Teacher empowerment through action research

By David Nunan, Hayley Black and Julie Choi

Since graduating with a Master of Teaching degree two years ago, Shannon has been teaching immigrants in an adult language centre. Although she has grown in confidence and competence, there are aspects of her teaching that concern her. She is particularly concerned with the amount of talking that she does, as well as with the quality of the language produced by her students.

Shannon consults the director of studies, who suggests that she record her lessons over several days, to check the amount of talking she does, as well as to evaluate the type of language produced by the students. When Shannon does this, she is disturbed to find that on average 70% of the class time is taken up with teacher talk. Much of this talk was made up of lengthy monologues devoted to managing and directing the learning process. She also finds that student talk is directed by her. She asks a question, a student responds, and she evaluates their response.

Shannon: So, OK, let's talk about what you did on the weekend? Shaheen?
Student: I … er … I go market.
Shannon: Go?
Student: Er … went … went market.
Shannon: Good. I went to the market. Can you say that?
Student: I went market.
Shannon: *To* the market. I went *to* the market.
Student: I went *to* the market.

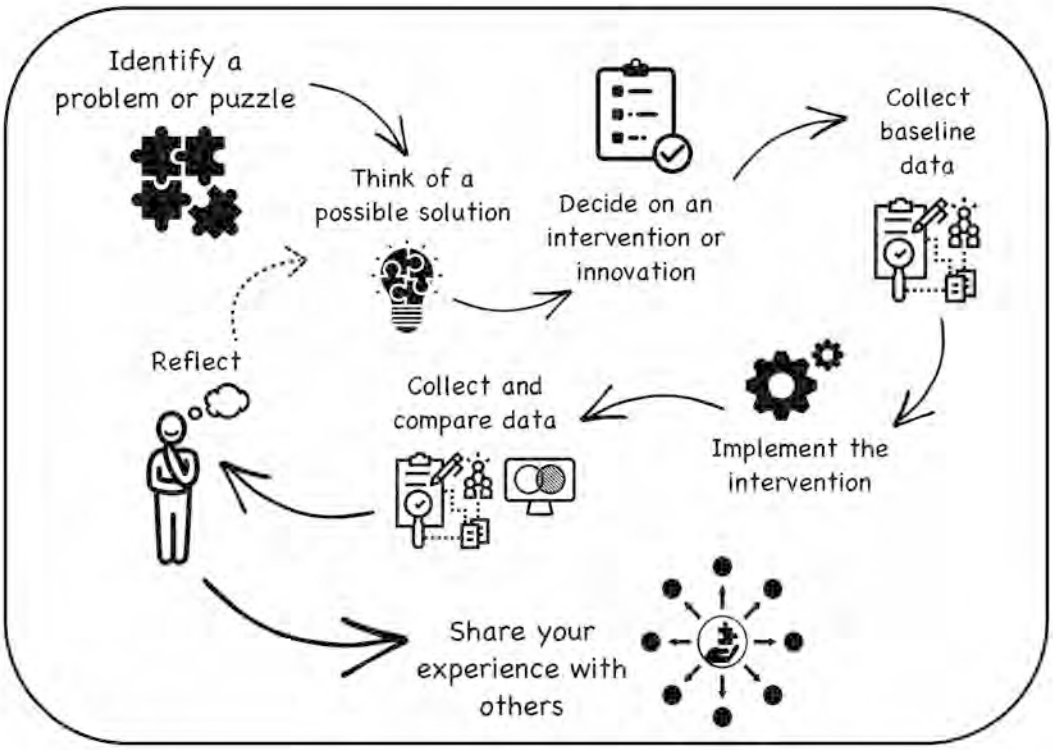
Shannon shares what she has learned with her director of studies and decides to incorporate teaching activities in which students have more active roles in contributing content to the lessons and have greater responsibility for managing their own learning. She creates small group tasks such as jigsaw listening and reading, in which she takes a 'back seat', monitoring and guiding students rather that directing the learning. Four weeks after changing the dynamics of her classroom and encouraging learners to take on active roles, she again records her lessons, and is gratified to find that the amount of teacher talk has more than halved and that the language her students produce is more like 'real world' discourse: they actively engage with each other, seek clarification, negotiate for a turn, agree and disagree and so on. At an in-service day at the end of semester, she gives a poster presentation based on what she learned.

