



# Exploring the classroom

**Andrew Boon**

considers his journey from teaching puzzles to published insights.

**A**ction Research (AR) (Boon, 2016; Burns, 2010; Kemmis *et al.*, 2014) is a process in which a teacher identifies and examines aspects of their particular teaching in order to gain insights and bring about positive change. In this article, I reflect on my journey from classroom teacher to teacher-researcher, providing a summary of three past research articles published in *Modern English Teacher (MET)*. Each summary outlines the various steps I took to conduct the research. If successful, the aim of the article is to encourage the reader to investigate (or continue to investigate) their own classroom practices not only as a means of professional development for the individual teacher but also to share the expertise gained with their peers. By writing up research for publication in *MET*, a teacher contributes to the ever-growing body of theoretical and practical knowledge in the field of English language teaching. In this way, we support one another by exchanging ideas on what can work in the classroom and improve our pedagogical skills.

## My journey from teacher to teacher-researcher

So, when did it all begin for me? Let me take you back – about a quarter of a century. A few years into my career as an English language teacher in Japan, I found myself making the transition from teacher

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to teacher-researcher. In 2000, I enrolled on the Aston University distance-learning master's degree course in TESOL to help advance my career. The course encouraged working teachers to use AR (Boon, 2016; Burns, 2010; Kemmis *et al.*, 2014) to investigate the very environment in which they practise their pedagogical craft: the classroom. In fact, one of the key texts in the course was titled *Teachers Investigate Their Work* by Altrichter, Posch and Somekh (1993), which is now in its third edition. Most of the module assignments involved engaging with theory and then applying it to examine aspects of my own teaching context. The goal was to identify classroom puzzles or problems, gather data, implement changes and reflect on the results. After graduating in 2003, I decided to return to the research projects I had undertaken during the course and write them up for publication. For more on this part of my journey, see 'Why we publish' (Boon & Yanase, 2024), which shares further reflections on teacher motivations for writing and sharing research. I have continued researching and writing on a variety of themes throughout my teaching

career. In the next sections, I will outline the steps involved in conducting classroom research using AR and summarise three of my past *MET* papers.

## Possible steps in conducting AR

The AR process I followed in my projects can be understood as a flexible, reflective cycle consisting of five interconnected steps. Though inspired by models from Burns (2010) and Kemmis *et al.* (2014), the following structure emerged from my own experience and continues to guide my classroom-based investigations.

### Step 1: Exploring and identifying the topic

The AR cycle often begins with the teacher remaining open to puzzles and critical incidents that arise during regular classroom teaching. These moments of disruption, uncertainty or curiosity as to what is actually happening in the classroom prompt initial reflection. From there, the teacher narrows down the focus and identifies an issue, topic or theme worthy of deeper exploration.

### Step 2: Planning

Once a research theme emerges, the teacher-researcher makes a plan of how to investigate it. This may include reviewing relevant literature, selecting research tools (classroom recordings, journals, surveys, interviews) and designing guiding questions. Planning can also involve anticipating potential obstacles and ethical concerns.

### Step 3: Collecting and analysing data

The next step is to gather relevant primary data to understand more about the particular research theme in question. Data analysis often leads to cyclical reflection, allowing the teacher to revisit and rethink earlier assumptions before moving forward.

### Step 4: Intervening and observing

Based on the insights gained from the data, the teacher may implement a change or intervention to improve their pedagogical practice. This step may run parallel with observation in which the teacher monitors how the change affects classroom dynamics

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and student learning, and reflects on what is working or is still unclear. The teacher remains open to unexpected outcomes or new puzzles that may emerge.

### Step 5: Writing and sharing

The final step involves writing up the project to share with peers, often through articles, workshops or conference presentations. By documenting our research, we not only reflect more deeply on our own practices but also contribute to collective professional development within the wider teaching community.

## Instruction-giving: effective procedural instructions (Boon, 2004)

This was my first ever published paper for *MET*. It was adapted from the classroom research I had originally conducted and written up for the methodology module of my master's degree. What follows is a brief summary of the steps involved in the AR project.

### Step 1: Exploring and identifying the topic

After doing the reading for my methodology module, I began to reflect more critically on my classroom teaching, taking notes on problems as they arose and considering potential research themes. At this time, I was working for an *eikaiwa* (conversation school) in Japan which had a strict English-only policy in the classroom. The idea for this AR project emerged from a specific incident in which a student misinterpreted my procedural instruction during the setup of a role play:

1. **T:** OK – I want you to imagine this box is a household appliance (The teacher holds a box). It could be a TV or telephone . . . anything like that . . . OK? **S:** What is it?

2. **S1:** It's a box!

