on their learning.

Collecting this kind of information about a topic is something you can do either by surfing the web, as Andrea did, or by reading magazines, journals or books.

Task 5.2 @

Let's practise looking for other people's written ideas on a topic. This time, and just for the sake of this task, please find additional information about 'wrapping up' to complement what Andrea found. Surf the web and take some notes about the ideas you find.

Note: We will also do the exercise; you can check what we found in the answer key.

3. Notes from informal conversations with colleagues

You can also explore your own perceptions in quite a natural way by having an informal conversation with a colleague. Sometimes we don't realise what we really think about a topic because we haven't had a chance to reflect on it in depth. Talking to a colleague about something gives you the opportunity to express your views in the setting of a natural conversation.

Taking notes about some of the ideas expressed during the conversation and what you think about them gives you the opportunity to gather interesting data about your own perceptions.

As an example, read the following dialogue between two teachers. Pay attention to the way in which Isabel starts to reflect and share her views about her students' lack of motivation:

Isabel: *I've been thinking about my students' lack of motivation.*

Mario: *What exactly is troubling you?*

Isabel: *Well, they don't seem to enjoy my classes. They don't get engaged in the activities. They don't seem to enjoy anything I do! Does that happen to you?*

Mario: *It happens to me with some classes, not all. But yes, it does happen.*

Isabel: *This really bothers me and I need to think why it bothers me so much.*

Mario: *Well, it's not nice to prepare activities that students don't enjoy.*

Isabel: *Exactly, that's the main problem for me, too. I prepare what I think is a fun class, and they don't show any interest.*

Mario: *But do they tell you that they don't like the activities or do you just feel it?*

Isabel: *Well, they don't seem very interested – but they haven't actually told me that. And if they are bored, I guess it could be for another reason, so maybe I should find a way to find out! Another thing, though, is it takes me a long time to get through activities because I spend such a long time trying to get the students to do them in the first place.*

Mario: *The same thing happens to me but I've noticed that it always happens with the same group of students.*

Isabel: *I get the feeling that, in my case, they're all unhappy or bored, or uninterested. They just don't seem to want to participate in anything I plan.*

In this dialogue, you can see how Isabel manages to go deeper into the idea that her students lack motivation. She discovers that their apparent lack of participation is upsetting her mainly because:

- her students don't participate in the activities she prepares;
- they look bored and unhappy;
- her activities take longer than expected because she spends time trying to get students on task.

She also realises that she might need to consult the students to find out what they actually think.

Notes on a conversation like this would be useful to Isabel because they enable her to uncover her own perceptions. By then moving on to collect information about her students' perceptions and also their behaviour, she will be able to confirm whether her concerns are valid and, later, how she can address the situation.

4. Reflective writing by students

Here we move into thinking about how to gather others' perceptions about a situation, in this case students' perceptions (opinions, thoughts, feelings).

Reflective writing by students is a good way to explore their perceptions. You can ask students to write down – in their own mother tongue or in English (the choice is yours!) – what they feel or think about a particular topic. They could write freely, in note form, on a piece of paper that you give them in the last 5–10 minutes of a class, for example (answering a question that you write on the board or dictate to them) – or they could write for homework.

One advantage of this kind of evidence is that opinions / feelings can be expressed openly, especially if you don't require students to write their names. You can learn things you didn't know already. However, the opinions / feelings you learn about may not be shared by many in the class. You can check this by following up with a questionnaire (see 7 below).

5. Notes or recordings of focus group discussions

Something else you could do to discover students' (or other teachers', or parents') perceptions of a particular issue is to get a group of them together outside class time and ask the group for their opinions and thoughts. In this kind of group conversation or 'focus group discussion', it's important that you try to get members of the group talking with one another as freely as possible, instead of you being at the centre of attention all the time – so, after one person replies to a question, you should look around the group and invite others to respond or contribute additional opinions or thoughts. After a while, it may not be necessary for you to do this – in other words, the discussion among members of the group themselves may start to flow more naturally. If the conversation starts to go away from the focus of your research, however, direct it gently back towards your research topic.

One advantage of focus group discussions is that you can get several people's opinions in a relatively short time. You can also sometimes find that people go deeper into a topic than in an individual interview, because other people's opinions stimulate them to share more. On the other hand, it can be difficult to find a convenient time for several people to get together.

6. Notes or recordings of interviews / chats with individuals

In an individual interview, some people may share more with you than they would in a group situation. However, don't forget that if you are interviewing a student of yours – or even a parent – they may wish to 'please' you with their answers (in other words, they are unlikely to tell you the 'whole truth' about what they think or feel). Anonymous reflective writing – or completion of an anonymous questionnaire – can sometimes get you more honest answers! In any case, try to relax the person being interviewed via social talk before the 'proper interview' begins.

One advantage of an individual interview – or even an informal conversation – is that you can go deeply into a particular issue; more deeply, perhaps, than with a questionnaire. Prepare your questions in advance, but be open to the idea of going in unpredicted directions with further questions if you feel you are uncovering new and useful information. Finally, don't forget to take notes during interviews (focus group as well as individual interviews), and turn these notes into a fuller account soon after the interview – before you forget what was said. If you make a recording, you can, of course, make your account even more accurate, but it can take a long time to transcribe an interview – and good notes, taken during and/or immediately after an interview, can be equally useful.



7. Responses to a questionnaire

Gathering information about people's attitudes, feelings, ideas and opinions ('perceptions', in short) is very often done via questionnaires in both classroom research and other forms of research (for example, political opinion or market research surveys). In fact, when many people think of 'research' they may tend to think automatically of 'questionnaires'. However, we've deliberately put questionnaires at number 7 (i.e. not number 1) in order to show you that there are other, equally good, if not better, ways of finding out about people's perceptions (numbers 1 to 6 above).

Questionnaires have the major advantage that they make it possible to gather perceptions of a relatively large number of people quite easily. However, questionnaires have disadvantages, too. For example, in an interview you can go deeper and deeper into a particular topic according to what someone replies, but a questionnaire doesn't allow you to do that. Also, it can be quite time-consuming to make a questionnaire, and the questions need to be very clear. It can sometimes be easier just to ask for students' quick reflective writing, (4. above) or to have conversations or hold interviews (5. and 6.). Or you can do these things first and use the responses to help you make a questionnaire.

This is exactly how Javier Ávalos, another Champion Teacher, made his own questionnaire. He was interested in finding out his students' feelings or attitudes towards learning English. First he sat down and talked with his students and noted down their individual replies. Because he wanted to know if the whole class shared these perceptions, he then put the individual replies he'd received into a grid, as you can see below. The original survey was in Spanish (we have translated the questionnaire items into English below), since Javier wanted to make sure his students could understand the questions.

Statements	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree
1. Inglés es un idioma muy difícil. [English is a very difficult language.]			
2. Me pongo nervioso cada vez que tengo clases de Inglés. [I feel nervous whenever I have English class.]			
3. Inglés me frustra porque no sé nada. [English frustrates me because I don't know anything.]			
4. Me siento imposibilitado de aprender inglés. [I think it's impossible for me to learn English.]			
5. Siento que tardaré mucho tiempo en aprender inglés. [I think English will take a long time to learn.]			
6. Yo puedo aprender inglés pero siento que es difícil. [I can learn English but I think it's difficult.]			
7. Me siento motivado debido a mis notas en inglés. [I feel motivated because of my marks in English.]			
8. No aprendo inglés por flojera. [I don't learn English because I'm lazy.]			
9. Me siento avergonzado en inglés porque pienso que me puedo equivocar. [I feel ashamed in English because I think I can be wrong.]			
10. Me da vergüenza preguntar en inglés. [I feel embarrassed to ask questions in English.]			

Extract from Javier Ávalos' questionnaire.

We will come back to Javier's story in Chapter Seven. For a different example of a questionnaire from the Champion Teachers programme in Chile, you can also look at the example in 'Extra Material' (no. 2) at the back of this book.

In both of these examples, the questionnaire contains only 'closed' questions – that is, the students responding to the questionnaire are not given the opportunity to write freely, in their own words, about their perceptions. Instead, they are forced to choose from a 'closed' set of options. This has the advantage that you can compare different students' answers quite easily by counting and decide on what the majority of students think about a particular issue.

However, you can sometimes learn a lot by also including some open 'Wh-' questions in a questionnaire, or – if you want to both give them support for writing and control the variety of answers to some extent – by inviting them to complete sentences, the first part of which you provide. For example, instead of the first item in Javier's questionnaire above, he could have asked students to complete the following sentence:

'English is a _____ language.'

A completely open equivalent 'Wh-' question would have been 'What kind of a language do you think English is?'

Do you need students to write their name on their questionnaire sheets before returning them? This is an issue you will have to decide – if they do write their names you will be able to follow up by asking certain students what they mean by what they have written. If not, then they may feel more free to write honestly about their perceptions. Sometimes, a good compromise is to tell students to write their names only if they don't mind talking with you later about their answers.

Task 5.3 @

Try converting some more of the closed questions in Javier's questionnaire into sentence completion questions. Do this with items 2., 7. and 10. Now think of completely open questions starting with 'How ...?' to correspond with the same items.

8. Lesson plans and materials

So far, we have been considering sources of information about perceptions – your own and those of others (students', parents' or your colleagues'). Now we move into looking at different kinds of behaviour. Lesson plans, and materials you prepare for your lessons, can be quite useful for this, if you write notes on them or about them during or immediately after the class.

For example, let's imagine that you're interested in why you always seem to run out of time and why you never finish your lesson plan. On your lesson plan, you could make sure to write how long you intend to spend on each activity. During the lesson you – or someone observing you – could write down how long each activity actually took. Then you can know which activities took longer than expected and you can begin to think of reasons why. You can write other kinds of notes on lesson plans or on lesson materials, too. Of course, it can be easier to know what happened in a lesson if you have a recording (9. below) or if someone else watches your lesson (10. below).

9. Lesson recordings

Making either an audio- or a video-recording of your lesson can help you to understand what's going on in your class from a new and different perspective. You can simply play the recording and use it to take notes about things you may have missed when you were teaching, or, if you have time, you can transcribe parts of the lesson to get a good, objective record of what went on in the classroom talk (yours, the students' or both). In fact, if your research questions relate to any aspect of classroom talk (for example, if you're concerned about the way you give instructions or ask questions, or the way students respond to your attempts to correct their mistakes), then making a recording and transcribing parts of it will be almost essential – even though you can also get good insights by asking a critical friend to observe your class (see 10. below).

Before you attempt to make a recording, consider carefully – according to your research questions – what you are interested in 'capturing'. If you are just interested in some aspect of classroom talk and not other kinds of behaviour, then an audio-recording might be sufficient, but a video-recording can help you pinpoint who is speaking, if that is important. If, on the other hand, you are most interested in your own classroom talk, then an audio-recorder can be placed on your desk, near where you normally speak from, and you do not need to worry so much about capturing other voices. It can be quite hard to record students' voices in whole class interaction, and in this case a video-recording of the class will be more useful, perhaps combined with notes that you or an observer takes about who speaks when.

10. A critical friend's notes about your lesson

To explore your students' or your own behaviour in a situation, you can do so by observing the situation yourself, taking notes (as in 8. above) perhaps with the help of a recording (9. above), or you can ask someone else to observe what happens and to share their observation notes.

Asking a friend to observe you is useful because, even if you use a recording to observe your own classes, you can miss some things because they appear just 'normal'. Having a critical friend take notes about your lesson is good for giving you 'another pair of eyes', providing a new perspective on what happens.

There are limitations and difficulties, of course, including the following:

- Your critical friend may tend to want to judge your teaching as 'good' or 'bad'. It's very important that your colleague understands that their role is not to judge but to describe, and to support your exploration. Explain to them clearly what it is that you are interested in so that they focus on that. In order to do this, you can give them a set of questions or a list of things to observe in order to have a more focused observation.
- Your students (and you, too!) may behave differently because someone else is in the room and taking notes. One way to overcome this is by explaining to your students the reason for your colleague's presence and by assuring them that the notes this person is taking will not be used to evaluate either them or you.
- You may have difficulties finding a colleague who is available or willing to observe you. This can be a difficult problem to solve, but joining a local teachers' group or association or (in some countries) talking to a school inspector or adviser, or even head teacher, could be one option.

Despite all these limitations and difficulties, having a colleague take notes about your lesson is still a very useful way to get information about your and your students' behaviour in the classroom. Just one good thing about it is that you can get feedback immediately (whereas it may take you some time before you can listen to or watch a recording of your lesson, for example). Having a clear focus for the observation, as we've seen, is very important, and you can see a sample observation framework in 'Extra Material' (no. 2) at the back of this book, which might help you in designing your own.



11. Pictures of your class

In some cases, in relation to some research questions, taking photos of your class can be helpful. For example, if your question relates to the way the desks are arranged, or to the way that you use the chalkboard or a whiteboard, photos will be useful. Mauro – one of the Champion Teachers, whose story you will be reading later in this chapter – used photos to keep a record of the changes he brought about in classroom arrangements. Together with other sources, this helped him see the effects of these changes.

12. Students' performance on tasks (written or recorded).

You can look at and analyse students' written work to understand issues in their performance. For example, if you are interested in why students appear to be using a particular grammatical structure incorrectly, it would be logical to begin by looking at samples of their work and describing the way it is used there. For oral production, you could record a group of students engaging in a speaking task and then transcribe what you hear. Transcription is quite time-consuming, so you could choose to write down just those utterances where the particular problem you're interested in seems to be occurring.

You can also combine these techniques with chats or interviews with students which help you understand reasons for particular aspects of their performance. If you come to compare samples of their later work (for example, following an action research intervention) with their initial performance, it will still be valuable to get students' own reflections on reasons for change or on the difficulties they're still facing.

Task 5.4 @

Let's summarise! From what you've read, which of the kinds of data 1. to 12. would be suitable for:

- A. Exploring your own perceptions
- B. Exploring others' perceptions
- C. Exploring behaviour (including performance)

Write numbers from 1. to 12. next to A., B. and C. below. Then check your answers in the answer key at the back of the book.

Focus	Kind of data
A. Exploring your own perceptions	
B. Exploring others' perceptions	
C. Exploring behaviour (including performance)	

5.2 Mauro's story

Below is a story of research by Mauro Sáez, a Chilean teacher who was interested in exploring better ways to organise his class. Read his story, paying special attention to the ways he gathered evidence.

Mauro's story

"The topic of my research is how to arrange my classroom. Why did I choose this topic? I attended a seminar "Summer Camp" where tons of interesting topics were exposed and I was amazed and ready to put them into practice. As the academic year started, there was one idea that I noticed that wasn't working for most of my classes, and it involved rearranging my students' seating. Taking that into account I wanted to find out the way that best suits my students when it comes to the arrangement of the classroom and how they perceive it.

So I stated my exploratory questions as the following:

- How do my students act when they are sitting individually?
- How does the sitting arrangement affect individual work?
- How do students feel about individual work?

For collecting my initial data, I asked a colleague to observe my classes (one where they had to work individually, collaboratively and in groups) and to write down the behaviour of the students during the class. Of course, in order to provide a better observation, I also considered my experience as an English teacher and the regular behaviour of my students. In addition to that I video-recorded a full class in order to obtain some information by myself. As for the data collected from students I created three surveys, one each for a class when students had to work individually, in pairs and in groups.

I gathered the information provided by the surveys and took into account the most repeated ideas provided by the students in order to organize the information. I also consulted with my colleagues about the observations done by my colleague and myself and they all agreed that the behaviour is repetitive through different subjects.

Students show a proper behaviour when working individually but there is a repetitive pattern that most of the students show in class, noticed by the observing teacher as well as myself, which is that whenever they

have questions they look for a classmate to clarify their doubts in the first instance; after that, if the doubt was not clarified, they reach out to the teacher for help – so I started to suppose that students naturally prefer to work with their peers rather than by themselves.

When it came to the students' opinion, they do prefer to work with their classmates but they do not prefer working in groups because they mainly feel that at least one classmate is not going to work properly. A few students prefer to work on their own, while most of them point out that working in pairs is the best class arrangement that suits them in terms of working in a more productive and comfortable environment.

After finding out the results, I asked the school authorities' permission to change the classroom arrangement in order to start implementing pair work. The pairing was a bit difficult because I had to consider the emotional and disciplinary aspects of the pairings.

Luckily I know my students well, so I could pair them up according to their needs and their compatibility. I then implemented activities and classes where my students had to work in pairs.

I was impressed by the results obtained by the students in the final test, where there were over 95% of students with grades from 4.0 to 7.0, while there was only 4% disapproval for the lessons themselves.

As my planning did not originally include activities in pairs I had to create a new set of activities for my class that involved collaborative work. I think that this experience helped me to take into account my students' opinion in relation to how I do my classes and created a comfortable environment.

I now think that I will include from the beginning of the year activities where my students can work in pairs, and I will also encourage my colleagues to implement pair work, as the experience is turning out to be very productive, not solely in academic results but in the students' attitude towards the class."


Task 5.5 @

Based on Mauro's story, look at the table below and complete it by noting the kinds of data he collected to answer his exploratory questions. Use the list of kinds of data shared with you in 5.1 above.

Teacher	Research question	Kind(s) of data
Mauro	1. How do my students behave when they are sitting individually?	
	2. How does the seating arrangement affect individual work?	
	3. How do students feel about individual work?	

Task 5.6 @

In the previous chapter, you read Teresa’s story about her students’ lack of communication in class, particularly in speaking. Try to remember the kinds of data she gathered to answer her questions. You can quickly re-read her story if you don’t remember!

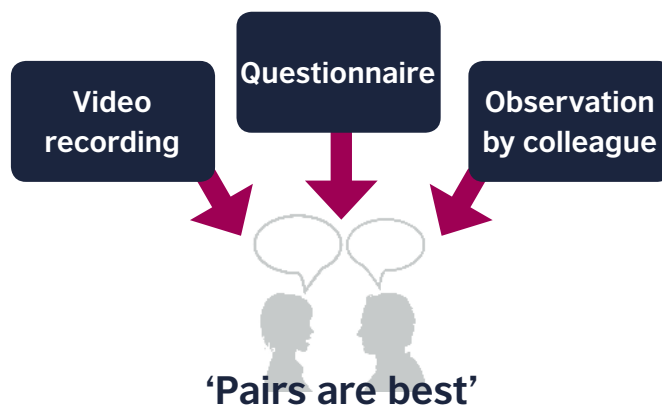
Teacher	Research question	Kind(s) of data
 Teresa	a.1. Why is it that my students do not speak in class?	
	a.2. Do my students like to speak in English?	
	a.3. What opportunities do they have to speak in class?	

