Develop research skills

Teaching and research go hand in hand, since in every lesson things happen that can be a basis for further understanding. Research simply means collecting information about an issue to better understand it.

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Learn how to review a textboook 27

Purpose: to develop experience in evaluating textbooks

Many teachers make use of commercial textbooks, and understanding the nature of textbooks is helpful if you are on a team involved in selecting and evaluating materials. In this tip suggestions are given for reviewing a textbook using a set of questions as a guide. This activity can be carried out by a group of teachers or by an individual teacher.

1 Examine the organization of the book by considering these questions:

- Goals. What does the book seek to achieve and how clearly are its learning outcomes identified?
- Syllabus. Is the syllabus adequate or would it need to be supplemented (e.g. through additional activities)?
- Theoretical framework. What language-learning theory is the book based on?
- Methodology. What methodology is the book based on? Is it pedagogically sound?
- Language content. What kind of language does it contain and is it an appropriate level of difficulty for the learners?
- Other content. Are the topics appropriate for the target learners?
- Organization. Is the book well organized into units and lessons, and within lessons are the purposes of activities clearly identified? Do units have a coherent, consistent organization, and do they gradually progress in difficulty throughout the book?
- Activities. Are activities engaging, varied, and useful?
- Teacher appeal. Does the book look easy to teach and is it self-contained, or would the teacher need to develop supplementary materials to use with it?
- Learner appeal. How engaging would it be for learners? How would they rate the design of the book, the topics and the kinds of activities included? Is the material clearly relevant to their perceived language-learning needs? Are self-study components included?

- Ancillaries. What other components does the book include, such as teacher's book, workbook, tests, and digital and web-based support?
- Price. Is the book affordable for the intended buyers?

2 Examine the format of a unit from the textbook: choose one unit from the textbook for closer analysis in order to understand how the content of the unit is organized.

- What are the aims and objectives of the unit?
- What syllabus strands does it contain?
- What is the format or structure of the unit and how is it organized?
- What different kinds of exercises or activities does the unit contain?

3 Experience a textbook-based lesson: teach a unit from the book following the suggestions given in the teacher's book. Following the lesson experience, consider questions such as these:

- What did you like most or least about it?
- What kinds of language use did the unit practice?
- What specific learning outcomes did the material deliver?
- Was there adequate scaffolding of tasks?
- Did you experience any difficulties with any of the activities?
- Would the material work with a mixed-level class?
- How engaging were the activities?

4 Adaptation of the book: consider the suitability of the book in relation to your teaching context and whether some forms of adaptation may be needed.

- Modifying content. Is there content that needs to be modified to better address learners' needs?
- Adding or deleting content. Should anything be added or removed?
- Reorganizing content. Is the sequence of content appropriate, or should some of it be rearranged?

5 Relevance to the teaching context: you can now make a decision on whether you would recommend the course for use in your school.

Richards, J. C. (2015). Materials design in language teacher education: An example from Southeast Asia. In Farrell, T. (ed). *International Perspectives on Language Teacher Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 90–106.
Siegel, A. (2014). What should we talk about? The authenticity of textbook topics. *ELT Journal 68(4)*, 363–375.

Carry out action research 28

Purpose: to understand the nature of action research and how to implement it

Action research is teacher-conducted research that seeks to clarify and resolve practical teaching issues and problems. "Research" here refers simply to collecting information. "Action" means that the process involved addresses a classroom issue that you want to explore. This tip clarifies the nature of action research and how to conduct it.

1 Understand the nature of action research: action research has the following features:

- It is built around your normal classroom practice and adds another dimension to practice.
- Its goal is to improve teaching and learning.
- It is small scale and problem-oriented.
- You can carry out action research on your own or with colleagues.
- It views you as a change agent seeking to improve your understanding of teaching through carrying out action research in your own classes.

2 Stages involved in action research:

- Identify an issue you would like to take action on.
- Consider ways of addressing the problem.
- Develop an action plan to try to resolve the issue – the "intervention" – and consider the time and resources needed.
- Implement the plan and observe its effects.
- If necessary, modify the intervention and repeat the process.

3 Choosing a topic for action research: choose a small-scale issue and frame a question that you want to answer. For example:

- How can I help my learners remember new words?
- How can I reduce the amount of talking I do during my lessons?
- How can I deal with a mixed-level speaking class?

4 Choosing a strategy to address the problem: select a way to address the problem that will bring about a change of some kind.

5 Choosing a way of evaluating the results: decide on a way to evaluate the impact of the change. For example:

- a questionnaire to students
- a survey
- a video record of a lesson
- a test or other form of assessment.

6 An example of action research:

> *Recently, I wanted to find out if peer feedback in my composition class helps improve my learners' writing, and decided to try out action research. I first had to develop a procedure for carrying out peer feedback, guidelines for my students to follow and a checklist that they can make use of. I also gave several practice sessions to demonstrate how the process works. Then we used peer feedback as an alternative to teacher feedback on my students' compositions throughout a semester-long composition class and kept notes on how it works. At the end of the course, I surveyed my students' opinions about peer feedback, and compared their writing to see if it had improved. My conclusion was that it has made a difference to my students' writing. However, I needed to make some changes to the checklist I had developed and will try it again with another class next semester.*
>
> (Jose, institute teacher, Ecuador)

Can you identify the stages involved in action research from this example, as outlined in part 2 above?

7 Recommendations:

- In addressing the problem, choose strategies that relate to or reflect your usual classroom practices.
- Consider working with a colleague, for example, two teachers could use the same intervention strategy and compare the results.
- Give careful consideration to the amount of time involved.
- If you find your action research made a difference, share your findings with other teachers.

Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative Action Research for English Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Wyatt, M. (2010) Teachers researching their own practice. *ELT Journal 65(4)*, 417–425.

Try a replication study 29

Purpose: to learn techniques that can be used to study your own classroom

In order to better understand the nature of teaching and learning, it is helpful to explore questions about these processes and to collect information about how they take place. This tip considers the value of repeating a piece of research that has been carried out in a different context to see whether what was discovered is also true in your own setting.

1 Nature of replication research: replication research means repeating a study using the same procedures, but in a different setting and with different subjects. For example, you may read an article that reports on how teachers use questions and the kinds of questions they most often use with adults. You decide to repeat the study to see if you get the same results when you collect information about your own use of questions in your adult classes.

2 Benefits of replicating someone else's study: replication research can have several purposes for teachers:

- It enables you to see if the research findings apply to your situation.
- It enables you to learn about the process of conducting research.
- It adds the role of "teacher-researcher" to your role.

3 Choosing a study to replicate: a number of factors need to be considered in choosing a study to replicate:

- The research raises questions that are relevant to your situation.
- It is manageable in terms of time and resources you have available.
- It does not require the use of procedures that you may not be familiar with (such as statistical analysis of information).

Professional ESL teacher journals often contain example of issues that could be a focus of a follow-up study. For example, recent issues of *ELT Journal* included reports on research on the following topics:

- the kind of feedback supervisors gave to teachers after observation
- the ways in which teachers explained vocabulary in reading classes
- the kinds of changes students made when they revised compositions.

4 An example: the following is an example of the kind of project that could easily be replicated (from Richards and Lockhart, 1994):

- A group of teachers in an institute were interested in the kind of feedback they gave to their learners on their spoken errors.
- They videotaped lessons of classes with different levels.
- They reviewed the videos and focused on the errors students made, and noted the ones that the teachers corrected and how they corrected them.
- They found that in the beginning level, students were generally corrected because they were not understood. The amount of error-correction depended on the level of the class. In the upper-intermediate classes, 80 percent of errors were ignored, while in the beginning and intermediate classes, only 30 percent of errors were ignored. They also found that they corrected fewer errors in open-ended communication activities or unguided discussion. They found that the usual way that errors were corrected was to interrupt the learner and ask them to repeat the correct form.
- On discussing the findings, the teachers felt that the types of errors they corrected was appropriate, but that a greater variety of error-correction strategies could be made use of.

A piece of research of this kind is an ideal topic for a follow-up study for several reasons:

- It can be done individually or as a group project.
- It addresses a topic that all teachers are interested in.
- The research procedures are relatively straightforward.
- It generates information that can be applied to classroom practice.
- It would make a good topic for a presentation.

Richards, J. C. & Lockhart, C. (1994). *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms* (pp. 200–201). New York: Cambridge University Press.
Wyatt, M. (2011). Teachers researching their own practice. *ELT Journal 65(4)*, 417–425.

Take part in lesson-study 30

Purpose: to learn through engaging in shared lesson-planning

Lesson-study refers to a process in which a group of teachers co-plan a lesson that focuses on addressing a particular problem or issue. One of the teachers later teaches the lesson, and then the group meets to review and reflect on their experience. Through working together with other teachers, participants have a chance to learn from each other and to share and compare their understandings of teaching. It is an approach which focuses on solving issues that you identify in your own practice, and enables you to develop strategies that you can apply in your classes. This tip describes how to implement lesson-study as a professional development activity.

1 Preparing for lesson-study: a workshop can provide a good introduction to the lesson-study approach. Once you are familiar with the approach, you can choose how often you would like to take part in it, and how easily you can arrange to work as a group and carry out the observation phase of the project.

2 Forming a group: like other group-based activities, a small group of three to six teachers is a good size for a lesson-study project. Sometimes it is useful for the group to consist of teachers with different levels of experience so that inexperienced teachers can learn how more experienced teachers think and act. At other times, a group may consist of expert teachers who wish to try out novel and creative ways of teaching.

3 Identify a goal: the primary goal of lesson-study is to develop an effective way of improving student learning, often as a response to a problem or issue that your group has identified. The members of the group share ideas on possible issues or problems you could explore through lesson-study. The following are examples of topics that could be the focus of lesson-study:

- How can we use texts to teach critical reading?
- How can we teach grammar in a more communicative way?
- How can we teaching reading as an interactive process?
- What's an effective way of building a lesson around a recorded lecture?
- What are some strategies for differentiated instruction in a writing class?

In choosing a goal for a project, you need to consider what the students should be able to do at the end of a lesson designed to address the issue you have identified, i.e. you should identify one or more learning outcomes that you want a lesson to achieve.

4 Plan a lesson: your group then plans a lesson to address the question or problem you have identified. As you plan the lesson, discuss what your expectations are for the lesson, how you think it will promote students' learning, and what the expected outcomes of the lesson are.

5 Teach the lesson: one of the group volunteers to teach the lesson to their class. The other group members observe the lesson and take notes or collect information on the effectiveness of the lesson and what the learners learned from it. The observation phase of lesson-study is a crucial part of the process, since it requires careful attention to trying to identify how students are learning, how much they are learning, and whether what you observe reflects your expectations as to how the lesson would work.

6 Reflect and revise: your group then reflects on the lesson and discusses whether the lesson achieved its goals and if it needs to be revised or improved. Once changes to the lesson plan are made, a second teacher agrees to teach the lesson while the other group members observe.

7 Share: your group shares what you have learned with other colleagues.

Fernandez, C. (2002). Learning from Japanese approaches to professional development: The case of lesson-study. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(5), 393–405.