What is action research?

Without being aware of it at the time, Shannon has carried out a piece of action research (AR). She has identified a problem in her classroom, collected some initial data to verify the nature of the problem, planned and carried out an intervention, evaluated the effect of the intervention, and reported the study to interested colleagues. The vignette illustrates the fact that through AR, teachers can investigate a problem or puzzle that has arisen in their teaching and experiment with ways of improving their practice. Teachers are sometimes put off by the term 'research', conjuring up images of academics carrying out complicated experiments in order to collect sets of data that are analysed using incomprehensible statistical formulas. This is one way of looking at research, but there are other ways, as the vignette shows.

Basically, all research is a process of asking a question or questions, collecting data that can potentially answer the question(s), analysing and interpreting (i.e. making sense of) the data, and telling others what they have found. In keeping with other types of research, these steps are fundamental to AR. A key defining distinction of AR is that it is under the control of the teacher. It is the teacher, not an external researcher, who decides what it is they want to investigate, how to go about investigating the issue, what changes they might or might not want to make to their practice, and how to report what they have found to other teachers who might be interested. The term 'action' highlights the fact that we don't collect and analyse data for its own sake, but to solve a problem, and improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning in our classrooms.

In short, despite differences of orientation and approach, AR has three essential characteristics. In the first place, it is carried out and controlled by teachers rather than external researchers. Secondly, it is aimed at improving



The steps in an AR study

teaching and learning in a local context. Thirdly, it involves the collaboration of teachers and learners. In the vignette above, we see all three characteristics. It is Shannon, not an external researcher who decides on the issue of interest. Her aim is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in her classroom. She also explained to her students why she was making changes to her classroom practice, and why she was giving them greater responsibility for their own learning.

Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart, two key figures in AR, argue that it can be a powerful tool for teacher and learner empowerment. They summarise the method in the following way:

> The linking of the terms 'action' and 'research' highlights the essential feature of the approach: trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning. The result is improvement in what happens in the classroom and school, and better articulation and justification of the educational rationale for what goes on. Action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice into the one whole: ideas-in-action. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p.6)

A comprehensive AR study will consist of the following steps:

1. Identify a problem or puzzle.
2. Think of a possible solution.
3. Decide on an intervention / innovation.
4. Collect data so you have a baseline for comparison. (This step is optional for exploratory AR.)
5. Implement the intervention.
6. Collect post-intervention data and compare it with the baseline data.
7. Reflect on the process and decide on whether to implement a second round of research.
8. Share your experience with others. Publishing, i.e., 'going public', opens up your research to scrutiny and comment by others, and fulfils one of the defining criteria for research. It is this final step that differentiates AR from reflective teaching.

In the next section, we present an AR study, in which a university teacher introduces an innovative approach to one of her courses in order to address a problem she perceived in that course.

Case study

Teaching English Internationally (TEI) was a one-semester course that ran in early 2018 as part of a Master

of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in an Australian university. Sixty student teachers were enrolled in the class from local and international backgrounds. The course covered issues relating to the cultural politics of teaching English in an era of globalisation. The course required student to contest challenging concepts such as translanguaging, linguistic rights and globalisation against their own experiences of language and learning. To realise fully the goals of the course, collaboration and sharing between peers from disparate cultural and linguistic backgrounds was essential. In previous iterations of the course, the lecturer (Julie) noted that cross-cultural collaboration was minimal, at best.