5.3 Combining information from different sources

You may have noticed from the Chilean Champion Teachers’ stories we’ve considered in this chapter (Andrea’s, Mauro’s and Teresa’s), that they all collected information from more than one source. For example, Mauro recorded one of his lessons, got a colleague to observe him and also gave a questionnaire to his students. Combining different sources of information has a number of advantages.

One advantage is that it builds up a more complete picture of a situation than just collecting data from one source. For example, you can use a questionnaire to find out the main difficulty your learners have with writing, but this may not help you to understand why this is difficult for them. Interviewing learners can help with this understanding, since you can ask them to expand on their answers, but without the questionnaire, you wouldn’t have known how many students have this difficulty in the first place!

Another advantage is that collecting different types of information can help you to confirm what you see from one source, making your research more reliable. For example, Mauro’s colleague noticed that most of his learners did activities best when working in pairs. When Mauro watched the video recording of his lesson, he also noticed that they seemed to be interacting effectively and were helping each other when they worked in pairs, while in their questionnaire answers, most of his students said that they did prefer to work in pairs. If you get information from only one source, it can be useful to help you understand a situation but it may not be reliable, in other words you may not be able to depend on it to make conclusions. The process of obtaining data from different sources – in order to confirm understanding of a situation – is called ‘triangulation’. To put it in simple terms, it involves looking at a problem from two or more different points of view.



Task 5.7 @

There are sometimes advantages to collecting different types of data in a specific order. Let’s use an example to make this clear:

You have noticed that about half your students either don’t do their homework, or do it badly, and you want to find out more to explore this situation. As this is not something that happens in the classroom, collecting the data directly (e.g. by observing them) is not possible, so you have decided to choose the following three methods of data collection:

1. a focus group discussion with four or five students
2. a short questionnaire for everyone in the class
3. five minutes of reflective writing for everyone in the class, using the following question: What do you think about homework?

What order would you do these in, and why?

Note: Check our answers in the answer key.

What data will you collect?

Now it's your turn! Remind yourself of the exploratory research questions you ended up with at the end of Chapter Four. What kinds of data are you going to try to get to answer each one? Below is our list (from 1. to 12.) of the different kinds of data you could consider accessing, matched against whether they are good for exploring your own perceptions, others' perceptions or behaviour / performance:

Exploring your own perceptions

1. Your own written reflections and/or notes
2. Other's people's written ideas on the topic
3. Notes from informal conversations with colleagues

Exploring others' perceptions

4. Reflective writing by students
5. Notes or recordings of focus group discussions
6. Notes or recordings of interviews/chats with individuals
7. Responses to a questionnaire

Exploring behaviour (including performance)

8. Lessons plans and materials
9. Lesson recordings
10. A critical friend's notes about your lesson
11. Pictures of your class
12. Students' work / students' performance on tasks (written or recorded)

Task 5.8

Write down your exploratory questions in the table below and the exploration focus of each question (own perceptions, others' perceptions, or behaviour). Doing this can help you identify the kind(s) of data you'll need to collect for each question. Then, complete the last column of the table with a kind – or kinds – of data you could realistically access.

Exploratory questions	Focus	Kind of data
Example: What are the characteristics of my wrapping up?	Behaviour	A critical friend's notes about your lesson.
1. _____ _____ _____		
2. _____ _____ _____		
3. _____ _____ _____		




5.4 What should I keep in mind when collecting data?

Let's think further about your own research and your exploratory questions. What kinds of information could you realistically get that would help you to answer them? By 'realistically', we mean information that you can collect yourself or with the support of your colleagues in a relatively short period of time, requiring minimum preparation. As far as possible, gathering information should not be a task that takes too much time away from your normal planning and teaching time.

Other things to consider are more specific to certain ways of collecting data. Since questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations are very common methods used, we provide below a list of things you may want to consider in relation to each of these methods before starting the data collection process.




Here are some tips:

- Look at the twelve different kinds of data in 5.1 above. First, cross off any that are not relevant because of your research focus. For example, if you want to research some aspect of homework, it probably won't be useful to video-record your lessons!
- Think about time and practicality. You're probably busy, so don't be too ambitious. If you collect a little data to start with, you can always go back for more if you need it. Depending on where you work, the resources you have, your learners, and timetabling in your school, some of the options will be more feasible than others.
- Keep your research questions in mind and if possible written in a place where you can see them easily. As soon as you have some ideas for your data collection methods, go back to your research questions and check whether these methods will help you to collect the information you need to answer the question. Imagine that you've collected some data and you're analysing it now: Is it helping you to answer your research questions? You could even try filling in a questionnaire with expected answers, role-play an interview with a friend, etc.

Research method	Things to consider
Questionnaires 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Keep questions simple to avoid confusion and misinterpretations. ■ Use the type of questions that will give you the information you need. It might be useful to vary between closed and open questions (see the example in Extra Material (no. 2) at the back of the book, where spaces are provided for 'other' responses). ■ Keep the questionnaire to the point and brief. Sometimes questionnaires have too many questions which are not relevant. Good questionnaires are not good because they are long but because they ask the right questions in the minimum time possible. ■ Ask a colleague to check the questionnaire and give you feedback and, if possible, ask a student from a different class to answer it in order to make sure questions are clear.
Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Decide your questions before the interview. ■ Plan additional questions in case the responses you get are too short and provide too little information ■ Try to ask 'open' questions and try to avoid 'leading' students to a particular answer ■ Plan a date and time for the interviews to take place ahead of time.
Classroom observations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Decide areas to focus on before the observation. For this you can design an observation checklist (see the example in Extra Material (no. 2) at the back of the book). ■ If you are planning to ask a colleague to observe your classes, make sure you agree the focus and procedure with your colleague ahead of time. ■ If you are recording a lesson, advise your students they will be recorded. ■ Prepare the recording device properly as to avoid any technical difficulties. ■ Consider carefully where to place the recording device, in advance. ■ Plan the date and time of the recording ahead of time.

Task 5.8

If you have decided to use questionnaires, interviews or classroom observations as your main methods to collect data, then before you start collecting it, use the following checklist as a guide to keep track of the different things to consider. If possible, ask someone – a colleague or critical friend – to help you while you’re planning. Otherwise, ask yourself the questions, as self-critically as you can!

Research method	Things to consider	Check ✓
Questionnaires 	1. Have I prepared the questions?	
	2. Are my questions easy to understand?	
	3. Have I used a variety of question formats?	
	4. Is my questionnaire brief enough?	
	5. Are my questions relevant to the main issue explored?	
	6. Have I asked a colleague to check my questionnaire?	
	7. Have I asked a student from a different class to answer the questionnaire (to ‘pilot’ it)?	
Interviews 	1. Have I prepared the questions?	
	2. Have I planned additional question?	
	3. Are my questions easy to understand?	
	4. Have I chosen a date and time for the interviews?	
	5. Have I chosen a place for the interviews?	
	6. If I will record, have I prepared a recording device?	
	7. If I will take notes, have I decided where and how I will take notes?	
Classroom observations 	1. Have I decided the areas to focus the observation?	
	2. Have I asked a colleague to observe my class?	
	3. Have I informed my colleague about the focus of the observation?	
	4. If I will record, have I informed my students they will be recorded?	
	5. Have I chosen a date and time for the observation?	
	6. If I will record, have I prepared a recording device and planned where to place it?	
	7. If I will take notes, have I decided where and how I will take notes?	
	8. Have I chosen a date and time for the observation?	

Once you have decided on a topic, identified your exploratory questions and decided on the kinds of data you need to collect, we suggest that you organise a research schedule. A research schedule is a useful way to keep a note of different actions you need to take in your research process and the time you will need for each one.

In order to help you with this, we have listed below some of the things you may need to do during the data-collecting process. We have also suggested an estimated time you need to dedicate to the exploratory phase of research (from 11 to 14 weeks), but please remember that the timings are only suggestions based on our experience – they may vary due to a number of factors. Read more about the different steps overleaf.

Things to do	Time
1. Informing and asking permission from school, students and/or other relevant people.	1 week
2. Talking to colleagues who may be involved.	1 week
3. Planning dates and times for the data collection	1 week
4. Designing ways of collecting data (questionnaires, interviews questions, observation checklist, reflection notebook, etc.)	2–3 weeks
5. Collecting data	4–6 weeks
6. Analysing and reflecting on the data you've collected.	2 weeks

There are many factors that you should be aware of which may modify your research schedule. They can include;

- suspensions of lessons
- holidays
- sick leave
- school activities
- change of school year calendar
- exams
- natural disasters
- waiting for school authorisation to carry out your research
- teacher training
- difficulties finding a critical friend to observe you
- teacher evaluations

We suggest that you try to keep your deadlines flexible in order to allow for disruptions like the ones listed above. If anything like that occurs, then you will need to use the extra time you have prepared.

Task 5.9

Based on the list of actions and times provided above and also considering your own research, your questions and the kind of information that you need to collect, complete the table below to design your own research schedule.

Month 1 – Things to do

Week 1 _____

Week 2 _____

Week 3 _____

Week 4 _____

Month 2 – Things to do

Week 1 _____

Week 2 _____

Week 3 _____

Week 4 _____

Month 3 – Things to do

Week 1 _____

Week 2 _____

Week 3 _____

Week 4 _____

Month 4 – Things to do

Week 1 _____

Week 2 _____

Week 3 _____

Week 4 _____

Summary and follow-up

In this chapter we went from research questions to methods for collecting data. There were practical explanations and examples of different kinds of data (reflective writing, notes from interviews and observation, questionnaire responses, etc.) The different tasks showed you how methods need to be well-matched to your questions. Finally, we provided you with some suggestions of important things to consider with regard to the data collection process.

Follow-up

In Chapter Three and at the beginning of this chapter, you learned about Andrea's story. We recommend that you read her full story here to refresh your memory:

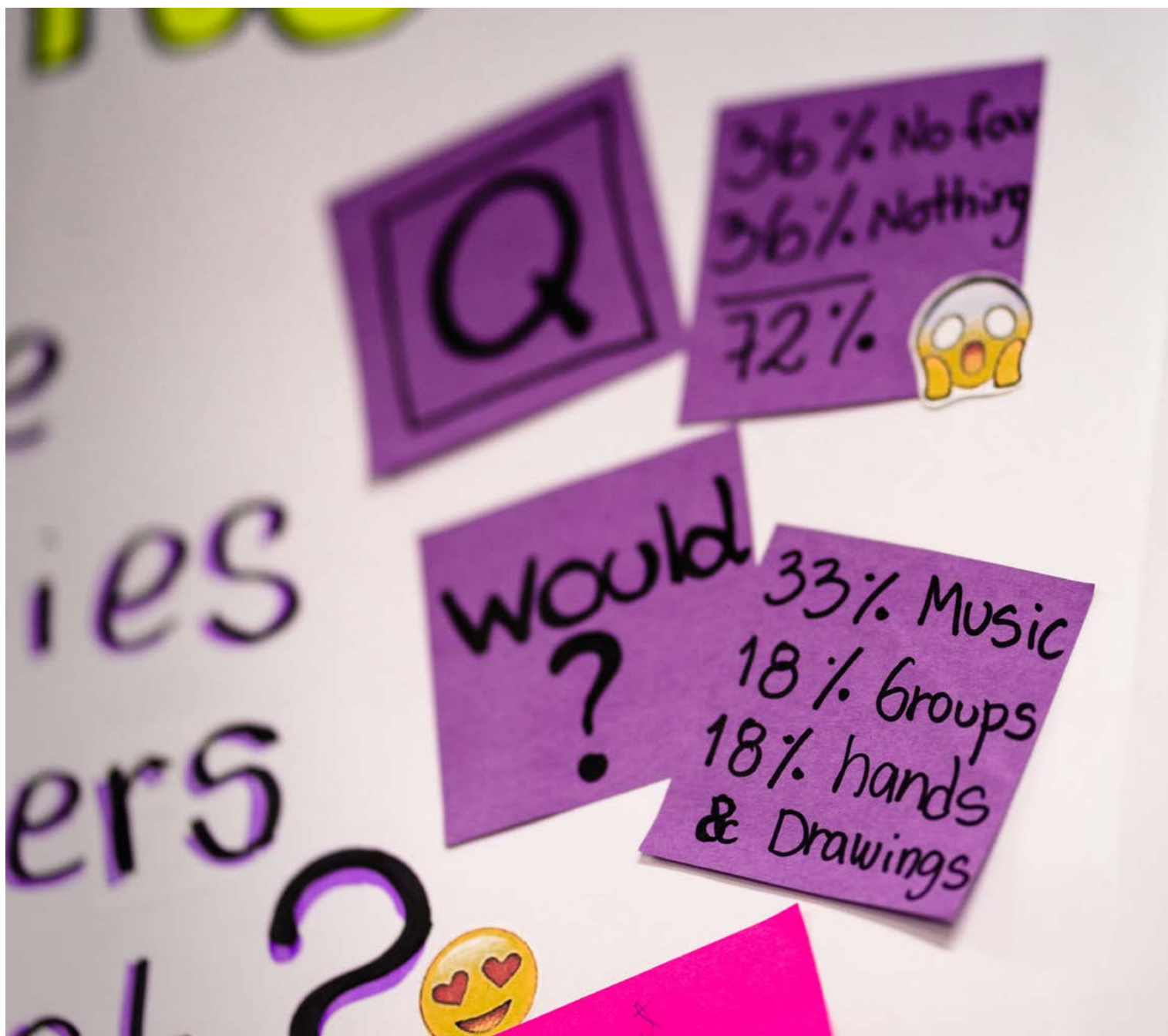
<http://bit.ly/Andrea-Robles>

In her story, identify the different kinds of data she collected. Did she use any form of 'triangulation'? In what way was collecting different kinds of data useful for her?

6. What do I find?

In the last chapter we looked at different forms of information, or data, that you can gather to answer your questions, and at the ways, or 'methods', that you can use to get data (e.g. observing or interviewing students, or asking them to give written feedback or fill out a questionnaire).

In this chapter we need to look at how to analyse the data you gather; and we consider how you can interpret what you find in order to answer your research questions.



'Analysis': n. 'Detailed examination of the elements or structure of something.'¹

Back in Chapter Two you came across some different definitions of research. These definitions indicated that the 'analysis' of data is an important part of the research process. Analysis involves the careful review of information in order to help you to draw conclusions and make decisions.

We will try to explain this process in a way that is easy to understand – 'data analysis' can seem a very technical activity, and many people think it must involve complicated statistics, for example. We hope to show that it can actually be relatively simple, and even fun!

6.1 Daniela's story

Daniela Gajardo's action research story is an inspirational one in its own right. It's also useful for helping us to understand an important distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of data – 'quantitative' data and 'qualitative' data. Both are useful, but they are useful in different ways. Read about the first phase of Daniela's story, then do Task 6.1

"So now, let me tell you something about this impressive and exciting journey. It started as a project with the aim of encouraging speaking production among my students. I began with an observation period, taking notes about their behavior.

The first thing I noticed, from that process, was that the students were used to answering and speaking in their mother tongue instead of in English.

I asked them "Why don't you try to answer me in English?" and they let me know that every time they give me an answer in Spanish I assumed they did not understand the question or did not know how to express in English, and I explained it to them in their mother tongue; consequently, it was much easier and more comfortable for them to get the idea coming from their native language. At that moment I learned my first lesson: "Never underestimate your students. They have acquired tools to face the language in an appropriate way, but if you do not allow them to do it, they won't try at all", and from then on I committed to speak them only in English, so in that way I could encourage my students to try to do the same.

I also made a questionnaire which allowed me to gather deeper information about my topic."

What did Daniela find? Here are some of the findings from Daniela's questionnaire. Read them and complete the task below.

1. Do you like or enjoy speaking English in class?

Yes, I do: 20

More or less: 13

No, I don't: 5

2. Is it important to you to speak English?

Yes, it is: 32

Not sure: 3

No, it isn't: 5

3. Would you like to speak English in future?

Yes, I would: 30

Not sure: 3

No, I wouldn't: 3

Task 6.1 @

According to the answers provided by Daniela's students, complete the sentences which follow (you may need a calculator!). You can check your answers in the answer key.

A. _____% of students definitely enjoy speaking English in class.

B. _____% of students think it's important to speak English.

C. _____% would like to speak English in future.

Now think about the following three questions (A–C):

A. What does this data tell us about the students?

B. What doesn't it tell us?

C. What question(s) might you now want to ask Daniela's students?

Commentary

If you look at the information that Daniela collected through the questionnaire, you will notice that it is mainly represented in the form of numbers and percentages. This is what we call quantitative data, i.e. information in the form of numbers, statistics or percentages, and it helps you understand how common or uncommon a situation is. In other words, it helps you answer questions like How many? or How often?

Questions 1–3 above are typical 'quantitative questions'. As an English teacher you will probably have noticed that they are also yes/no questions, so they provide a limited range of answers. Other common quantitative questions start with 'How much...?', 'How many...?', 'How long...?', 'When...?', etc. Of course, we can also collect quantitative data without asking any questions. For example, you could get a colleague to observe your lesson and to count how many times you do different things. This would also provide quantitative data.

¹ Oxford English Dictionary

As we see below, Daniela had some further useful questions on her questionnaire, of another kind;

1. How do you feel at the moment of speaking English?
2. What kinds of activities do you like or would you like to do in English classes?

These two questions are typical 'qualitative questions'. Such questions are often open questions, with a wide range of answers which (as in this case) can help us to understand what people are thinking or feeling. They give a voice to the participants in our research.

These two questions, then, gathered what is called qualitative data, involving descriptions of feelings, opinions, impressions, qualities, etc. Notice how Daniela needed to ask these questions in order to understand the causes of the problem she had observed. 'How...?' and 'Why...?' are perhaps the two most common qualitative questions. Qualitative data, unlike quantitative data, visually presents itself as responses, short or longer sentences or even paragraphs.

Task 6.2

Read about Daniela's further findings below and then answer questions D and E that follow:

4. How do you feel at the moment of speaking English?

Group A (15 students) feel comfortable, relaxed and fine when they speak English in class. They feel that performing oral activities in classes will help them to develop accurate speaking skills.