3. **T:** Er . . . no! (followed by correction move) (Boon, 2004)

The student's visible embarrassment in response to the misunderstanding made me pause. I began to consider the challenges of giving task instructions through the L2, and I wanted to understand more deeply the various circumstances in which my instructions were unsuccessful and, more importantly, determine ways to deliver them more effectively.

### Step 2: Planning

To investigate, I reviewed the literature I could find on instruction-giving. Surprisingly, I found that very little had been written on the topic in ELT. A breakthrough came when I explored work on interpersonal communication from a business perspective (Buchanan & Huczynski, 1997). This helped me frame the instruction-giving process as a kind of coded message. I planned to collect data by recording my lessons and keeping a journal, focusing on both my successful and unsuccessful attempts at delivering task instructions in the classroom.

### Step 3: Collecting and analysing data

I recorded approximately 12 hours of lessons over a three-month period across different levels and class types. I identified four key incidents where instruction breakdowns occurred and analysed the factors involved: 1) difficult but key vocabulary being filtered out; 2) mismatched expectations leading to student reinterpretation of the task; 3) poorly constructed instructions leading to confusion; and 4) task instructions being embedded in the model narrative, leading to students' silent feedback. As I transcribed the key incidents and referred

to my journal reflections, I began to refine my understanding of these key instances in which my procedural instructions had been unsuccessful.

#### Step 4: Intervening and observing

Drawing on my analysis, I introduced several small but impactful changes to my instruction-giving. I simplified my instructional language, framed transitions more clearly, provided models when needed, and even experimented with students taking over parts of the instruction-giving process themselves. I then observed how students responded and found that these adjustments improved student understanding, task clarity and task engagement.

#### Step 5: Writing and sharing

Based on feedback from my Aston University methodology tutor, I adapted the module assignment accordingly and submitted it to *MET* for publication. I hoped the article would highlight for language teachers the problem of unclear instructions and offer practical techniques to improve them – techniques that had emerged directly from my classroom-based inquiry. The process confirmed for me the power of AR to turn everyday teaching puzzles into opportunities for professional learning and into something useful to share with others.

### **‘Tell me what you want, what you really, really want!’ – helping learners to identify their needs in a short business English course (Boon, 2005)**

This was my second article published in *MET*. It was adapted from the research I had originally conducted and written up for the Course and Syllabus Design module of my master’s degree. Below is a summary of the steps involved in the AR project.

#### **Step 1: Exploring and identifying the topic**

After leaving *eikaiwa* teaching to work with several different corporate English training providers, I was assigned to deliver short-term English courses at various businesses in the Tokyo area. One provider ran a 10-week (20-hour) business English course with a negotiated syllabus component, targeting business people from different companies who were self-financing their studies. During the needs assessment in the first lesson, I noticed that learners seemed unsure of what they wanted to achieve by participating in the course, or even what was possible to achieve, in such a short period. Most course participants could only express a vague idea of their learning goals. This led me to the central research

puzzle and question: how could I improve the current needs-assessment procedure so that learners could more clearly articulate their goals and take greater ownership of their learning?

#### **Step 2: Planning**

I reviewed the available literature on needs assessment, including Gorsuch (1991), Littlejohn (1985) and Nunan (1999), then gathered feedback via questionnaires or interviews from teachers and former course participants on the short business English course regarding the current needs assessment procedure.

#### **Step 3: Collecting and analysing data**

Following the initial round of data collection and literature review, it became clear that the existing needs-assessment procedure conducted in the first lesson of the 10-week voluntary business English course was lacking. Learners were not provided with any meaningful options for possible lesson content that could be included in the subsequent lessons of the course, and there was no mechanism for ongoing, dialogic needs analysis with participants once the course had begun.

#### **Step 4: Intervening and observing**

To overcome the issues with the existing procedure, I implemented a multi-



stage, needs-assessment process. This included early brainstorming activities, guided reflection and a 'pick-and-choose checklist' which allowed learners to examine a range of business-related lessons that had already been delivered to course participants on previous 10-week courses. Learners could then consider whether this lesson content would be 'very useful', 'useful' or 'not useful' for them to study with regard to their current work situation. Each student could select three important lesson ideas from the pick-and-choose checklist or come up with their own alternative ideas for business lessons (e.g. describing products, showing visitors around the workplace, chairing a meeting). They wrote the lesson ideas on three separate pieces of paper and placed them face up on the table. It was then possible for the course participants to look at everyone's lesson ideas, negotiate and fix the content of the remaining nine classes. I could then tailor the course content accordingly to the requests of the participants. I observed a noticeable shift in learner reaction during the needs-assessment procedure: they became more specific, confident and collaborative in expressing their goals, and this shaped the negotiated course design in a way that felt both more relevant and motivating to the course participants.