Julie decided that an intervention was needed. She organised students into culturally and linguistically heterogeneous groups. Each group was required to draw on input from lectures and take part in jigsaw literature circles. For jigsaw literature circles, each group member had a different reading on the topic for the week. Students shared insights from their reading with their group and drew on these insights to create a multimodal project to present to the class at the end of the semester. This project was the basis for each student's final assessment. Each student had to be committed to and contribute to the work of the group because it was the group rather than the individual student who received a grade. The assessment was ever-changing and dynamic as students worked to structure their project under Julie's guidance and critical feedback. The technical term for this procedure is Group-Dynamic Assessment (G-DA) (see Poehner, 2009).

Time was allocated in each session for group members to meet and discuss their multimodal project. To encourage collaboration, students were given the freedom to use multiple modes (film, presentation slides, written texts, etc.) and engage in multiple perspectives to address the assessment topic: 'How should languages be taught in a new era of migration and mobility?'. The group multimodal assessment provided a meaningful reason for international and local students to collaborate and begin to see diversity as a resource for creating their assessment project.

Towards the end of the weekly lessons, Julie summarised the literature and addressed students' questions. Each session could conclude with a planning session for the multimodal group assessment where student teachers would discuss their ideas with their group members. Due to limited class time, these discussions would frequently continue outside class in face-to-face meetings or on a digital platform. The small group multimodal presentations formed the finale to the course and were an opportunity for student teachers to contribute their group's perspectives and personal experiences.

In order to evaluate the impact of the innovation, a research assistant (Hayley), who had been a student teacher on the course the previous year, conducted interviews with student teachers who were eager to share their experiences of the group activities that they participated in. The interviews were framed by one question: 'How did your group collaborate and complete the group tasks together?', which aimed to elicit student teachers' perspectives and reflections on group work. The encouraging comments shared below allowed the teacher to see the importance of G-DA based group work for supporting student–student connections.

Student teachers believed the small group multimodal assessment increased student–student collaborations.

> It set up a space for the students to really work together...like you need to sit together and make it together … You need to involve different people's effort; this is very important. – *Cynthia*

> This was a chance that everyone can bring all their thoughts together and create something fascinating. – *Karlee*

Each week the topics and group configurations changed which afforded student teachers an opportunity to communicate with all class members.

> I think the reading jigsaw was an excellent way of structuring the seminars. I really like the readings she chose, and spreading that out amongst different people … And the negotiation and the collaboration, the fact that you have to really listen to what people are saying, take it onboard, and voice your opinion back. It is about actual communication. – *Rachel*

Given the time and spatial constraints of the weekly sessions, student teachers were open to having extensive and less structured conversations on course topics beyond the classroom walls. What emerged were discussions that bridged differences. Student teachers commented

on expanding their awareness by learning about their group members' lives.

> [one group member] has an office here in the city and we would meet and sit and talk and analyse each other. He was the 'native speaker' and we were all the 'others', but we tried to understand each other's perspectives. We spoke about our lives and we wanted to share. – *Sarah*

> I feel like I enjoy working with different nationalities people. Sometimes we need more time to spend, to communicate. But we have some more ideas as well. For example, I know about Jenny's life in Australia. That's what makes me quite enjoy working on this. – *Cynthia*

The group tasks encouraged reflection on inclusive practices during group activities.

> This helped me to think about when we do group work, how to engage with different people because sometimes we just want to get the things done and be very efficient and we didn't, like, think about how to include everybody. – *Cynthia*

While creating a multimodal piece of work, international student teachers realised their own communicative resources. For Cynthia, the group experience contributed to her language resources being drawn on and she felt she was able to improve her Mandarin.

> So, because we have different nationalities, we need to use English. But sometimes I do talk to the other two students in Mandarin. Actually, Mandarin is not my first language as well. So English is easier for me to communicate, but … every session I feel more comfortable. – *Cynthia*

For some students, this experience changed their perception of group work.