Group B (23 students) feel nervous, insecure, and not confident because they do not have a proper or accurate command of the language. Most of them said they get nervous, lack confidence and feel embarrassed when speaking because they are afraid of making mistakes, and hearing their classmates laugh at their errors. Among the answers, a few students said that when they know the correct answers, they feel great, but when the answers are wrong they feel frustrated. Finally, only one of them said he does not like oral quizzes or tests because he is not sure about his pronunciation.

5. What kinds of activities do you like or would you like to do in English classes?

Most of the answers to this question were focused on doing more practical, funnier and group activities in classes. In order of preference: songs, games, karaoke, movies, oral exercises, acting, puzzles and jigsaws, pictionary, group contests, spelling, debates and repeating and learning words' pronunciation. Apart from that, some students proposed more hours of English classes and an English workshop after school.

- D. What additional information did Daniela get by asking the above two questions?
- E. Why was this useful?

6.2 Analysing and interpreting qualitative data

Analysing quantitative data basically involves counting (see 6.1 above and 6.3 below). Analysing qualitative data, on the other hand, tends to involve coding – that is, labelling ideas so that you can easily group similar ideas together.

For example, consider the following four students' written responses to the question 'How do you feel about group work?'

- A. I like that we practise
- B. I like being relaxed
- C. I like speaking English
- D. I like English conversation with no worry



Even though these responses are all different, using different words, there are some underlying similarities. These similarities can become clearer if you give a label, also known as a 'keyword' or 'code', to each separate idea.

Response	Code/Label
A. I like that we practise	[+ practise]
B. I like being relaxed	[+ relaxed]
C. I like speaking English	[+ speaking English]
D. I like English conversation with no worry	[+ speaking English] [+ no worry]

Notice that you can give more than one code to a single statement, as in the case of (D) above. Also, your codes don't need to be single words – two or more words can be used, as in 'speaking English'. If you want, you can use symbols like '+' for 'like' or '-' for dislike. However, the actual codes and symbols you use are for you to invent, to correspond with what you read in the data. There are no fixed codes or symbols that 'must' be used.

If you now look again at the Code/Label column above, you can probably identify some similarities. If you think about students' enjoyment of practising the language by speaking, then you can say that they like to 'use' the language. Also, being 'relaxed' and having 'no worry' seem to belong together – you can say that this is also a common idea. Here, then, is where you can put ideas together under bigger labels, which are called 'categories' (see table below). These are basically 'bigger codes' because they include codes that were similar to one another and therefore have been put together.

Response	Code/Label	Categories
A. I like that we practise	[+ practise English]	[+ use English]
B. I like being relaxed	[+ relaxed]	[+ relaxed]
C. I like speaking English	[+ speaking English]	[+ use English]
D. I like English conversation with no worry	[+ speaking English] [+ relaxed]	[+ use English] [+ relaxed]

We can summarise this analysis by saying that three of this small set of students like group work because it enables them to use, or practise, English, while two of the four students like the fact that group work helps them feel relaxed.

We have now seen how this small set of data can be analysed. The results, as just presented, constitute the teacher's 'findings':

DATA + ANALYSIS = FINDINGS

However, findings don't just 'speak for themselves'. Something more is necessary, and that is to interpret the findings.

'Interpret': v. transitive. 'To decide that something has a particular meaning and to understand it in this way.'¹

¹ Oxford English Dictionary

To interpret your findings, you need to ask yourself questions like:



The fundamental question is ‘So what?’. You need to decide on what your findings mean by reminding yourself of your original research question(s) and your motivation for doing your research. For example, in the case of the above data, if the teacher’s research question was ‘Do students find group work beneficial?’, the answer seems to be clearly ‘Yes’, at least for these students. If other students in the same class give similar answers she may interpret this as a clear signal to carry on using group work.

Task 6.3 @

Try to give codes to some more qualitative data, seeing what similarities can be identified. This time, also try to interpret the findings in relation to a particular research question.

Here are eight different students’ answers during a class discussion about the teacher’s main concern and research question, ‘Should I [the teacher] use the students’ mother tongue – Spanish – in the classroom?’ (The teacher recorded this discussion and wrote down the individual students’ answers while listening to the recording later).

Try to give a keyword or keywords to each statement. Then see whether any similarities (categories) emerge. Finally, write a few sentences summarizing what you think the findings say about whether the teacher should use Spanish.

- A. “When we’re stuck, I think use of Spanish can support”
- B. “When our mother tongue is used, it’s better in terms of understanding”
- C. “Using mother tongue reduces my interest in the lesson”
- D. “If we don’t understand, speaking in Spanish is better”
- E. “When Spanish is used, the pace of the lesson may slow down”
- F. “I feel relieved when I feel that I can understand”
- G. “After some time, when the language we know is used, we get bored easily”
- H. “I think we can learn faster with the target language”

You can make a table like the one below to help you organise the codes and make the categories from them.

Response	Code/Label	Categories
A. “When we’re stuck, I think use of Spanish can support”		
B. “When our mother tongue is used, it’s better in terms of understanding”		
C. “Using mother tongue reduces my interest in the lesson”		
D. “If we don’t understand, speaking in Spanish is better”		
E. “When Spanish is used, the pace of the lesson may slow down”		
F. “I feel relieved when I feel that I can understand”		
G. “After some time, when the language we know is used, we get bored easily”		
H. “I think we can learn faster with the target language”		



Task 6.4 @

Look at the following extracts from a 5-minute reflective writing task about the different interaction patterns used by the teacher in a class. The question was: 'What do you think of pairwork and groupwork?'. Write as many keywords or key phrases as you like next to each response. After doing this, say what similarities and differences you see by forming categories, and write a short paragraph summarizing the data and reflecting on 'So what?' (in relation to this teacher's own puzzle - 'Is pair work more beneficial than group work?').

Don't worry if your own answer is different in some respects – different people will code and summarise the same data using different words – so long as the main ideas are similar. If you have doubts about how to code or label some qualitative data, you can ask a critical friend to help you to provide a second opinion. It is always a good idea to try to compare your own way of coding with someone else's.

Commentary

In this section so far, you have seen one example of qualitative data and how to code and form categories from it; you have also completed one task where you were asked to code, categorise and interpret some responses. You have hopefully begun to gain a clear picture in your mind about the steps to follow when analysing qualitative data. Here is our summary of these steps:

1. Working individually, write a keyword or key phrase next to each idea.
2. Looking at these keywords ('codes'), identify similarities and see whether you can put ideas together to form categories.
3. (If possible) compare your categories with a colleague who has done the same task.
4. Write a summary which describes the main categories.
5. Think about 'So what?' How do your findings help you to answer your research question(s)?

You have seen (and tried!) some of these steps with short responses to questions. But qualitative data can also be found in the form of paragraphs like the ones you can get when asking students to write reflective notes. The coding process will be the same – try it out in the next task!

"When we work in pairs, Maria teaches me the meaning of certain words. She is like a dictionary for me." – Carla

"Agustin is my best friend, so we always try to be in the same group, and make jokes. It's lots of fun. But for pairwork, I like studying with the girls. They're more serious." – Vicente

"Groups are noisy and I don't like to work with Vicente. He speaks English too fast. I prefer to work alone." – Agustin

"Everybody copies my answers in group work, and they ask me so many questions. I like to do the exercises on my own, and then compare with another student – I find that very useful." – Sofia

"I like pairwork and groupwork, especially if I can choose who I work with." – Maria

You can use the following table for this task;

Comment	Keywords	Categories
1. Carla: "When we work in pairs, Maria teaches me the meaning of certain words. She is like a dictionary for me."		
2. Vicente: "Agustin is my best friend, so we always try to be in the same group, and make jokes. It's lots of fun. But for pairwork, I like studying with the girls. They're more serious."		
3. Agustin: "Groups are noisy and I don't like to work with Vicente. He speaks English too fast. I prefer to work alone."		
4. Sofia: "Everybody copies my answers in groupwork, and they ask me so many questions. I like to do the exercises on my own, and then compare with another student - I find that very useful."		
5. Maria: "I like pairwork and groupwork, especially if I can choose who I work with."		

Summary / Interpretation of findings:

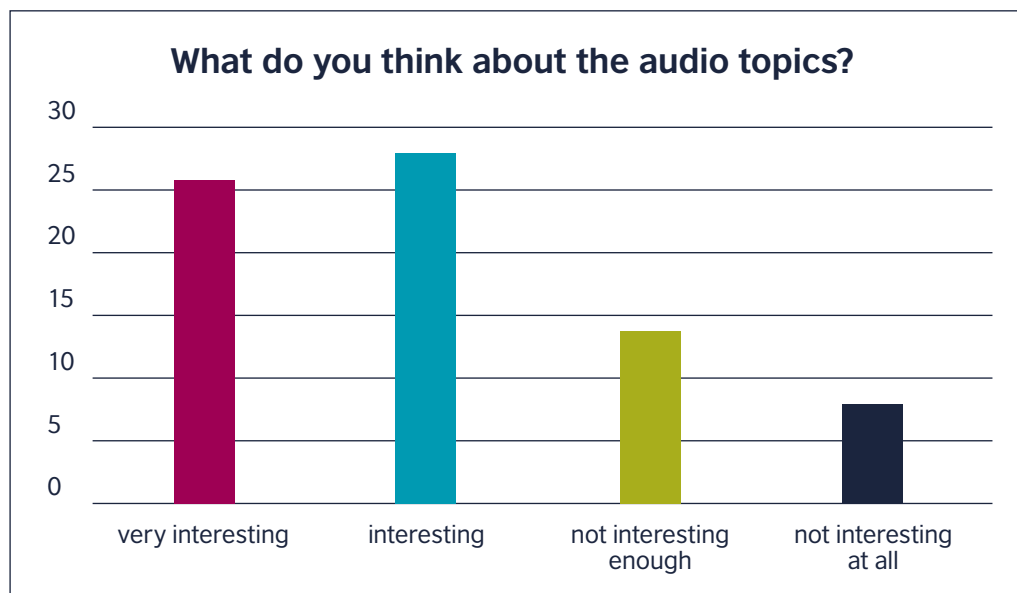
6.3 Interpreting quantitative data

As with qualitative data (6.2 above), quantitative data needs to be interpreted – it doesn't just 'speak for itself'. Numbers and percentages can give you some information about your question, but they will not fully explain the meaning of what you found. For this you need to ask yourself 'So what?'. In order to answer this question, it is sometimes useful to organise the data in visual form, as this can help you understand it better.

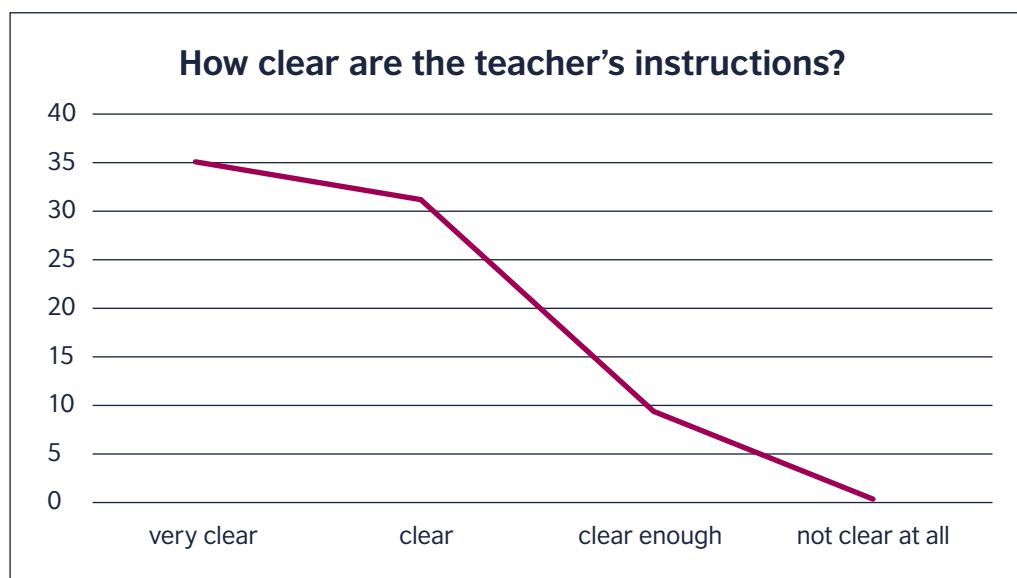
Lorena, for example (her story was presented in Chapter Two), was concerned about her students' lack of participation in listening tasks. One of the things she did was to get her students' views and preferences through a questionnaire. She organised her students answers in a table (presented below).

1. What do you think about the audio topics?	very interesting	interesting	not interesting enough	not interesting at all
	26	28	14	8
2. Which activities do you like best?	songs	activities from the course book		films
	48	1		27
3. How clear are the teacher's instructions?	very clear	clear	clear enough	not clear at all
	35	31	10	0

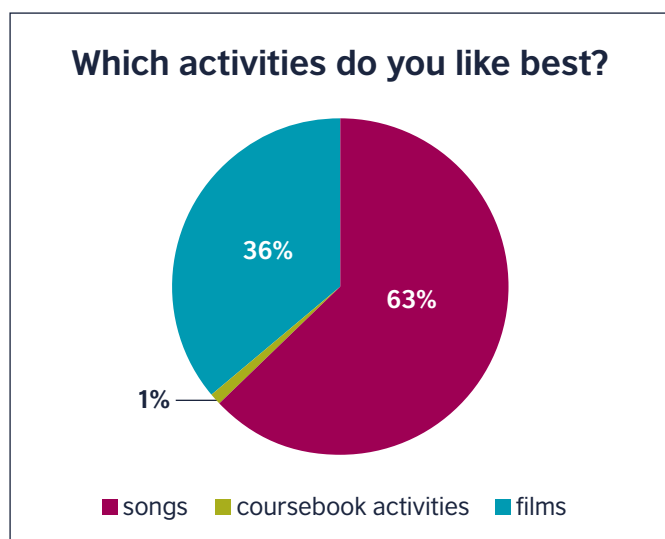
By utilising a table like the one on the previous page, you can see where the highest responses are. This can become even clearer if you create a chart. Below, for example, we have created a chart for each of her questions.



Bar chart



Line chart



Pie chart

By looking at each chart, you are able to see more easily the strongest preferences or 'peaks' (like mountains) and these enable the 'So what?' question to be answered. In Lorena's case, she was able to notice that her students' views regarding listening tasks were positive. This was not what she had expected and she felt she still did not know why students' participation was low during listening tasks. She therefore decided to analyse the findings from focus group discussions to gain further understanding.

Task 6.5 @

In the story of another Champion Teacher, Daniela (6.1 above), we saw some of her qualitative and quantitative data. Like Lorena, she also used tables to organise some of the quantitative data to make it easier to interpret.

For example, in her questionnaire, Daniela asked the question; ‘In class, what is the percentage you understand?’. She counted the numbers of students selecting different percentages, put this into a table and summarised the qualitative responses she also got on the right. Try turning the quantitative data into a bar chart, then check in the answer key.

Percentage	Students	Summary
100%	3	Children who understand more than 50% of the class said that they could not always understand each word from the class. However, they could understand the main and secondary ideas in order to develop a high level of understanding, and that was enough for them to comprehend the class.
90%	8	
80%	6	
70%	2	
60%	3	
50%	5	
40%	7	Students who do not understand the whole class argue that the lack of discipline of the class distracts them from paying attention and concentrating properly.
30%	1	
20%	1	
10%	1	
0%	1	

What do you notice? What are the peaks? Daniela’s research question was ‘How much do students understand in class?’ How do you think she interprets the findings above, in the light of this question?

Commentary

We can notice many things from this data. From the teacher’s perspective, it’s generally good news. The majority of the students can understand most of what the teacher says, and may be learning well from trying to understand what they don’t know. However, there are two ‘peaks’ in the data. As well as the biggest peak at 80–90%, there is also a peak at 40–50%. Notice how converting the data into a chart made this clearer, and is likely to help Daniela think about the issue, what problems there may be in this class, and even potential solutions.

Now let’s see another example of this with another Champion Teacher, Javier Ávalos. Read about the problems Javier found with learner motivation in his class.

“I did my research in a public school for adults and youngsters (between 16 and 60) who had dropped out of schools for different reasons. When I started teaching them I noticed their faces sometimes looked scared and/or quiet when we talked about English. They seemed to be not frightened of me, but of English itself. Then I noticed that they have a very low level in the language. ‘Can they learn English if they are afraid of it?’, I wondered. I did some tests and noticed they had weak grades. So, I began to ask my students randomly: ‘What were their feelings about English?’ ‘Why did they think that they can’t learn English?’ ‘Were they comfortable or confident with learning the language?’ I took some notes. While some students were happy, others with more difficulties in English said things like ‘I don’t understand English’, ‘I don’t care about English. It’s useless’, ‘We are in Chile and we speak Spanish’, ‘I feel ashamed in English because I think that I do it wrongly’. I decided to create a survey to find out more.”

Here are the questionnaire responses Javier obtained in this first part of his research:

Statements	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree
1. Inglés es un idioma muy difícil. [English is a very difficult language.]	3	2	2
2. Me pongo nervioso cada vez que tengo clases de Inglés. [I feel nervous whenever I have English class.]	6	0	1
3. Inglés me frustra porque no sé nada. [English frustrates me because I don't know anything.]	5	1	1
4. Me siento imposibilitado de aprender Inglés. [I think it's impossible for me to learn English.]	2	2	3
5. Siento que Inglés está muy lejos para aprender. [I think English will take a long time to learn.]	3	0	4
6. Yo puedo aprender Inglés pero siento que es difícil. [I can learn English but I think it's difficult.]	4	2	1
7. Me siento motivado debido a mis notas en Inglés. [I feel motivated because of my marks in English.]	4	2	1
8. No aprendo inglés por flojera. [I don't learn English because I'm lazy.]	3	1	3
9. Me siento avergonzado en inglés porque pienso que me puedo equivocar. [I feel ashamed in English because I think I can be wrong.]	3	2	2
10. Me da vergüenza preguntar en inglés. [I'm embarrassed to ask about English.]	5	0	2
11. Creo que puedo aprender inglés pero no confío en mí. [I think I can learn English but I lack confidence in myself.]	3	3	1
12. Creo que puedo aprender inglés. [I believe I can learn English.]	4	2	1
13. Entiendo las palabras pero no sé cómo pronunciarlas. [I understand the words but I don't know how to pronounce them.]	6	1	0
14. Me aterra inglés porque no sé cómo pronunciar. [English terrifies me because I don't know how to pronounce it.]	3	2	2

Task 6.6 @

Look at the questionnaire responses Javier got. Circle the responses where a majority either agree or disagree. What do these statements have in common?