I also incorporated a feedback sheet into the process. The feedback sheet was to be returned to the teacher by participants after the third and seventh lessons of the course. By doing this, participants could inform the teacher of any different language or learning needs that had emerged once the course had begun. This could allow the teacher to make any appropriate changes to the remainder of the course based on the feedback.

### Step 5: Writing and sharing

I wrote up the project for *MET* to share a simple but effective model for assessing needs that other teachers could use in similar courses with negotiated syllabuses. The AR process again showed how modifying existing classroom procedures can help uncover learner needs that may go unstated, and how small interventions by the teacher can lead to a more responsive and learner-centred course.



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### Strategies for teaching large classes (Boon & Nakao, 2024)

Fast forward 20 years and this was my 25th paper for *MET*. The original AR idea dates back to 2011 when I was teaching an elective university course that unexpectedly attracted 48 students. I had to quickly adapt my lessons to accommodate the larger class size. Around that time, I collaborated with two peers to collect data from teachers on strategies for managing large classes. Although we analysed the findings and presented them at several conferences, we sadly never got around to writing up the original data for publication.

#### Step 1: Exploring and identifying the topic

A colleague at my university expressed an interest in co-authoring a paper with me. During our initial meeting to explore potential ideas, I mentioned the large classes research I had conducted back in 2011 with two peers – data that had remained on the backburner for over a decade. Although neither of us was currently teaching large classes, we

agreed that it remained a highly relevant topic for many language teachers. We decided to revisit the project, look back at the old data and presentations I had delivered, and begin a new data-collection cycle.

#### Step 2: Planning

We reviewed prior studies (Bahanshal, 2013; Hadi & Arante, 2015; Wadesango, 2021) that had examined the challenges of and strategies for managing large classes. We then created a teacher survey to collect current, context-specific data from educators in Japan and beyond. The survey asked respondents to share their definitions of a large class, describe the challenges they encountered teaching large classes, and outline the strategies they used to manage those challenges effectively.

#### Step 3: Collecting and analysing data

Fifty-six language teachers responded to the Google Forms survey that we distributed online. Respondents shared their definitions of 'large' (typically 25–30+ students), the challenges they

faced (remembering names; monitoring; assessing; creating opportunities to speak; taking attendance; and grouping students) and the strategies they used to manage large classes successfully. Data was coded and categorised, and common themes were identified across both the reported problems and suggested solutions.

#### Step 4: Intervening and observing

Unlike a conventional AR project in which a teacher-researcher introduces an intervention or series of interventions into the classroom and observes the outcome or outcomes, this study did not involve classroom-based experimentation. Instead, we used the survey data and our own experiences as language teachers to compile a comprehensive set of practical teaching strategies for addressing the key challenges of managing large classes. These included: name-learning techniques; effective grouping; using digital tools for monitoring and assessing; active speaking games such as *Kaitenzushi* (Boon, 2010); and low-tech solutions for attendance and participation tracking.

#### Step 5: Writing and sharing

The Boon and Nakao (2024) article concludes by encouraging teachers to accept the limitations of large classes while embracing the unique opportunities they can offer. Teachers are encouraged to experiment with different strategies, reflect on their classroom experiences and share effective practices with their colleagues. The article was written up and submitted to *MET*, where it was accepted for publication, marking my co-author's first paper for the magazine. We also had the pleasure of sharing our findings with Iraqi teachers during an April 2024 online professional development conference titled 'New Trends in English Language Teaching' hosted by Al-Farahidi University, Baghdad.

#### Conclusion

Each of the projects I have shared in this article began with a simple classroom puzzle: an awkward silence after unclear instructions, a needs assessment in which learners struggled to articulate their goals and the logistical challenge of running a communicative English course in a classroom packed full of students. The ideas grew out of comments that made me pause,

reflect, want to better understand and want to improve my teaching. By following a flexible, five-step AR cycle of identifying, planning, collecting, intervening and sharing, I was able to turn those puzzles into meaningful classroom investigations and, ultimately, shareable insights.

Read the literature. Gather student feedback. Talk to colleagues and peers. Develop and experiment with new approaches.

So, where do you begin, or what might you do next? Step into your classroom and stay open to the small, persistent questions that surface in your teaching. Make a quick note when something surprises or troubles you. Reflect on it more after the class. Use it as a starting point for your classroom inquiry. Read the literature. Gather student feedback. Talk to colleagues and peers. Develop and experiment with new approaches. And when you discover something that works, or even something that does not work, consider sharing your findings with the wider teaching community. *MET* is a space that welcomes teacher-led research and values practice-informed contributions. I really do hope this article encourages you to begin your own cycle of classroom exploration. And I genuinely look forward to reading your work in a future issue of *MET*.

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