> I am so grateful that the group experience was so positive. It sort of turned my head around. – *Jenny*

> Oh, I really like group work now. And I am more motivated to do group work than a writing assignment, because, writing an assignment independently I feel very lonely, I don't have the motivation from others. – *Cynthia*

> That is how the class has changed me. Now I am thinking as long as the assignments are designed in a very meaningful way, you can also discuss about it. It isn't supposed to be like 'ok I get a score, and this is all my thing', but actually learn from each other. It's really amazing. – *Karlee*

The innovation of the group tasks in the TEI course was designed to support ongoing discussions that involved choice, negotiation of meanings and the activation of learners' communicative repertories. Listening to student teachers' comments shows us that there was a significant

Table 1: Steps in the action research process

Steps	Case Study
1. Problem Identification	In an era of globalisation, cross-cultural contact and collaboration are essential. This is not happening in a graduate TESOL teacher education course – a cultural divide exists between local and international students.
2. Preliminary investigation	This is an optional step in the AR model we followed.
3. Hypothesis formation	G-DA based collaborative group work will stimulate greater cross-cultural communication and enhance opportunities for self-directed learning.
4. The innovation	The innovation, based on G-DA, involved lectures, jigsaw literature circles, and a small group multimodal assessment project.
5. The data	Student interview responses. Students' final multimodal pieces of work.
6. Outcomes	Significant increase in cross-cultural collaboration in and beyond the classroom. Greater sensitivity and appreciation for cross-cultural perspectives. Students' enhanced ability to take control of their own learning, and greater investment in assignment work.

increase in peer–peer collaboration and discussion. Group tasks based on G-DA felt meaningful to the students and group diversity was an opportunity for mutual learning. There was a significant increase in cross-cultural collaboration in and beyond the classroom, student teachers exhibited greater sensitivity and appreciation for cross-cultural perspectives and demonstrated an enhanced ability to take control of their own learning and greater investment in assignment work. The steps in the AR project are summarised in Table 1.

Evaluating action research

In evaluating an AR network, Nunan (1993) interviewed and administered a questionnaire to a group of 120 teachers who had carried out an AR project. When asked how their teaching had changed as a result of doing AR, the teachers reported that they used a greater variety of teaching behaviours, praised students more, were more aware of students' feelings, made greater use of the target language in class for managing the learning process, were more conscious of students' non-verbal cues, incorporated students' ideas into their teaching, made greater use of group work, accepted divergent, open-ended student responses, and were more effective in getting students engaged in their own learning. In addition, they reported being less directive, criticising students less, and using less teacher talk.

The four most frequently mentioned advantages of engaging in AR were, first and foremost, empowerment and greater control over their own ongoing professional development; the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues; an enhanced sense of professionalism; and the development of practical and relevant activities for the classroom. Disadvantages included a lack of time for and expertise in doing research; in some cases, the hijacking of their AR by school administration; scepticism and a sense of threat by colleagues not involved in AR; and the fact that doing research sometimes got in the way of teaching.

When asked what advice they would give to teachers thinking of engaging in AR, most frequently mentioned were to start small, to collaborate and network with others, to have a knowledgeable and supportive ally inside your institution and to report your research as a narrative. In relation to the last point, Elbaz (1992) has this to say:

> Initially, 'story' seems to be a personal matter: There is concern for the individual narrative of a teacher and what the teacher herself, or a colleague or researcher, as privileged eavesdroppers, might learn from it. In the course of engaging with stories, however, we are beginning to discover that the process is a social one: The story may be told for personal reasons but it has an impact on its audience which reverberates out in many directions at once (p.423).

The following checklist is a useful tool for self-evaluating an AR proposal:

1. Is the project logical and coherent? If not, where are the gaps?
2. Is there harmony between your teaching and research? (Does the research flow out of and back into the teaching?)
3. Is the research question worth asking? Why do you think so?
4. Are there alternative ways of investigating the question? If so, what are they?
5. Can you predict a follow-up question or questions?
6. Are the learners participants in or objects of the research? If the latter, how could their role be enhanced?
7. Is the proposed data collection method consistent with the research question?
8. How will the data be analysed and interpreted?
9. Who will you collaborate with or consult in conducting the research?

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