Overall, how do you think Javier interpreted these results? In other words, how did he answer the questions he started out with – ‘What are students’ feelings about English?’ and ‘Are they comfortable and confident with learning the language?’. You can check your answer in the answer key.

We will come back to Javier in the next chapter, where we see how he moved from this exploratory research into action research.

Summary and follow-up

So, now we've gone through the whole exploratory research process. We've seen how you can develop your research plan by matching:

- your questions to ...
- particular types of data to
- analysis, and interpretation.

In Chapters Four and Five, you read about how you can explore areas of interest by collecting classroom data. Chapter Six showed how you can make sense of the data, so you can understand the situation better: why an activity is successful, why a particular problem happens, or what our learners think about something we do, for example. In Chapters Seven and Eight we will see how, on the basis of the new understandings you have gained through exploration, you can bring about change, in other words, how exploratory research can turn into action research.

Follow-up

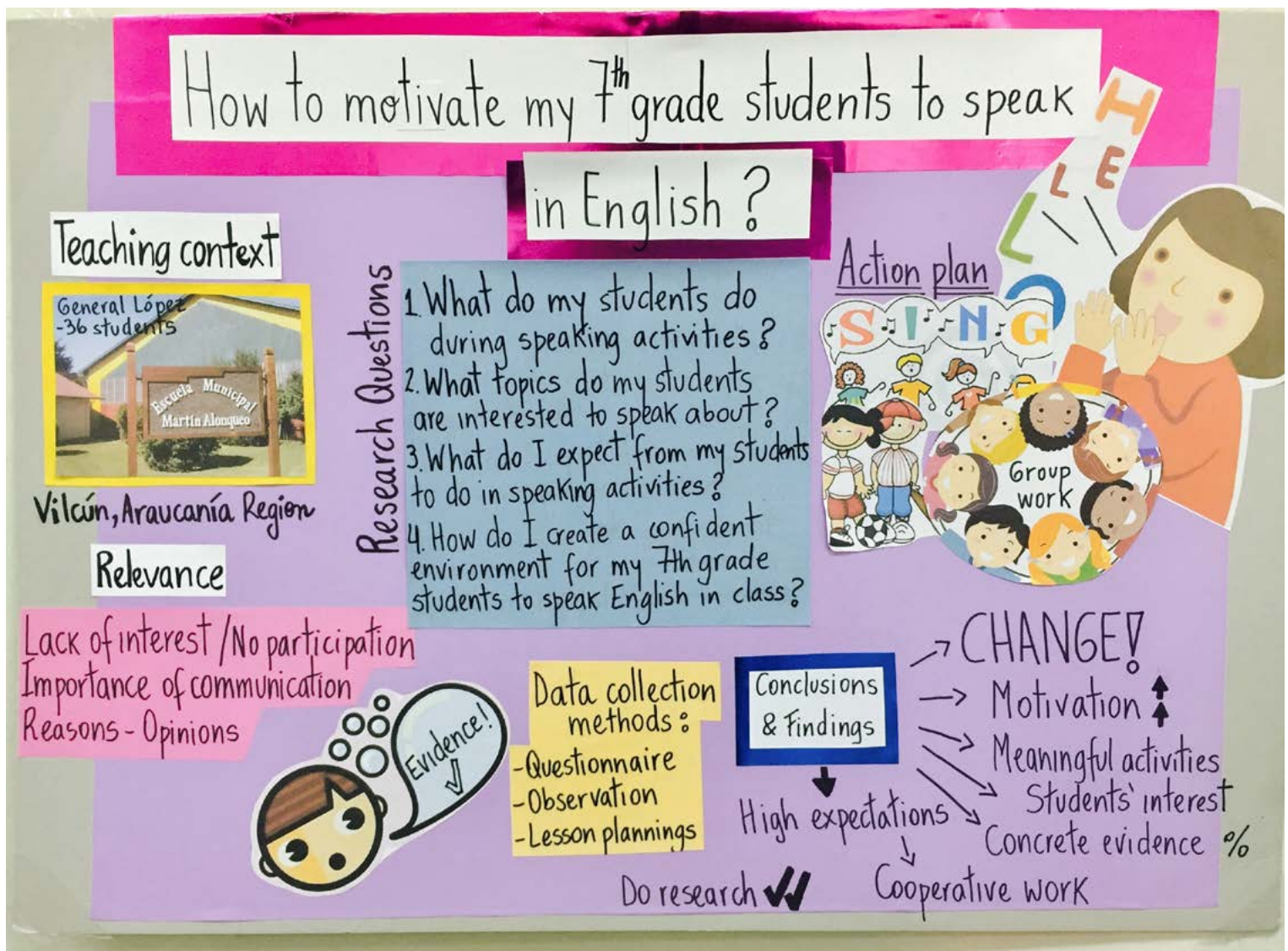
In Chapter Five, you read about Mauro, a teacher who was interested in looking into his students' reaction to different classroom layouts. As a result of his exploration, Mauro discovered that his students prefer one classroom layout over another; which one? How did he discover this?

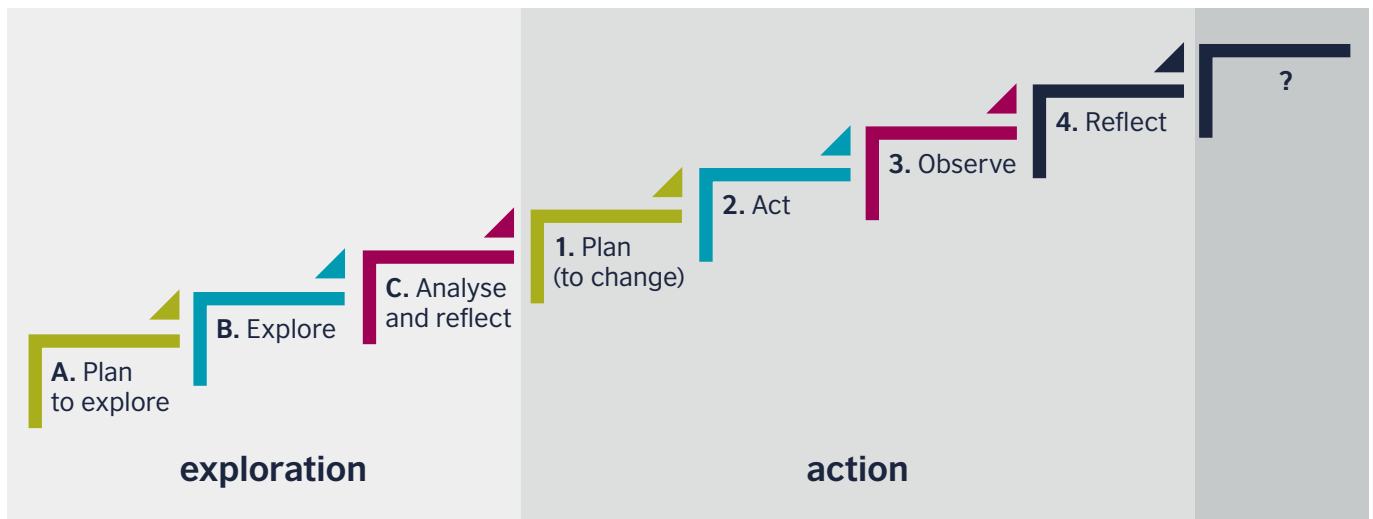
After Mauro reached this understanding, he decided to try some activities to evaluate their effects. What did he do? Read his full story here: <http://bit.ly/Mauro-Saez>



7. What shall I change?

Now we've been through the process of exploring, we come to the 'action' part of 'Exploratory Action Research'. It's time to see if you want to change anything. If you do, this chapter will help you both to plan for change and to implement the changes you plan. Chapter Eight will focus on observing the effects and reflecting on what impact the action had.





7.1 Is ‘new action’ needed?

We’ve seen how exploration can lead you to a better understanding of a particular puzzling, problematic, or even successful situation. Based on your analysis and interpretation of the findings, you need to decide whether some kind of new ‘action’ is now needed. Let’s first look at the possibility that no new action is necessary.

No need for new action

a) “Things are looking good”

When you interpret the data in relation to your exploratory research questions, you may be quite satisfied, for example, if you discover that something you thought was problematic in fact is not, from students’ perspectives.

b) “New things to explore”

On the other hand, there may be new puzzles or problems to explore. In this case you can start a new exploratory research process, with a new topic and research questions, following the procedures we’ve explained in Chapters Four to Six.

c) “My teaching has changed already”

There are several ways in which change can happen. In fact, you may have found that just by exploring you have caused some changes. To start with, your understanding of the situation will have changed – and you may already have started to teach in a different manner as a result.

d) “My classroom ‘feels’ much better”

By involving your students in exploring your questions (through asking them for their opinions about something, for example), you may have found that the classroom atmosphere has already improved. Students may feel more valued as contributors to the learning process, and this, in itself, may have improved the ‘rapport’ you have with them, or the respect they give you as their teacher. If you share and discuss the findings of your research with students, this can also help to improve relationships and learning.

Here’s what one teacher, Karla Ojeda, discovered:

“Rapport is a crucial piece to the puzzle, because you are not alone inside the classroom and you need to pay attention to your students, not to assume things about them, but take the time to talk to them and to really listen to what they are saying, so as to understand more. By doing this, rapport improves.” (final research report)

So, the very act of exploring the issue and/or opening it up to students’ contributions and involvement can help to bring about a positive change. You may feel that this is enough, for example, if it has helped to improve the atmosphere, reduce a problem or increase your own well-being as a teacher.

Desire for new action

It is also possible that, based on your new understanding of the situation, you will feel the need to change something, in other words implement a teaching idea that you think will help. If you then collect data and analyse it to see what change actually occurs, you will be engaging in action research (and not just ‘new action’).

Since you have already explored the existing situation in some depth, it can both be satisfying and relatively straightforward to analyse differences between the situation ‘before’ and ‘after’ you try to bring about change. In the next chapter (Chapter Eight), we will consider further how to make this kind of before vs. after comparison (and how to plan to gather data to help you with the comparison). Here (in Chapter Seven), we’ll continue to try to help you identify what to change.

So, we’ll assume both in the rest of this and in the next chapter that your new understanding of a situation leads you to want to change something about it. which will lead you into ‘action research’.

Remember, action research is like this:

1. Plan (to change)

2. Act [implement the change]

3. Observe [see what happens – with data]

4. Reflect [interpret what occurred]

Do you, then, feel a need to change anything in your practice – a different way of teaching, organising your class, supporting your learners, etc? If so, what exactly do you want to change?

Having carried out your exploratory research, do you think you might need and/or want to move into action research? If you do, read on!

7.2 Javier's story

In 7.3 below we'll consider different possible sources for new actions, to help you define for yourself the desired change you'll investigate in your own 'action research'. First, though, let's see what one teacher did, following on from his exploration of a problematic situation.

As we read in 6.3 in the last chapter, Javier Ávalos was experiencing problems with demotivation in his classes of disadvantaged learners. After analysing and interpreting his questionnaire results, Javier realised that he could not approach this class of learners in the same way he did with other classes. He knew that building their confidence and creating a warm and positive classroom atmosphere was a crucial first priority. He explains some of the things he did:

"I used more ice-breakers, told jokes about work, home, couples, etc. Then, when they felt more comfortable, I started each class by explaining what we were going to do. Later in class, doing exercises, I started to monitor carefully, guiding them on every single item. If they made a mistake I explained why it was a mistake, but always with a phrase like "Whoa! You are doing it quite well, you did it wrong here, but it's OK. Go on!!" and with those words, they smiled and asked me "Really?", "Yes, sure!" Their confidence in English went up and the frustration went down immediately. Once, I created an activity in which the students had to create signs in English for different places, like supermarkets, malls, the metro, etc. The main idea was that they were already very familiar with many signs, and even if they don't understand all the words, they could see the symbols well, and get the idea of the

sign. In that workshop they understood that the daily context can help them to understand English. And I did things like this the whole year. I got more students in class, better participation and they felt much better with the language. At the same time, their marks were improving and, of course, the second term was better than the first one for the same reasons. Then I did the same survey again and the results were very positive."

Task 7.1

Where do you think Javier's ideas for changing the situation might have come from?

Commentary

Javier faced a big challenge that many teachers face: lack of motivation. There is no easy solution to this issue, but his story shows that there are things that can be done. Javier explored the situation and then carried out small actions like:

- using ice-breakers
- telling jokes
- explaining the overall plan of each class
- correcting encouragingly
- using creative activities like sign-making

We don't know exactly how the positive change in his class came about or where his ideas came from, but the change is likely to have resulted from a combination of:

- A.** Change without extra action. Students' change in attitude from Javier's requesting their opinions and ideas. Just by talking to his students and giving them a questionnaire about their attitudes towards English, Javier is likely to have helped them focus on the issue and recognise their own fears and concerns.
- B.** Change due to new actions. Javier tried out a range of ideas, some of which perhaps came from his training as a teacher (e.g. correcting encouragingly) or from colleagues, other teachers, or, for example, the internet. It also sounds like he came up with his own ideas, such as the sign creation activity.

Thus, Javier drew upon a range of sources of new actions to help solve his problem. Interestingly, his action research did not involve just a single big change but involved several small changes, each of which contributed to the overall result.

7.3 Planning a change

Here is a reminder of the different sources of change we identified in 7.1 above (of course there may be others!):

As we know, without the need for further action, classroom change can occur through ...

- a teacher's change in understanding
- students' change in attitude due to you requesting their opinions and ideas
- students' change in attitude due to you sharing findings with them

The above can all come about through exploratory research, without the need for new action. With new action, classroom change can occur through:

- implementing students' suggestions
- implementing your own ideas
- implementing others' ideas

Change that occurs through such actions can be evaluated through Action Research. So, let's consider how you can plan new actions for bringing about change in your own classroom.

Task 7.2

Where do your new ideas for teaching tend to come from? Tick all those that apply to you:

Source of teaching ideas	Tick (if it applies to you)
A. your students' suggestions	
B. from inside yourself	
C. from conversations with other teachers	
D. training manuals	
E. conferences	
F. teacher group or association discussions	
G. academic research	
H. other teachers' research	
I. other sources (where?)	

Implementing students' suggestions

When offered responsibility, students can be very perceptive about their needs and preferences, and about challenges and problems in the classroom.

In Chapter Six we met Daniela, who investigated why students didn't seem to speak much in class. As well as finding that this was partly a result of her behaviour as a teacher, she also got some useful suggestions from the learners for relevant activities to improve their speaking skills, such as games, debates, drama or role play, and using songs and movies. Suggestions from students are particularly useful, as they are more likely to succeed than ideas 'from outside', and they also provide the learners with a shared interest in making them successful. This was particularly true in the case of Mauro (Chapter Five), who made changes to seating arrangements in his classes based on suggestions from students. Because students were aware that the suggestions had come from them, it's likely that they wanted to make it succeed.

Karla Ojeda, another Champion Teacher, whose reflections we first heard above, in this chapter, said this:

"You end up finding out that what the students say to you helps you to think of a variety of ways to plan your lessons and to approach them. So, you find yourself having more opportunities to gain inspiration, motivation and confidence for your teaching practices."

Roberto Delgado, another Champion Teacher, also stresses the value of considering students' opinions. This is what he said about this;

"You have to interact with them. In the future if I see some things that are not working. I don't want to take any measures without considering their point of view – I've come to see it as a kind of dialogue, and that helped me a lot because from now on when I do classes I will start with that."

Considering Roberto's words, have you ever asked your students' suggestions for class activities? If so, what did you ask them about?

Task 7.3 @

A number of stories that you have read in this book describe how students were the source of suggestions for classroom activities. Teresa (Chapter Four) was one teacher who got some interesting ideas from students – what did they tell her?

Implementing your own ideas

One of the advantages of action research is that it provides an opportunity for you to develop your own creativity through the process of trying out new ideas, or adapting established ones in your own classroom. By doing this within an action research framework, you can observe the impact of your creativity and collect useful data on how effective the ideas are. We met a good example of this in Chapter One, when we read about Paula’s secondary school students who had difficulty remembering countries and nationalities. Drawing on her experience, creativity and knowledge of her learners, she came up with an idea for creating a domino game that turned out to be an effective solution to the challenge she faced. Learners both enjoyed the game and learnt the vocabulary. Thus, in this instance, Paula’s creativity as a teacher turned out to be the primary source of her intervention.

Daniela (see 6.1) is an example of a teacher who found out what students wanted but implemented actions which she devised herself. After analysing her quantitative and qualitative data, she

- A. built a better atmosphere to help relax her learners, including allowing them to change seats, having interviews with students and parents, getting help from the school psychologist and having class discussions.
- B. implemented some different classroom activities to encourage speaking, including pair and group work, using nomination sticks,¹ more formative assessment, and asking questions to check understanding.

Task 7.4 @

Go back to Tasks 6.1 and 6.2 in Chapter Six and re-read Daniela’s findings. Which findings mainly helped her decide to do actions (a) and (b)? Check your answers in the answer key.

Actions	Findings
A. built a better atmosphere to help relax her learners, including allowing them to change seats, having interviews with students and parents, getting help from the school psychologist and having class discussions.	
B. implemented some different classroom activities to encourage speaking, including pair and group work, using nomination sticks, ¹ more formative assessment, and asking questions to check understanding.	

Implementing others’ ideas

As teachers, we are members of communities on different levels. There’s the school community, where we can sometimes get ideas and materials from colleagues, and there’s the wider community of teachers in our country and worldwide. By making the most of opportunities to interact in both these communities, you can get ideas for your own interventions. A particularly good source might be other teachers conducting action research in their own

classrooms. If they teach in a similar context to yours (e.g. primary, secondary, etc.), and especially if they are in the same country as you, ideas that they have may be successful in your classroom, too. So, if you’re using this book as part of an action research programme, it’s a good idea to find out if other participants (either current or past) have carried out similar projects, what ideas they had, and how successful these were.

¹ Coloured wooden sticks with students’ names written on them which she would randomly pick out to give each student at least one opportunity to speak in English.

By attending conferences, and reading journals and magazines, you can also find out about what is working in the classrooms of other teachers in our own country and around the world. But the list doesn't stop there – you can get ideas from almost anywhere, including coursebooks, materials and resources that you use, websites for teachers, Facebook groups and other online communities. However, English teachers work in very different contexts worldwide, and something that works in a different classroom may not always be useful or appropriate in yours, so it's wise to evaluate such ideas critically and to make adaptations if necessary before using them.

In Chapter Three, we met Andrea, and learnt that she had got some initial ideas for her area of research, wrapping up lessons, from a website: www.busyteacher.com. It was only by trying out a range of different ideas, getting further feedback from her learners, and then adapting some of the ideas that she eventually developed ideas that worked well in her classroom. As such, Andrea's interventions turned out to be successful because they were a combination of implementing students' suggestions, her own ideas, and others' ideas.

Task 7.5

Imagine your colleagues had carried out their own Exploratory Action Research and had decided that they need to implement new actions. As a result of analysing and interpreting their findings they now realise that they need to

1. make their listening lessons more interesting for students;
2. cater better for the needs of both high-achieving and low-achieving learners when doing group work;
3. improve the way they correct spoken errors.

Where would you advise them to look for ideas? Make notes or discuss with someone.

Task 7.6

In Chapter Four you identified a topic to focus on for your own Exploratory Action Research project and also identified your exploratory questions. You may have also begun the data collection process (Chapter Five) and the analysis of that data (Chapter Six). If not, you may want to come back to this task when you have done these. Alternatively, for the purposes of this task, you can imagine you have collected the data and analysed it.

Complete the table for your Exploratory Action Research project so far:

My topic
(see Chapter Four)
My exploratory questions
(see Chapter Four)
1.
2.
3.
4.
↓
My key findings
Write a brief summary sentence or two.
↓
Changes so far?
Note down whether you have already seen any changes as a result of your exploration.
Possible 'actions'?
Note down what (kind of) actions you may now want to implement, to bring about (further) change.

Now get a colleague or mentor to look at your table, especially the possible actions, and provide some feedback. Do they match the findings well? Does your colleague or mentor think they are good ideas? Can s/he think of other possible actions? You may even want to share your ideas with your learners: What do they think of the possible actions?

7.4 Implementing the change as planned

Once you have identified your possible actions, and got feedback on them from colleagues / a mentor (and possibly learners), you will be ready to begin implementing the change. In this section we will share some advice that might help you, and also consider some of the possible challenges you may face.

Advice for implementing your change

1. Consider the extra workload

It's likely that implementing the change will increase your workload temporarily. This may include planning the action, implementing it and observing its effects. If possible, then, try to do it at a time of your academic year when your workload is not too high or make sure the actions don't deviate too much from your everyday teaching.

2. Let those around you know what you're doing

For obvious reasons, it's a good idea to inform your school principal, and other teachers of the same learners what you are doing and why. Most importantly, think carefully about how you will introduce the change to the learners. It will probably be a good idea to explain to the learners about the change before you begin implementing it.

3. Plan ahead of time

It's important that you plan your action considering the time this will take and also keeping some time aside for contingencies. For example, make sure you consider holidays and assessment periods since these may interrupt your implementation.

What happens if my action has a negative impact or I come across an unanticipated problem?

Mistakes and challenges are all part of the learning process. Often we learn just as much from them as from our successes. So, first and foremost, don't be afraid of these; observing them can be part of the action research cycle.

If you find it necessary to stop your action before its planned completion, reflect on what you observed that caused you to make this decision, and, if appropriate collect further data (e.g. interview your learners) to help you understand the problem in more detail, and whether stopping was the right decision. The data you collect at this stage could help you to modify your intended action and try again.

Plan the remaining schedule

In Chapter Five (section 5.4), we encouraged you to plan a research schedule to keep track of the different things you need to do during the exploratory part of your research. We have now added new things to do in the 'action' part of the process, and you may be able to see, having gone through numbers 1. to 6., that we have arrived at step 7. in the schedule below:

Things to do	Time
1. Informing and asking permission from school, students and/or other relevant people.	1 week
2. Talking to colleagues who may be involved.	1 week
3. Planning dates and times for the data collection.	1 week
4. Designing ways of collecting data (questionnaires, interviews questions, observation checklist, reflection notebook, etc.).	2–3 weeks
5. Collecting data.	4–6 weeks
6. Analysing and reflecting on the data you've collected.	2 weeks
7. Designing an action plan.	2 weeks
8. Planning dates and times for application of the action plan and accompanying data collection.	1 week
9. Designing ways of collecting data (questionnaires, interviews questions, observation checklist, reflection notebook, etc.).	2–3 weeks
10. Applying the action plan and collecting data.	4–6 weeks
11. Analysing and reflecting on the data you've collected.	2 weeks

Task 7.7

Based on the list of actions and times provided above and also considering your own research, your action plan and the kind of information that you need to collect, complete the table below to design your own research schedule for the action part of your research (7. onwards in the above schedule).

<i>Month 1 – Things to do</i>		<i>Month 3 – Things to do</i>	
Week 1	_____	Week 1	_____
Week 2	_____	Week 2	_____
Week 3	_____	Week 3	_____
Week 4	_____	Week 4	_____
<i>Month 2 – Things to do</i>		<i>Month 4 – Things to do</i>	
Week 1	_____	Week 1	_____
Week 2	_____	Week 2	_____
Week 3	_____	Week 3	_____
Week 4	_____	Week 4	_____

Summary and follow-up

In this chapter we have learnt about how to move from the exploration to the action phase of Exploratory Action Research. We have thought about whether it is necessary to plan a specific intervention, or whether the exploration itself has been sufficient. We have looked at different ways in which change can happen, and looked at examples from real teachers, noticing that for several of them the changes involved a combination of different approaches and even adaptation to their original idea. You have also had an opportunity to think about what kind of change you may want to make after conducting the exploration phase, and considered some useful tips and advice in case things don't go quite as planned!

In the next chapter you will read about how we can observe and analyse the effects of the change, and reflect on what occurred and its meaning.

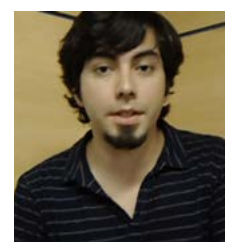
Follow-up

Esteban López conducted an Exploratory Action Research project consisting of several cycles of exploration and action. The first action that he implemented involved using a new approach called 'input-based instruction', something he'd never tried before. When he began implementing it, he faced some challenges. For example, he found that:

- with this approach students were less involved than when they discovered rules for themselves
- an input-based strategy sometimes seemed overwhelming to these learners who had so little language
- students still did not produce as much spontaneous speech as he had expected.

Imagine you are Esteban. What would you do in this situation? Make notes or discuss with a colleague if possible. Then read Esteban's story and see what he in fact did next:

<http://bit.ly/Esteban-Lopez>



8. What happens?

This chapter focuses on observing and analysing the effects of the 'new action' introduced in the action research part of your project. We will review different ways of collecting data and will consider again how data can be analysed. We will also look at ways to reflect on what you find and consider its implications. In a few words, this chapter focuses on helping you answer the question:

What are the effects of the change(s) that I attempt?

So, whereas findings for exploratory research are connected with the basic question 'What is the current situation?', your findings for action research will tell you what happens as a result of the change you implement.



8.1 Lorena's story – revisited

Let's begin by revisiting Lorena Muñoz' Exploratory Action Research project, which you first read about in Chapter Two. Read this summary and extract and then do the task that follows.

Lorena noticed that her grade 9–11 students weren't engaging with listening lessons. Her exploratory research phase involved surveying the students, conducting a focus group interview and getting a student-teacher to observe several of her lessons. These revealed that her students found the audio topics interesting (something that surprised Lorena), but they found many recordings too long and could not complete activities. This led to them getting frustrated and doing other things, like chatting. She also found that they liked songs most of all, simply because they were shorter and they were able to complete the task. So she started adapting audio tasks to make them more like songs. She divided the audios into sections and created activities such as ordering the information, filling in gaps, underlining the correct word and crossing the odd one out.

Let's reread what happened after she implemented her action plan:

“By the end of two weeks I observed several changes. The first one was that they actually did the activities, handouts were completed with the correct answers and I could observe many hands up to participate in the lesson. I conducted another survey in which students answered that working with the listening materials as if they were songs allowed them to work better. They also said that they were able to identify information from the text and that the activities they liked the most were underlining the correct word, filling in the gaps and crossing out the odd one out. They still found it difficult to order the information because sometimes the material was too fast.”

The focus group participants mentioned that they now felt motivated and more successful because they were able to do the tasks, and do them well. This was confirmed by another peer observation, where the student-teacher told me that students were able to focus on the activities and they did not get distracted by anything else.”

Task 8.1 @

Underline or highlight the words or phrases above that tell us about the evidence Lorena gathered to answer the question 'What are the effects of the change(s) that I attempt?'

Then answer the following questions, either by making notes or discussing with a colleague:

1. How long did it take her to begin noticing the effect of the changes?
2. Which kinds of evidence were 'quantitative' and which were 'qualitative'?
3. What told her that the changes were effective?

Commentary

Lorena collected data before and after implementing a change, using the same methods. She then analysed the data from the different sources to evaluate whether the effects of her actions had been effective.

As we know from Chapter Five, the process of trying to find evidence from different points of view, with different types of information, is called triangulation. While it is not necessary to engage in this for all Exploratory Action Research projects (sometimes one kind of evidence will be enough), Lorena's case demonstrates that teacher-research can be quite reliable if we attempt to see things from several points of view.

8.2 A reminder of research methods

It's clear that in the action research phase you are going to plan different new actions (or one overall new action) related to your teaching. You will also need to plan what kind of data you require in order to answer, as objectively as possible, the question 'What are the effects of the change(s) that I attempt?', in other words 'What happens?'

At this point, it is worth revisiting the kinds of data we came across in Chapter Five.

Task 8.2

Read through the following different types of data and try to remember examples of each one from the teacher-research stories you have already read in this book.

1. Your own written reflections and/or notes	2. Other people's written ideas on the topic
3. Notes from informal conversations with colleagues	4. Reflective writing by students
5. Notes or recordings of focus group discussions	6. Notes or recordings of interviews / chats with individuals
7. Responses to a questionnaire	8. Lesson plans and materials
9. Lesson recordings	10. A critical friend's notes about your lesson
11. Pictures of your class	12. Students' performance on tasks (written or recorded)

Task 8.3

Think about your own Exploratory Action Research project. You may also want to look back at the table you completed for task 7.6. Answer the following questions, either by making notes, or discussing with a colleague:

1. Will you collect the same kind(s) of data as for the exploration phase, or will you make some changes and/or additions?
2. How long after you begin to implement the new action will you collect this data?
3. Will you be able to use the same research methods? If so, what adaptations – if any – will you need to make?

Commentary

It's usually a good idea to use at least one method that is the same as in your exploratory phase. This will allow you to make a direct comparison between before and after the action.

With many changes you will find that data collection naturally begins immediately as you observe your learners' behaviour, as Lorena did when she noticed the change in numbers of students with their hands up.

But you may also want to allow some time for students to get used to the change before doing surveys, interviews or reflective writing. Two weeks, as in Lorena's case, may be long enough for the changes to stabilise, but not too long for learners and you to forget and become unable to compare the situations before and after the action or change.

Remember that if your change involves introducing a new activity or way of working into your classroom, you'll probably need to make some alterations to the data collection method that you used. These alterations could involve adding questions or other items to surveys, sets of interview questions or an observation framework, in order to ask learners or observers what they think of or notice about the new action(s) you've introduced. Note that Lorena did this in her action research phase – she asked the student-teacher observer to focus more specifically on student participation and engagement; and, in the second focus group discussion, she asked for reasons why students liked the new type of listening activities.

8.3 Comparing exploratory and action research findings

In Chapter Four you identified your own topic and exploratory questions (EQs). Then in Chapter Five we looked at a range of different ways to collect information to help you answer these questions, and thereby help you gain more understanding of your learners and teaching situation. The initial, exploratory information you gained will be very useful (necessary, in fact) as we attempt to answer the key question for the present chapter – the action question (AQ):

What are the effects of the change(s) that I attempt?

You can most effectively answer the basic action research question by comparing the data you collected earlier, during the exploratory phase, and the data you collect after the change, like Lorena did.

This is why the exploration part of the Exploratory Action Research cycle is essential. Without the earlier observation and description to help you understand the situation as fully as possible, it is difficult to analyse the impact of what you have done. While it is not necessary to collect exactly the same type of data each time, the more similar it is, the easier it is for you to evaluate the impact.

So, you can often use the same ways of gathering information, for example the same questionnaire, or the same observation framework to give to colleagues with only some minor amendments.

Task 8.4 @

Look back at Esteban's story, which you read at the end of Chapter Seven. Notice how he collected data before and after the intervention. Did he use the same methods to gather evidence before and after? Did he alter the methods in any way? Check your answer in the answer key.

If you are gathering the same kind of data after or during as well as before your new action(s), then noticing change is usually quite straightforward, especially if the data involves numbers – you can just compare the data and spot any differences. Let's practise this by looking again at Javier's Exploratory Action Research study (we have been following this in 6.3 and 7.2 already).



The data from Javier's questionnaire changed a bit from the first to the second application since there were more students in his class the second time, but still you will be able to notice some differences which can tell you the effect of his new actions:

Statements	First application			Second application		
	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree
1. Inglés es un idioma muy difícil. [English is a very difficult language.]	3	2	2	9	3	11
2. Me pongo nervioso cada vez que tengo clases de Inglés. [I feel nervous whenever I have English class.]	6	0	1	5	4	14
3. Inglés me frustra porque no sé nada. [English frustrates me because I don't know anything.]	5	1	1	6	4	13
4. Me siento imposibilitado de aprender Inglés. [I think it's impossible for me to learn English.]	2	2	3	4	4	15
5. Siento que Inglés está muy lejos para aprender. [I think English will take a long time to learn.]	3	0	4	3	6	14
6. Yo puedo aprender Inglés pero siento que es difícil. [I can learn English but I think it's difficult.]	4	2	1	17	2	4
7. Me siento motivado debido a mis notas en Inglés. [I feel motivated because of my marks in English.]	4	2	1	13	5	5
8. No aprendo inglés por flojera. [I don't learn English because I'm lazy.]	3	1	3	6	2	15
9. Me siento avergonzado en inglés porque pienso que me puedo equivocar. [I feel ashamed in English because I think I can be wrong.]	3	2	2	8	4	11
10. Me da vergüenza preguntar en inglés. [I'm embarrassed to ask questions in English.]	5	0	2	6	4	13
11. Creo que puedo aprender inglés pero no confío en mí. [I think I can learn English but I lack confidence in myself.]	3	3	1	11	1	11
12. Creo que puedo aprender inglés. [I believe I can learn English.]	4	2	1	19	1	3
13. Entiendo las palabras pero no sé cómo pronunciarlas. [I understand the words but I don't know how to pronounce them.]	6	1	0	12	7	4
14. Me aterra inglés porque no sé cómo pronunciar. [English terrifies me because I don't know how to pronounce it.]	3	2	2	7	5	11

Task 8.5 @

Look at Javier's data above. What do you notice? Javier's aim for doing this Exploratory Action Research with his students was 'building their confidence and creating a warm and positive classroom atmosphere'. Do you think he succeeded in achieving this aim?

8.4 Interpreting self-critically

It is important to recognise that other things may influence your findings, not just the action(s) you implemented. A very simple, but useful tip is to try to look at your data critically and ask yourself the question:

What else could have caused the change that I'm noticing?

Task 8.6

You will probably remember Andrea's story from Chapter Three. Her Exploratory Action Research project involved investigating the way she wrapped up lessons, and then making a change to help learners to remember more about the lesson content. Although she collected several different types of evidence, one very simple idea she had was to get students to write down what they could remember from the previous class:

Before the change

"I gave students a piece of paper and I told them to write what happened the previous class, I did that in Spanish so all of them had the same chances to express their ideas. These were my findings: 23 did not remember; 3 did not answer; 8 answered correctly."

After the change

"I repeated the same procedure from the first observed class, I asked my students to write on a piece of paper (in Spanish) what they remembered from the previous class. Their answers were: 30 of them remembered the previous class (most of them remembered the activity of the map); 4 of them did not remember."

Using this information alone, ask yourself the critical question we have suggested – in other words, what else (other than Andrea's new ideas for wrapping up lessons) could have influenced the change that we're noticing in the data?

Commentary

If Andrea relied on this data alone, the difference could be explained by any of the following:

1. Coincidence – there are always variations between lessons in how much students remember;
2. They may have found the second lesson topic more interesting, or it may have been easier;
3. Andrea may have been better prepared for the second lesson;
4. Andrea may have been trying harder for the whole lesson, and not just changing the way she ended it;

5. The students may have tried harder, especially if they knew that Andrea was hoping for success;
6. It may be because the wrapping up activity was new that the students remembered much more. If she does the same activity every lesson, the novelty may wear off and they will remember less.

Luckily, Andrea collected much more data than this. After introducing a range of wrapping-up activities, she also asked students to choose their favourite ones, and she got a colleague to observe her lessons before and after implementing the change. Thus, we can again see the importance here of triangulating. After she carefully and critically interpreted all of these different sources of information, and considering other things that could have influenced the findings, Andrea was confident that her new strategies for wrapping up lessons were helping learners to remember more.

Where does the data lead you?

Noticing change and trying to work out what led to it is only the first step in evaluating change. In order to understand the data and its implications for our practice, we need to interpret further, just as you did during the exploration phase of your research.

As we saw in Chapter Six, 'interpret' means to decide what something 'means' by answering the question 'So what?'. Knowing the meaning or 'value' of something in the case of teacher-research primarily involves knowing what it means for your practice and in relation to the questions you asked.

So, you may be happy with what has happened, and perhaps seek to reproduce your success in later lessons. Or it may not have worked, and you may either (1) not mind because you've gained understanding in other ways or (2) want to find out more about why it didn't work or try out new things for the same purpose. In all these cases, you are answering the 'So what?' question by thinking about the implications the new action has had for your teaching and/or continuing research.

Often we may only get a partial answer to a question. This, on its own, may be useful enough, or may prompt us to make changes and collect more data at a later stage. It's also very common that our findings will throw up new questions, as they did in the case of Esteban, whose story you read at the end of the last chapter:

- A key characteristic of action research – and of Exploratory Action Research – is that we can continue to adapt and improve the changes that we introduce for as long as we keep teaching, while continuing to research and reflect on the impact of these changes – there is no end to the process of discovery!

8.5 Reflecting on your own development – the major finding?

‘Reflect’: v. ‘To think carefully and deeply about something’¹

Nobody would disagree that teachers should ‘think carefully and deeply’ about their work. Unfortunately, we are sometimes too busy to do this, and we replace reflecting with ‘assuming’. If we go back to the story of Teresa Perčić, whom we met in Chapter One, you will remember that she assumed that playing classical music had no effect on how well students concentrated during tasks, so she stopped doing it, despite the recommendation of her boss. It was only through the process of teacher-research that she learnt that her students did find it beneficial:

So what was her final thought?:

Task 8.7

Look carefully again at these final reflections. Think about the following two questions and either make notes or discuss with a colleague:

1. What did Teresa learn from her research that is likely to help her in the future?
2. What do you think she will do next time she’s told to do something by her boss because it has been proven by research?

Commentary

Teresa’s final reflections seem to indicate that she learnt several important things:

- We can all be wrong, but we shouldn’t be scared of this. It is an opportunity for learning;
- We should avoid making assumptions based solely on ‘signs’ of student behaviour (remember, in Chapter One we made this distinction between ‘signs’ and ‘evidence’);
- It’s OK to be critical of recommendations we receive from others, and testing them out in our own classrooms is the perfect way to find out whether we should accept them or not.

Task 8.8 @

The other teachers that we’ve met in this book have all learnt valuable things through the process of Exploratory Action Research, and the insights they provided give you a useful opportunity to practise your own data analysis and interpretation skills. Analyse the reflections below for any common themes, recurring expressions or important words, and then write a short paragraph summarising what Exploratory Action Research can do for us as teachers, on the basis of these reflections. You can compare your answer with our paragraph in the answer key.

“We need to stop focusing on our concerns and pay more attention to our students’ concerns. As a result of this project, I feel that I am more empathetic.”

Camila Villalobos

“I heard my students. I saw myself.” Leyla Nuñez

“If you are an experienced teacher and you think that you have nothing to learn from your colleagues and from your students, you are wrong.” Andrea Robles

“With this exploratory process I discovered that I was expecting something from my students but I was not giving them something they needed first.” Teresa Ríos

“Action research is important because education needs teachers who innovate, who have good ideas, who are aware of their students’ needs and are willing to change their approach.” Mauro Sáez

“From now on the way I teach listening will be different and according to what the group requires.” Lorena Muñoz

“I can say that this project has benefited me in so many ways. It has helped me to improve my teaching skills, but also to develop a better relationship with my students, and colleagues.” Javier Avalos

“Research is a wonderful tool and opportunity to begin that change we so desperately need.” Daniela Gajardo

Finally, we’d like to share the following update from Leyla (whom we met at the end of Chapter One). This is what she told us about her learning experience almost four years after her project ended:

“Thanks to engaging in my exploratory action research project, I now see my students and myself as active agents in/of the changes in the classroom. I have stopped blaming the system, my students or even myself for those things that don’t work as expected in the classroom; also, I have learnt to value those things that do work, which also deserve to be explored and systematized in time. Above all, I have learnt not to assume the reasons why things happen. Whatever happens in the classroom has a reason which I need to unveil. The best way is by asking the other actors, my students -- they will always have important information to share. They are the source of motivation to continue improving my teaching practices.”

¹ Oxford English Dictionary

Summary and follow-up

In this chapter we have learnt more about how we can observe, analyse and reflect upon the changes that we may make in our teaching as a result of doing Exploratory Action Research. We have learnt when and how we can observe the effects of these changes, and the difference between noticing and interpreting them during the evaluation process. We have also practised looking critically at indicators of change and have reminded ourselves why triangulation is an important part of showing us that change has really happened. Finally, we have seen how, when teachers reflect on Exploratory Action Research, they often notice more fundamental changes – changes in ‘mindset’ – in how they view learners, their colleagues, themselves, and the teacher development process.

The change that can happen inside you, as a teacher (even when you were not expecting or planning this), can be one of the most important findings of Exploratory Action Research – and one that it is good to highlight when you come to share your findings, as we shall consider in the final chapter.

Follow-up

Camila, whose challenging situation you first came across in Chapter One, did an Exploratory Action Research study to help some of her students. She was particularly interested in supporting those students who were part of an inclusion programme. Please read Camila’s story here and answer the questions below: <http://bit.ly/Camila-Villalobos>

1. What changes did Camila introduce in her class?
2. How did she evaluate its effects?
3. What did Camila learn from this experience?

9. Where do I go from here?

In the previous chapters of this book we have invited you to take a journey of exploration and action. In that journey we have asked you to reflect about your practice, identify an area to explore, plan an exploration, explore by collecting data, analyse and interpret data, suggest an action plan, implement the action plan and evaluate its effects. We have supported you in this journey by looking in detail at each of the key steps in the Exploratory Action Research process. Now we've reached the top step. So, where do you go from here?





9.1 Sharing your research with others

Task 9.1

Before reading on, take a moment to consider the above question.

- Is this the end of your journey? Or just the beginning?
- How do you feel about what you have learnt?
- Do you want to share it, or build on it?

There is of course no one simple answer to any of these questions. Your decisions at this stage will depend very much on you, your research and the other obligations in your life. One thing you can do is share what you have learnt in your research, and we will consider how you can do that orally or through a written report while respecting participants' rights. You may wish to join a wider community of teacher-researchers and/or you may want to start the process again and embark on another Exploratory Action Research experience.

So, rather than it coming to an end, your first Exploratory Action Research project is likely to be the beginning of a longer process of development and interaction with other teacher-researchers.

As Daniela, one of the Champion Teachers, noted (and we hope you will agree!):

“Research is a wonderful tool and opportunity to begin that change we so desperately need.”

First let's look at how you can present your research to colleagues, and audio- or video-record and share your presentation further.

Task 9.2 @

Write a list of potential advantages of sharing your research with others. Think of how it can benefit you, yourself, not only other teachers. You can find some of our ideas in the answer key.

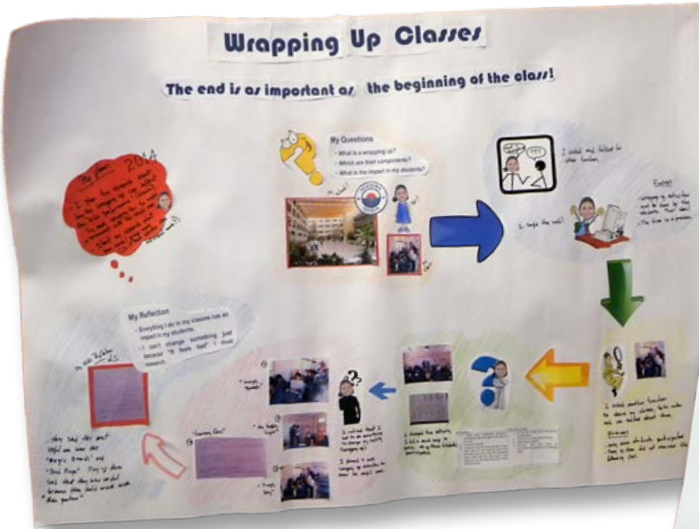
The first step to take to share the findings of your Exploratory Action Research could be to make a brief presentation to other teachers. This may happen in a teacher development session in your own school, during a regional workshop, a local teachers' meeting, or even at a conference. If, like most people, you are nervous about giving a presentation, perhaps the best place to start could be in front of your own colleagues. The more often you give the same presentation, in different places, the better it will become! A presentation doesn't have to be very long. You may want just to talk about it for three to five minutes in front of a poster, as in our next example, or you may prefer to show a few PowerPoint slides of photos, quotes or results charts. Don't forget to allow time for questions and discussion at the end – this can be the most useful part of the presentation, both for yourself and colleagues.

Task 9.3 @

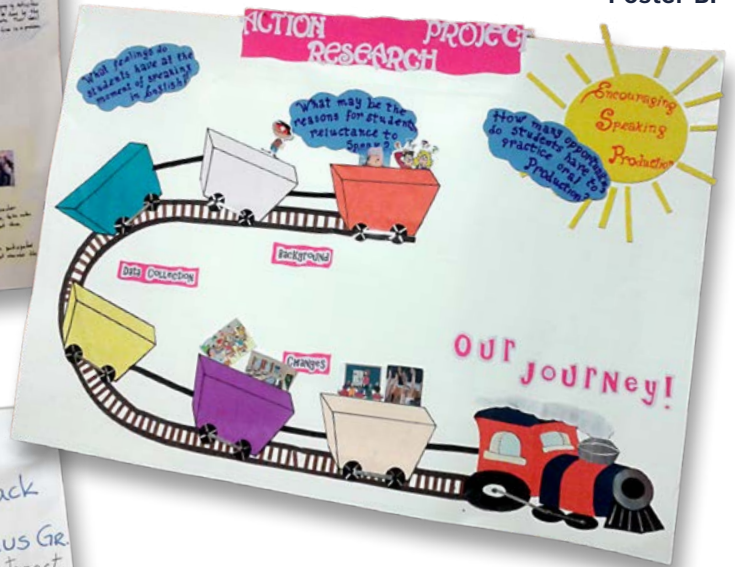
One of the simplest ways of presenting is to do so via a poster presentation. You can prepare a poster in advance, use it more than once, and you don't need to rely on technology! Here are four posters from teachers we have met in this book.

1. Can you work out who created which one?
2. Which one do you like most, and why?

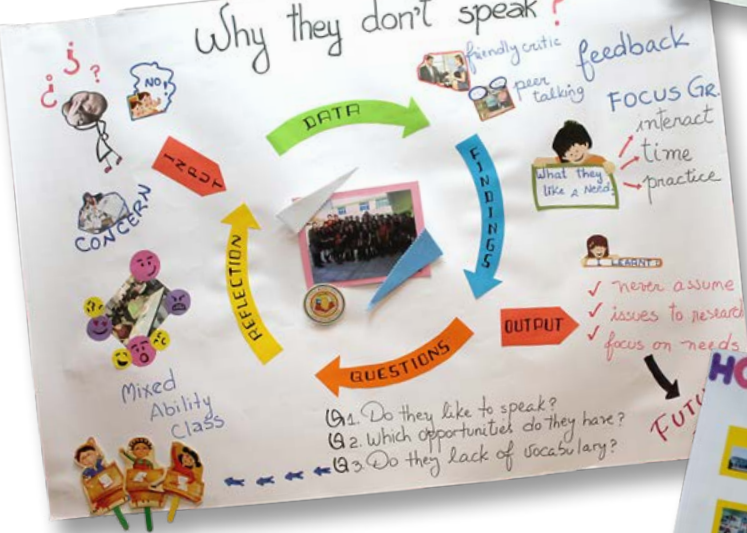
Poster A.



Poster B.



Poster C.



Poster D.



Commentary

We will probably all have different answers to the second question, and the variety provides a useful insight into how different teachers understand the research process. For example, Poster C refers to the way action research is often represented as a circle (see also 9.5 below) whereas in Poster B the research process is represented as a journey.

Task 9.4

Choose one of the posters above (A to D). If needed, read through the corresponding story again to refresh your memory with the details, and then answer the following questions, either by making notes, or discussing with a colleague:

1. What information did this teacher choose to present in their poster?
2. Where did they decide to use images? Why?
3. What questions would you ask them after the presentation?
4. What would you have done differently in the poster?

As you gain confidence in your presenting skills, and also in the value of your research for others, you may want to do a talk or a workshop at a Teacher Association conference. Lorena, a Champion Teacher whose report you read in Chapter Two, did that. She presented her research at a conference organised by RICELT (Red de Investigador@s Chilen@s en ELT: the Network of Chilean ELT Researchers) along with other teacher-researchers. You can watch her presentation here: championteachers.weebly.com/lorena

An alternative or additional way to begin sharing your research with others is to use social media. One simple way to do this is to record yourself presenting your research findings on a digital camera or mobile phone, and then upload this recording to YouTube, Facebook or other platform. If you're giving a talk at a conference or workshop, or even in front of a small group of other teachers, why not ask a colleague to record your presentation and then upload the recording together with photographs of your poster?

You can see some examples of online presentations on the following website:

<http://classroombasedresearch.weebly.com/outcomes.html>

There are more examples in this Facebook group, and you can join it to share your own video:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachersresearch/>

9.2 Sharing your research by writing

Back in Chapter One we saw some of the images teachers have about research and tried to show how they can be revised. One of these concerned writing:

A major worry teachers have about research is that it will involve them in a lot of academic writing, for which they do not have time. We'd like to show how writing can be built up to – from the kind of oral presentation described in the last section, to wider sharing via writing.

There are many ways that you can write about your research, ranging from informal brief accounts that may only take a few hours to write, to academic articles that can take much longer. Let's look at some of the options:

From oral presentation to written report

What we are suggesting here is that you take the recording from your oral presentation, transcribe it, edit it and share it as a written report. In other words, writing can come after a spoken presentation that has been recorded. For this, you need the file of the recording, a laptop and headphones.



Instead of worrying about issues such as style and format, just listen to the recording and type what you hear, then edit to add detail or to delete things you don't want to share in writing, and to improve grammar and vocabulary choices. You can then add photographs to support comprehension and you're done! We do advise that you show this written report to a colleague to give you feedback. Sometimes things are clear for us (because we have done it!) but not clear for others. So asking a colleagues to read it and give you feedback is always useful.

You could share the final written report via social media, or as part of an account of the workshop where you presented. You could even turn it into a short blog post.

Task 9.5

Let's look at an example from a teacher you know – Andrea, whose poster is Poster A in task 9.3. She recorded her talk, listened to the recording and transcribed almost exactly what she heard. The result was uploaded to the Champion Teachers website. Visit the page, listen to her recording here <http://championteachers.weebly.com/andrea-robles.html> and answer the following two questions:

A. How closely does the report match the recording?

B. What did she change? add? delete?

Notice how, in her spoken presentation, Andrea just chats naturally about her project. This makes it relatively easy to understand and enables her audience to participate. Then, when she wrote it up, she used the same structure and just made small changes to the sentences to make them clearer.

Sharing your written report

If you want to share your research experience with a bigger audience, you can place your writing in a blog, a newsletter or even in a Facebook group or on your own web page.

If you want to create your own blog or website, it only takes a few minutes to set one up through websites such as WordPress.com or Weebly.com.

If you don't want to start your own blog, there are teacher-research communities and teacher associations that have their own blogs (for example, the International Festival of Teacher-Research in ELT: <https://trfestival.wordpress.com/>). They may be interested in you contributing as a guest blogger.



If you want to share your writing through a newsletter or a magazine, first think about the newsletters you have access to and which would be interested in publishing your story.

You can also think about a newsletter for teachers of different subjects (not only English language teachers), since this experience may also be interesting for them.

Task 9.6

Many successful blog posts are just one to two pages long, written for busy teachers like you! If you already have your transcribed report, think about the following task applied to your own report. Otherwise, try drafting a short report based on Lorena's presentation here: championteachers.weebly.com/lorena. After you have transcribed, think about the following:

1. What title would you give the post? Remember that it has to attract attention.
2. What three images would you use? Remember that the first image in a post will appear as a preview on social media sites.
3. What headings would you use? Three to five should be enough.

9.3 Consider participants' rights

When we report on research we need to respect participants' rights to confidentiality and security at all times. This relates to 'ethical issues' in research.

As soon as you begin to share your research findings in public, even within your own school, you need to actively imagine the consequences this may have for participants in your research. So here is some important advice:

1. Anonymise data. Change participants' names unless they wish you to use their real name;
2. Don't post photos or video of children for the public without full consent of their parents. Asking the children themselves if it's OK is not sufficient; Their parents need to provide consent, ideally in written form.
3. Remember that some of the most enthusiastic readers of your research may be the participants themselves. They may enjoy seeing themselves in your research, but because of how much they know about each other, they may also be able to spot classmates or colleagues, so, if you quote them, make sure that other research participants won't be able to identify them from what they say.

Task 9.7

Ethical issues in your own research

If you have started your own Exploratory Action Research project, note down some answers to the following questions and then share with a colleague. If you haven't started yet, you could consider them from the perspective of one of the teachers-researchers featured in this book:

1. Have you made any video- or audio-recordings or taken any photos of children for your research? How will you keep these secure? Do you really need to use them when sharing your research?
2. What personal information have you collected from participants (e.g. names, jobs, hometown, etc.)? Do you need to include this in your research findings? If so, can you anonymise this data?
3. How will you describe the context for your research? Will others be able to identify the school/organisation involved? If so, how can you alter this description to ensure that it is useful but anonymous?

9.4 Joining wider communities

Here are some further advantages of sharing your research. These involve the fact that, when you publicise your research, you are joining a wider community as a presenter or writer:

- You can meet other individuals interested in similar questions. You can discuss and share your challenges and also learn from others about how to research more effectively.
- You may gain opportunities to become a mentor for other teacher-researchers, developing your capabilities as a leader and 'teacher educator'.
- You can make useful contacts, for example with representatives of universities, agencies or networks which will provide you with further opportunities, due to sharing your research.

In this chapter we have already provided the names of several networks and communities where you can both share your research and learn from others. Below we list some further, mainly international, communities and groups. However, the most useful and rewarding groups to participate in are often local or national associations or groups, where you can interact with teachers who share similar challenges to you.

IATEFL

Originally started in the UK in 1967, IATEFL (the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) has grown to be an international organisation. It organises webinars and a web-conference each year, and a main conference which takes place in the UK. It also has a number of Special Interest Groups (SIGs), including the IATEFL Research SIG and Teacher Development SIG, which you are likely to find of great use.

IATEFL website: <https://www.iatefl.org/>

IATEFL Research SIG website: <http://resig.weebly.com/>

IATEFL Teacher Development SIG website: <https://tdsig.org/>

IATEFL also has national affiliates in many countries.

TESOL

Started in the USA in 1966, TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) International Association, like IATEFL, has become global, with regular regional seminars and a main conference in North America each year. While many of its 'Interest Sections' are similar to IATEFL SIGs, it does not have an interest section specifically devoted to teacher-research.

Website: <http://www.tesol.org/>

Teachers Research! Facebook group

There are a number of communities active online that are involved in teacher-research for English language teachers. A relevant community for you would be the Teachers Research! group, which is dedicated to all types of teacher research, including Exploratory Action Research, but also 'Exploratory Practice' and more formal classroom-based research: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachersresearch/>



You can also join communities or networks which support the sharing and promotion of teacher-research in your own country. Many of the Champion Teachers in Chile did this by joining RICELT (the Network of Chilean ELT Researchers) and participating in their conference as presenters.



Champion Teachers at the first RICELT conference

Finally,

Electronic Village Online (EVO) on classroom-based research for professional development

EVO is a voluntary community, active in January–February each year – that has provided online teacher education programmes for free to teachers from around the world. In recent years, the EVO on classroom-based research for professional development has been supporting teachers through Exploratory Action Research:

<http://classroombasedresearch.weebly.com/>

9.5 Continuing your research

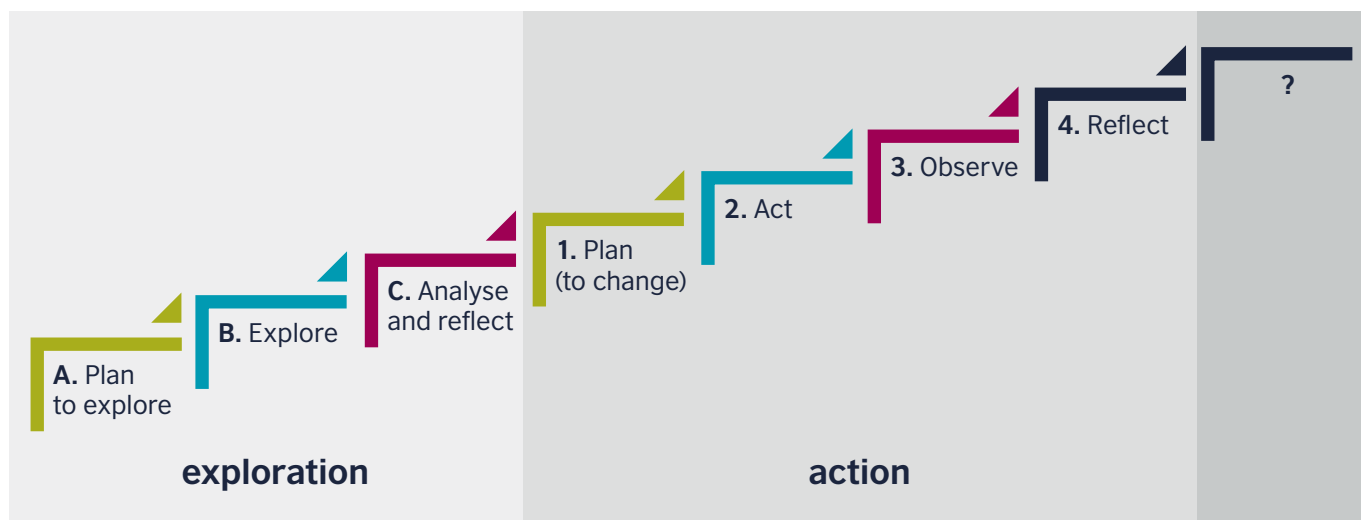
In this book, we have used a staircase to illustrate the key steps of Exploratory Action Research. But action research can also be visualised in other ways.

Task 9.8 @

Type the words 'action research' into an Internet search engine, and then look at the image results provided.

1. What is the most common diagram type shown?
2. How many stages are usually involved?
3. Why do you think that they show a circle or spiral instead of a straight line?

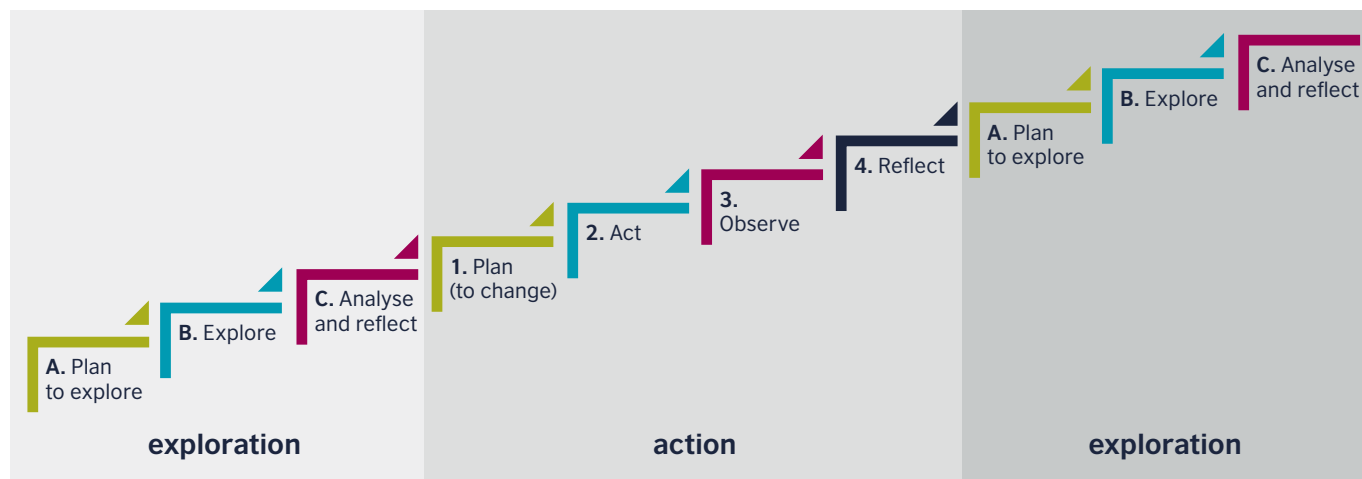
We have represented Exploratory Action Research as a staircase which includes the stages from the action research cycle that you probably found in the internet, but those stages (1. to 4.) are preceded by exploration steps (A. to C.) in the staircase diagram:



We decided to use a staircase representation in this book in order to highlight the need (in our view) for an exploratory stage before entering action research but also to show how the whole process promotes learning and professional growth through an 'upward' series of steps. Nonetheless, the process can certainly be viewed as cyclical – or as a spiral – because it may begin again.

Observations and reflections may throw up new questions to answer and therefore another cycle of exploration and action may start again – the more we learn, the more curious we may become!

Many teachers who have completed an (exploratory) action research project seem to go on to do more research, either informally in their own classrooms, or more formally as part of a qualification. You can do this research alone or with colleagues. If you do go on, our EAR staircase may get taller and taller! For example:



Let's look at a few ways that this might happen:

1. Your initial Exploratory Action Research (EAR) only partially answers your question, but it tells you where you need to look to find a more complete answer.
2. Analysing the data from your initial EAR reveals something you didn't expect, or can't explain.
3. The answers you get are general, and you want more specific answers, so you develop more detailed research questions.
4. The feedback you receive after sharing your findings provides you with new ideas that you want to try out.
5. Sharing your findings leads to an opportunity to collaborate with someone else on a new research project.

For example, Leyla, whom we met at the end of Chapter One, writes to us now (four years after her original project) that she has since used Exploratory Action Research in several new ways:

"I headed an EAR project on gender education in the frame of a British Council ARAS award. Also, I was involved in an international project, in which thirteen teachers from different corners conducted action research. Nowadays, I am starting my own EAR on developing strategies to scaffold special needs students who had been exempted for years and now they have to form part of the class because of the new law of inclusion in education."

Remember that, just as with the first project we have guided you through in this book, you can decide whether you just want to explore a situation, in order to understand it more, or whether you want to try a new intervention in order to change it. You can also decide on when you want to do this; perhaps you want to take a break first! As always, it's up to you.

Task 9.9

Reflect on your own Exploratory Action Research so far:

1. Has it thrown up new questions that you want to answer, or puzzles that you want to understand? What are they?
2. Has the process of doing the research brought you into contact with potential collaborators? If so, what kind of project might interest both of you?
3. Is there anything from your original research questions that you still don't understand? Would you like to find out more?

Finally, the more experience you gain of doing Exploratory Action Research, the better you will become at it. Formulating research questions, selecting your methods, planning and doing your research, analysing data and reflecting on it will all become much easier with time, and this will increase the opportunities for you to share your research, publish more widely, and share the benefits of your experience with others.

Some teacher-researchers even go on to become mentors, supporting other teachers embarking on research projects. This could be with other teachers in your school, within your local teachers' association, or through workshops or conferences. The experience can be rewarding, and can provide new inspiration for your own classroom research.

Lorena, for example, whose story you came across in Chapters Two and Eight, and whose presentation you may have watched while reading section 9.1, has done all the following since then:

"I have worked as a mentor for action research, two cohorts in Chile (13 teachers) and now a third one with teachers from Perú (10 teachers). I am also mentoring my colleagues on teacher evaluation this year. One of the elements of the portfolio should be a collaborative action done by teachers, so I have suggested to do it as action research since the idea of this product is how to solve a problem in the classroom collaboratively. The Physical Education department accepted the idea and they are doing it related to volleyball."

Leyla, too, reports that she is 'always speaking and showing what I do to "improve" my teaching practices in conferences, professional development events and talking to teachers who are struggling with issues in their classrooms.'

As you can see, the journey you have been through with this handbook may be just the first of many!

9.6 Your personal journey with this handbook

At the end of the introduction to this book we invited you to use a diagnostic tool to assess your own competencies in the key skills needed for Exploratory Action Research. Now that we've come to the end, as one way of seeing what you've got out of it, you may like to repeat the same self-assessment you carried out then. You can then compare the two to see how much change has occurred.

Fill out the Competencies table on the next page by circling numbers from 0 to 4 in the 'Level' column, using the following level descriptors:

Level 0	I do not currently have this competency.
Level 1	I am beginning to apply this competency.
Level 2	I am applying this competency but have areas which require improvement.
Level 3	I am applying this competency with confidence.
Level 4	I am applying this competency with strength.

Competencies	Level
A. I can reflect on and analyse my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
B. I know how to improve my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
C. I can identify what is good about my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
D. I can see what problems are occurring in my classroom	0 1 2 3 4
E. I can identify a focus for research into my classroom	0 1 2 3 4
F. I can consider how to turn successes, problems and other issues into research questions	0 1 2 3 4
G. I can identify appropriate sources of evidence for research questions	0 1 2 3 4
H. I can decide how to gather information to answer my questions	0 1 2 3 4
I. I can collect evidence to answer research questions	0 1 2 3 4
J. I can analyse evidence collected	0 1 2 3 4
K. I can incorporate my students' suggestions and/or opinions into my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
L. I can design an action plan based on exploration of my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
M. I can put an action plan into practice based on exploration of my teaching	0 1 2 3 4
N. I can evaluate the results of an action plan	0 1 2 3 4
O. I know how to communicate/present research findings orally and in writing	0 1 2 3 4

Task 9.10

Hopefully, you will be able to see some improvement in your scores. But if you've been honest with yourself, there will surely also be space for further development. Highlight the competencies where you have scored yourself the lowest. Then, working with a colleague, or a mentor if possible, discuss how you can work on these competencies further. This could include:

- reading sections of this book again;
- going back to your own Exploratory Action Research, and carrying out one of the stages again;

- further reading (see, for example, the list of resources here: <https://trfestival.wordpress.com/resources/>);
- starting a related, or completely new Exploratory Action Research project;
- participating in more formal educational programs, such as an online course, a teacher training qualification, or even a research degree.

Complete this table, based on the outcome of your reflections/discussion:

Area I would like to improve	How I plan to improve	When I plan to do this

Happy further exploring!



Image by: Rick Carey/Shutterstock.

10. Extra material

1. Sample questionnaire

Questionnaire about listening activities in English

Designed by Carolina Cid and Gemma Maldonado

Mark with an X the answer that best represents your opinion.

1. How do you feel when listening to English?	Mark 'X'
A. Motivated	
B. Relaxed	
C. Confused	
D. Frustrated	
E. Other:	

4. How understandable are instructions in English for you, either given by the teacher or in CDs?	Mark 'X'
A. Very understandable	
B. More or less understandable	
C. I understand very little	
D. I do not understand anything	

2. How do you feel when the teacher speaks in English?	Mark 'X'
A. Motivated	
B. Relaxed	
C. Confused	
D. Frustrated	
E. Other:	

What topics do you prefer listening to in the English class?	Mark 'X'
A. Sports	
B. Music	
C. Science	
D. Culture	
E. Other:	

3. How do you feel when your classmates speak in English in class?	Mark 'X'
A. Motivated	
B. Relaxed	
C. Confused	
D. Frustrated	
E. Other:	

6. What English listening activities do you like?	Mark 'X'
A. Listen and complete (dialogues, songs, box with information)	
B. Listen and mark correct pictures or options	
C. Listen and sequence actions	
D. Listen and answer development questions	
E. Other: (please specify activity)	

2. Sample observation checklist

Peer Observation Guidelines

Designed by Jeannie Fernandez

Purpose: The purpose of this peer observation guideline is to obtain in a written way what is being done during the lesson. This observation will be done by an English teacher colleague. Finally, the peer observation will be used to reflect on what is being done about the students' participation inside the classroom in an English lesson.

Research Questions: To reflect about the students' participation, there are two questions to be answered during the process of the research with the help and observation from a peer teacher. The questions are the following:

1. What do I expect from my students in my English class?
2. Who are the students that participate in my English class?

While you observe the lesson, please answer thoughtfully the following questions related to the teacher and the students from 11th Grade.

1. What do the students do during the introduction stage of the lesson?

(During the introduction stage the teacher greets the students and introduces the objectives and activities that the students will do during the lesson).

2. What do the students do during the development of the lesson?

(During the development stage, students do the main activities of the lesson, for example reading a text and answering some questions; or listening to an audio and completing a task related to it; working in pairs to discuss about a specific topic, etc.).

3. What do the students do during the closing stage of the lesson?

(During the closing stage, students answer a question orally or written related to the topic of the class, or complete an activity to sum up the content of the lesson).

4. What does the teacher do to get the students to participate during the lesson?

To answer this question read the definition used to understand the concept of participation.

'Participation is the fact of taking part, as in some action or attempt, for example, answering questions by raising their hands, completing the tasks on their notebooks or handouts, going to the board to give their answers, and working in pairs/groups when asked'.

5. What does the teacher do to get the students' attention during the class?

6. What are the teacher's words, instructions or signs that students respond best to, to participate during the lesson?

7. In what way(s) does the teacher ask the students to participate during the lesson?

8. How many times does the teacher ask the students to participate in the lesson?

9. Who are the students that participate in the class? Please cross out those students' desks here:

10. Write any other relevant comment about what you observed of the students' participation.

--

Answer Key

Chapter 1

Task 1.3

1. We **KNOW** the different strategies she used to motivate her students.
2. We **KNOW** the background of the students Camila is concerned about.
3. We **DON'T KNOW** what all of her students think about the strategies she used.
4. We **DON'T KNOW** what makes Camila conclude students are not motivated.
5. We **DON'T KNOW** how students actually react in class to certain activities.

Task 1.4 @

Box A. Signs

1.	Students are very involved in what is going on D, E
2.	Students are very active D, E
3.	Students are using the vocabulary words of the lesson A, B, E
4.	Students and teacher enjoy the class C
5.	Students were pronouncing words correctly A, E
6.	Students' enjoy classes based on games C

Task 1.5

What did the teacher do?	Kind of information
<i>"I took notes of everything that happened while my students worked: their attitudes, their behaviour, etc."</i>	b
<i>"I later collected their different pieces of work and started to notice certain differences in their work according to the music I played."</i>	c, b
<i>"I also gave them a survey, a simple kind of questionnaire for them to give me their opinions."</i>	d
<i>"I decided to interview them, so after each activity we did with background music, I asked them about how they felt, if they had trouble concentrating, if they felt the music helped them complete the task and so on."</i>	a

Chapter 2

Task 2.1

In example 1, Luis started his search with a clear question in mind: where to find the fastest and cheapest flight from Bogotá to London. In order to answer this, he did a search and then compared the results to make the right decision. This situation describes steps which are common in the research process; the need to answer a question or solve a problem, the collection of information, and analysis of the information to provide the answer.

If you compare this example with situation 3, you will see that Claudia did not search for any information to make her purchase and in fact her initial intention to find a laptop was not addressed, since she finally bought a computer just because it was on sale. This is an example of not using research to find answers to a question but simply acting impulsively.

In example 2, Francis at first tried to solve his problem by applying an immediate action without really thinking (pressing several buttons) but later he did look for information systematically (according to the question in his mind) in order to solve the situation.

Answer Key

Chapter 2

Task 2.2

The three situations show different ways in which teachers can approach a problematic or puzzling situation in the classroom. The maths teacher (1) decided to stop doing something because she was unhappy with the results. Even though what she did may be valid, this is not an example of research since no evidence was collected to identify the reasons for the problem. Similarly, although the science teacher (3) changed his teaching to try to improve his students' participation, he did not gather any information

or analyse the situation either before or after making the change. On the contrary, the English teacher (2) did collect information by asking her students and a colleague, and she compared this information when analyzing it. She then planned a strategy not only to improve her students' lack of participation during video-based lessons but also to gather more information, this time about the change she wanted to make. She went beyond signs and looked for data. Only example (2), then, can be seen as an example of research.

Task 2.3

1. What were Lorena's initial concerns ?	She noticed her students were not working properly in listening activities so she wanted to know why they were not completing their listening tasks.
2. What were Lorena's initial questions ?	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. In which listening activities do my students listen better?2. How is listening presented during the lesson?3. What kind of information are my students able to identify from the listening material?4. How does the length of the listening material affect students' performance?

Chapter 3

Task 3.1

Letter **B**

In these situations, there seems to be a focus on solving the situation by 'acting' on it. This is a common thing teachers do and it is understandable since they need to solve a number of problems in their classroom and in relatively little time. You probably feel a need to act now!

Task 3.2

- (1) closed
- (2) questions
- (3) questionnaire
- (4) observe
- (5) data
- (6) reflected
- (7) understand

Task 3.3

1. **A**
2. **B**
3. **B**
4. **C**
5. **A**
6. **B**

Task 3.4

1. **B**
2. **A**
3. **A**

Answer Key

Chapter 4

Task 4.2

1. Andrea's story about ending lessons

Motivation and category:

A puzzle / e. Other (wrapping up)

2. Leyla's story about writing

Motivation and category:

A challenging situation / c. particular areas of teaching

Task 4.5

Here are Andrea's actual exploratory research questions:

1. What is an 'effective' wrapping up?
2. What are the characteristics of my wrapping up?
3. How do my students react in that part of the class?

Task 4.6

Topic: I often have too little time at the end of the class to explain homework clearly.

Some possible questions for this issue are suggested in the table.

Exploring my perceptions

What do I mean by _____ ?

What do I think / feel about _____ ?

Why do I think _____ happens?

What do I want to see happening instead of _____ ?

E.g. What do I mean by 'explain clearly'?

Exploring behaviour

When/How often does _____ happen?

What do I do / say when _____ occurs?

What do my students do / say when _____ occurs?

E.g. How do I actually give instructions?

Exploring others' perceptions

What do my students think / feel about _____ ?

What do my colleagues think of _____ ?

E.g. What do my students think about my instructions?

Answer Key

Chapter 4

Task 4.8

Exploratory question	SMART?	Criterion
1. What affects my students' learning English?	No	Not realistic
2. When do my students use English to communicate with each other?	Yes	
3. Why don't my students learn?	No	Not accurate
4. How many times do my students use their dictionaries when doing their homework?	No	Not measurable
5. How can films promote my students' motivation?	No	Not study-oriented
6. How often in my lesson do my students work in pairs?	Yes	

Task 4.10

Exploratory question	Edited question (only those which need improvement)
1. What affects my students' learning English?	e.g. What do my students say motivates them to learn English? What do they say they find demotivating?
2. When do my students use English to communicate with each other?	
3. Why don't my students learn?	e.g. What do my students find difficult about English? What typical mistakes do they make? What do they say are some reasons for these difficulties and mistakes?
4. How many times do my students use their dictionaries when doing their homework?	e.g. How many times do my students use a dictionary when doing a writing task in class? What do they say about how often they use a dictionary when doing their homework?
5. How can films promote my students' motivation?	Do my students use any resources for learning English outside class? What do they say could help them learn more English from these sources?
6. How often in my lesson do my students work in pairs?	

Answer Key

Chapter 5

Task 5.1

Box A. Andrea's exploratory and action research questions:

1. What is a wrapping up? (a), (c)
2. What are the characteristics of my wrapping up? (b)
3. How do my students react in that part of the class? (b), (d)
4. What are the effects of the change(s) that I attempt? (b), (d)

Task 5.2

Information about wrapping up a lesson.

<p>The closure is the time when you wrap up a lesson plan and help students organize the information in a meaningful context in their minds.</p> <p>A brief summary or overview is often appropriate. Another helpful activity is to engage students in a quick discussion about what exactly they learned and what it means to them now.</p> <p>Reinforce the most important points so that the learning is solidified for future lessons.</p> <p>The closure step is a chance to do an assessment. You want to determine whether the students need additional practice, or you need to go over the lesson again. It allows you to know that the time is right to move on to the next lesson.</p> <p>You can use a closure activity to see what conclusions the students drew from the lesson.</p> <p>They could describe how they can use what they learned in the lesson. You can ask them to demonstrate how they would use the information in solving a problem.</p> <p>The closure can preview what they students will learn in the next lesson and provide a smooth transition to the next lesson.</p> <p>Source: https://www.thoughtco.com/lesson-plan-step-5-closure-2081851</p>
--

Task 5.3

- I feel nervous whenever I have English class. ->
[sentence completion] I feel _____ whenever I have English class ->

[open Wh- question] How do you feel when you have English class?
- I feel motivated because of my marks in English. ->
[sentence completion] I feel _____ because of my marks in English ->

[open Wh-] How do your marks in English make you feel?
- I feel embarrassed to ask questions in English. ->
[sentence completion] I feel _____ to ask questions in English ->

[open Wh-] How does asking questions in English make you feel?

Task 5.4

Focus	Kind of data
A. Exploring your own perceptions	1. Your own written reflections and/or notes 2. Other's people's written ideas on the topic 3. Notes from informal conversations with colleagues
B. Exploring others' perceptions	4. Reflective writing by students 5. Notes or recordings of focus group discussions 6. Notes or recordings of interviews/chats with individuals 7. Responses to a questionnaire
C. Exploring behaviour (including performance)	8. Lessons plans and materials 9. Lesson recordings 10. A critical friend's notes about your lesson 11. Pictures of your class 12. Students' performance on tasks (written or recorded)

Answer Key

Chapter 5

Task 5.5

Teacher	Research question	Kind(s) of data
Mauro	1. How do my students behave when they are sitting individually?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Recording of a lesson ■ A critical friend's notes about lesson
	2. How does the seating arrangement affect individual work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Recording of a lesson ■ A critical friend's notes about lesson
	3. How do students feel about individual work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Responses to questionnaire

Task 5.6

Teacher	Research question	Kind(s) of data
Teresa	a.1. Why is that my students do not speak in class?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A critical friend's notes about lesson ■ Notes or recordings of interviews/chats with students
	a.2. Do my students like to speak in English?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Responses to questionnaire
	a.3. What opportunities do they have to speak in class?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A critical friend's notes about lesson

Task 5.7

One way of doing this would be to start with the reflective writing, followed by the questionnaire, and then the focus group discussion.

The reflective writing will provide you with some of the issues that the students who don't like homework have with it (e.g. 'It's boring' 'I don't have time.' 'I find it too difficult to do on my own', etc.). This will help you to put together a questionnaire that you can then use to work out how common these issues are (See the example below).

Note that the statements in the left hand column in the questionnaire can come directly from what students have written in their reflective writing – you don't need to spend a lot of time thinking up 'good' statements. Once you have identified the most common issues from students' questionnaire responses, you can use the focus group discussion to find out why these issues are present, and whether the students have any suggestions that will help you to get them to do their homework better in the future.

Example questionnaire items:

1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree		1	2	3	4	5
1.	I find homework boring.					
2.	I don't have time to do homework.					
3.	I find it too difficult to do homework on my own.					

Answer Key

Chapter 6

Task 6.1

- A. 53 % of students definitely enjoy speaking English in class.
- B. 79 % of students think it's important to speak English.
- C. 84 % would like to speak English in future.

Task 6.3

Response	Code/Label	Categories
A. "When we're stuck, I think use of Spanish can support"	[+Spanish as support]	[+Spanish as support]
B. "When our mother tongue is used, it's better in terms of understanding"	[+Spanish as understanding]	[+Spanish as support]
C. "Using mother tongue reduces my interest in the lesson"	[-reduces interest]	[-reduces interest]
D. "If we don't understand, speaking in Spanish is better"	[+Spanish as understanding]	[+Spanish as support]
E. "When Spanish is used, the pace of the lesson may slow down"	[-slow lesson]	[-slow lesson]
F. "I feel relieved when I feel that I can understand"	[+Spanish as understanding]	[+Spanish as support]
G. "After some time, when the language we know is used, we get bored easily"	[-boring]	[-reduces interest]
H. "I think we can learn faster with the target language"	[-better learning]	[-better learning]

Summary / Interpretation of findings:

For the research question 'Should I [the teacher] use the students' mother tongue – Spanish – in the classroom?', the answer seems to be 'Yes' since it provides support for understanding. However, there is a caveat since students also perceive that the lesson becomes less challenging when Spanish is spoken. When it comes to interpreting this data, the teacher can also consider how Spanish is used in order to avoid making the class less interesting and also thinking about better ways to aid understanding.

Answer Key

Chapter 6

Task 6.4

Comment	Keywords	Categories
1. Carla: <i>“When we work in pairs, Maria teaches me the meaning of certain words. She is like a dictionary for me.”</i>	+ pairwork - learning from a specific other student	+ pairwork + student choice
2. Vicente: <i>“Agustin is my best friend, so we always try to be in the same group, and make jokes. It’s lots of fun. But for pairwork, I like studying with the girls. They’re more serious.”</i>	+ groupwork - jokes / fun / work with friends + pairwork - serious study	+ groupwork + pairwork + student choice
3. Agustin: <i>“Groups are noisy and I don’t like to work with Vicente. He speaks English too fast. I prefer to work alone.”</i>	– groupwork - noise – groupwork - problem with a specific student + individual work	– groupwork + student choice + individual work
4. Sofia: <i>“Everybody copies my answers in groupwork, and they ask me so many questions. I like to do the exercises on my own, and then compare with another student - I find that very useful.”</i>	– groupwork - others copying – groupwork - too many questions from others + individual work – exercises + individual work followed by pair work	– groupwork + individual work + pairwork
5. Maria: <i>“I like pairwork and groupwork, especially if I can choose who I work with.”</i>	+ pairwork - especially if own choice of partner + groupwork - especially if own choice of partner	+ pairwork + groupwork + student choice

Perhaps the most obvious overall category to spot among these keywords is ‘preferences for different interaction patterns’ (including pairwork, groupwork and individual work), but this is hardly surprisingly, as this is what the teacher asked the students to write about! You may have spotted another important umbrella category emerging from this very small set of data: all five students talk about other students in some way (who they like, and don’t like to work with, whether they work effectively with certain people, etc.). This is an interesting emerging theme, one that isn’t so obvious when you first look at the data.

Here’s one possible two-sentence summary. Notice how the first sentence introduces the theme, and the second describes the finding:

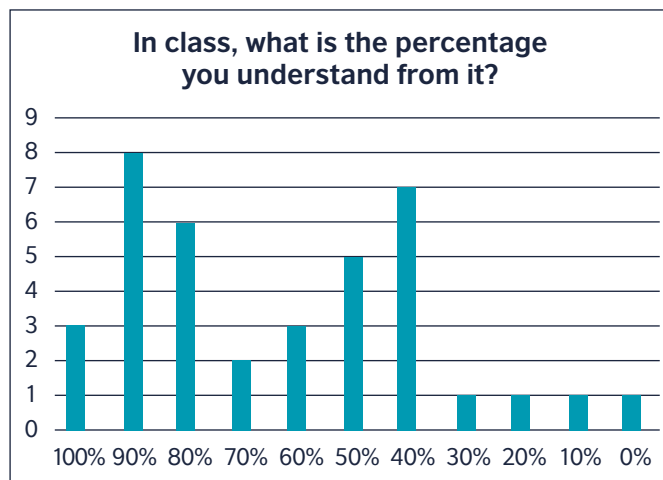
An important part of pairwork and groupwork for these learners is who they work with. Their evaluations of which interaction pattern they preferred were often linked to how much they did or didn’t enjoy working with others, either in pairwork or groupwork, with several of them mentioning preferring pairwork slightly more.

If you are writing this up as a finding from your research, you could then add a few quotes to illustrate the point you are making.

Answer Key

Chapter 6

Task 6.5



In the bar chart above, there are two noticeable peaks; one that shows 8 students who understand 90% of the class and then 7 students who understand 40%. If you look at the peaks again, you will be able to see that the highest peaks show students understand over 40% of the class or more.

What this graph shows is that Daniela has a mixed-level class at least in terms of language comprehension. Even though most of her students understand most of the language used in class, there is still a big number of students who struggle and therefore she needs to work on making her language more accessible and supporting understanding.

Chapter 7

Task 7.3

Teresa's students indicated they enjoyed 'dialogues' and 'role-plays', and they also mentioned 'songs' as something they would like to do in class.

Task 7.4

Actions	Findings
<p>A. built a better atmosphere to help relax her learners, including allowing them to change seats, having interviews with students and parents, getting help from the school psychologist and having class discussions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students feel nervous, insecure, and feel embarrassed when speaking because they are afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates. They also get frustrated easily when their answers are wrong.
<p>B. implemented some different classroom activities to encourage speaking, including pair and group work, using nomination sticks,¹ more formative assessment, and asking questions to check understanding.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They feel that performing oral activities in classes will help them to develop accurate speaking skills. They also would like more practical, funnier and group activities in classes. One student indicated he did not like oral assessments.

Task 6.6

Mostly, statements where most students agree or disagree are those which relate to feelings of fear, shame and frustration. These answers indicate that students feel afraid to use the language, mispronounce and therefore lack confidence. However, students also say that they want to learn and do better.

Regarding the questions 'What are students' feelings about English?' and 'Are they comfortable and confident with learning the language?', Javier concluded that;

"The results confirmed my suspicions - many of the students felt that they couldn't learn English, or pronounce it, but I also realized that they wanted to do their best."

Answer Key

Chapter 8

Task 8.1

“By the end of two weeks I observed several changes. The first one was that they actually did the activities, handouts were completed with the correct answers and I could observe many hands up to participate in the lesson. I conducted another survey in which students answered that working with the listening materials as if they were songs allowed them to work better. They also said that they were able to identify information from the text and that the activities they liked the most were underlining the correct word, filling in the gaps and crossing out the odd one out. They still found it difficult to order the information because sometimes the material was too fast. The focus group participants mentioned that they now felt motivated and more successful because they were able to do the tasks, and do them well. This was confirmed by another peer observation, where the student-teacher told me that students were able to focus on the activities and they did not get distracted by anything else.”

1. Lorena’s account indicates that it took her about two weeks to begin to notice the effect of the changes she had made.
2. There were four types of evidence: she first observed a change in the behaviour of her learners during lessons (making a mental or written note of this), and followed this up by collecting both quantitative data (through a second survey) and qualitative data (through her second focus group interview). Her comment: ‘From the peer observation’ indicates that she also asked the student-teacher to observe her lesson again and provide more feedback. This could have been quantitative (e.g. number of times students volunteered answers) or qualitative (e.g. general notes on aspects of students’ participation).
3. Lorena collected data in similar ways before (during the exploration phase), and after her new actions. This enabled her to compare the data and analyse what change had happened. The four types of evidence all pointed towards the students being more engaged and having more success in listening lessons. According to the four different sources of information, Lorena was able to see clearly that her attempted change had been successful.

Task 8.4

Esteban did a diagnostic test during his exploration phase, and then a similar test after beginning to use the new teaching method. At both stages he also reported his observations of learner behaviour. But, because he chose to modify his research questions, for the action phase he also chose to draw on information from a more formal progress test. And, as he continued to make further modifications to his teaching method, he continued to collect more informal evidence for the impact of the change, including about levels of learner participation and interaction in the lesson.

Task 8.5

If you look at Javier’s questionnaire data, you will notice that after the change, there is a trend towards agreement with statements beginning with “I think I can learn English ...”, “I feel motivated ...”, etc.. Also, there is a trend away from agreement with statements beginning with “I think it will take me a long time ...”, ‘I think it’s impossible ...’, ‘I feel ashamed ...’, etc. This data can be interpreted as showing students became more confident and the classroom atmosphere improved. Javier could then conclude that his main aim had been achieved.

Task 8.8

Here is one possible summary paragraph. Yours may be a little different. This doesn’t mean, of course, that it’s wrong!

Above all, the process of exploratory action research helps us to focus on the learners, their needs and their perceptions (Camila, Teresa, Lorena). By doing this, we develop our rapport with learners, and with colleagues (Javier). Exploratory action research shows us that to develop as teachers we don’t necessarily have to visit workshops or undergo training, we can learn in our schools and in our own classrooms through the insights and support that both learners and colleagues can provide us with (Andrea, Daniela, Javier). This includes developing our own creativity (Mauro), and learning more about who we are as people (Leyla) and community members (Javier).

Answer Key

Chapter 9

Task 9.2

There are many possible advantages to sharing your research. Let's start with, perhaps, the most beneficial to you personally, and maybe the least obvious:

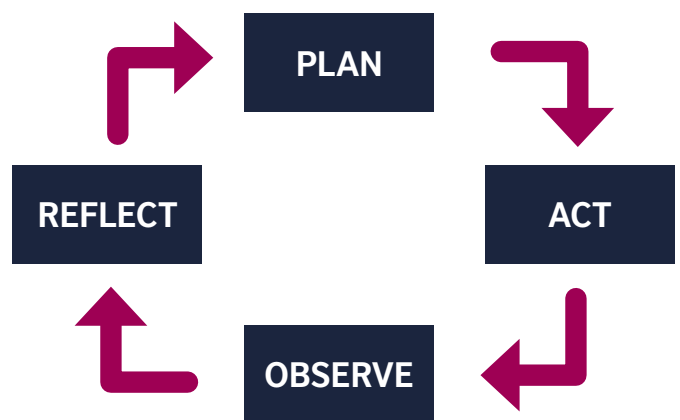
1. Presenting your research to others can be a way to enter new professional groups, communities and networks, and this can be beneficial in many unpredictable ways. We will return to this point in 9.3.
2. The act of sharing your research findings can be motivating, due to the impact you can see it having on colleagues and the professional pride you can gain.
3. As you prepare for a presentation, this will help you to reflect and evaluate what you have done carefully. This can lead to new insights before you share anything!
4. You get feedback on your research and what you found. This can include both praise and questions or constructive criticism that can help you to re-evaluate your research and understand more about it. This may help you to understand your experience better, and of course it can help you to become a better teacher-researcher, too.
5. Finally, other teachers can learn directly from your experience, challenges, successes and findings.

Task 9.3

- A. Andrea;
- B. Daniela;
- C. Teresa;
- D. Lorena.

Task 9.8

1. Action research diagrams tend to show a spiral or a round cycle like the diagram shown here:



2. Most diagrams will show four key stages; Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect.
3. The spiral shows how the process may continue after the final stage to a previous stage or back to the beginning.

This practical, user-friendly guide takes teachers through the steps of Exploratory Action Research, an approach to teacher-research for professional development created originally in the context of the British Council Champion Teachers programme for secondary school teachers in Chile and, since then, adopted also in teacher-research schemes in India, Nepal and Peru.

Based on examples from actual experience, including cases from the companion publication *Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* (British Council, 2016), the book is unique in the literature on teacher-research in ELT in being particularly targeted at school teachers working in relatively difficult circumstances.

Richard Smith (Reader in ELT & Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, UK) has expertise in the fields of language teaching history; learner and teacher autonomy; teacher-research; ELT research capacity-building; and teaching in difficult circumstances. He has published widely and given invited talks, seminars and workshops in many countries, working as an educator and mentor with teachers and researchers from around the world, both face to face and as leader of networks like the Teaching English in Large Classes network (TELCnet), IATEFL Research SIG, and the International Festival of Teacher-research. He is currently the editor of the 'Key Concepts' section of *ELT Journal*, chair of the Editorial Board of *English Language Teacher Education and Development Journal*, and an academic adviser to teacher-research schemes in both Latin America and South Asia.

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