

Appendix D

Sample Action Research Report

Too Loquacious to Be Communicative: In Search of Opportunities for Comprehensible Output

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First and foremost, I would like to thank the East Asia Regional Council of Schools (EARCOS) for considering our professional growth and taking the initiative in launching the EARCOS Action Research Grant. This is a splendid opportunity not only for each educator to enhance their teaching and their students' learning, but also for all educators of EARCOS to be further unified as a learning community. I feel honored to be nominated for one of the first awardees, and I hope that many educators in the community will avail of this wonderful opportunity in the future.

My special thanks are due to Mr. Bill Oldread, Assistant Director of EARCOS, whose kind and encouraging words navigated me through the process.

I am grateful to Mr. Paul Grisewood, Head of School, who recognized the importance of this action research for me and my students.

Last but by no means least, I would like to thank both my students and their parents, who allowed me to set out this meaningful journey together. I promise to make a continuous effort to become a better teacher.

INTRODUCTION

What is the background of this action research?

Recently, I had the good fortune to come across an insightful and implicative book entitled *Becoming an Emotionally Intelligent Teacher*. In the book, Powell and Kusuma-Powell (2010) acutely pointed out that it is not always the case that “enhanced knowledge and skills will automatically result in improved classroom instruction and, therefore, improved student learning” (p. 38). I felt a strong affinity with the statement, as the underlying reason why I had decided to carry out this action research was fully expressed in it.

In my capacity as ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Specialist Teacher, I have been striving to keep abreast with different curriculums, methods, theories, research findings, activities, textbooks, and so forth, in order to find the “best method” for my students. To that end, I have been reading many teacher reference books and academic articles, as well as attending lectures and professional development courses. Such activities surely help me to build a larger teaching practice repertoire. However, it does not mean that I can be more confident in the validity and effectiveness of my teaching in view of *each* student's English language development, as my students bring diverse English language needs into my ESOL classroom stemmed from the differences in their mother tongue, culture, age, length of time they learn English, and the way their English improves. Ironically, the more I increase my knowledge, the more I come to realize that “it is highly unlikely that a single instructional approach or method is likely to be effective for all ELLs [English Language Learners]” (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian, 2006, p. 227).

In fact, Kumaravadivelu (2003) articulates that “there is no best method out there ready and waiting to be discovered” (p. 1) for language teaching, and recommends us to review and improve the fundamental dimensions of our classroom, stating as follows: “Creation and utilization of learning opportunities in the classroom are ultimately in the hands of

teachers and learners who are engaged in a joint exploration of learning and teaching” (p. 47). I decided to scrutinize my classroom interaction with my students through this action research, because it is “an inescapable and inescapably crucial aspect of classroom life” (Allwright, 1984, p. 159) regardless of the content of my lessons, and I felt that enriching this aspect of my classroom was vital for me in order to serve my students’ various language needs individually, but holistically.

Note:

Different acronyms are used to refer to non-native speakers of English who receive their education through English, such as EAL (English as an Additional Language), ESL (English as a Second Language), and ESOL, almost interchangeably with each other. I apply ESOL throughout this paper, simply because it is used at my school.

LITERATURE REVIEW & PURPOSE OF THIS ACTION RESEARCH

Why is interaction important for ESOL students?

The importance of conversation and interaction for child language acquisition is described by Hatch (1978) as follows: “Language learning evolves *out of* learning how to carry on conversations” (p. 404). She goes on to say, “One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed” (p. 404).

In order to engage in conversation and interaction successfully in the classroom, ESOL students need both to understand their teacher and peers, and to make themselves understood in English. However, it is only natural that they sometimes fail to achieve it, due to their limited English proficiency. In such cases, it is important for them, with the help of their teacher, to make an effort to turn incomprehensible input and output into “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1985) and “comprehensible output” (Swain, 1985). Long (1996) suggests that it is negotiation for meaning or asking for clarification that enables them to do so, and that their language acquisition is facilitated in the process, because it helps them “to provide each other with comprehensible input, to give and gain feedback on contributions and to modify and restructure utterances so that meanings are made clear” (Walsh, 2006, p. 22).

In particular, the importance of ESOL students’ opportunity for comprehensible output increases, if we pay attention to the reason why Swain (1985, 1988) drew it. She focused on the speaking and writing underachievement observed among Canadian students who had learnt French through an immersion program, and found out that there was a lack of opportunities for the students to talk, and to be asked to repair their speech “in a manner that was grammatically accurate or sociolinguistically appropriate” (Swain, 2005, p. 472). Interestingly, they were on a par with their native French-speaking peers both in listening and reading. If past experience is any guide, I have to agree with her point, as I have witnessed that ESOL students tend to have a problem in their speaking and writing, even after they develop other skills fairly well. As far as their speaking ability is concerned, it is not necessarily the case that fluency is always accompanied by the same level of accuracy.

Although the importance of classroom interaction for language teaching has been spread and recognized under the name of *communicative language teaching*, it has been pointed

out that many teachers actually fail to create a genuine communication rich classroom (Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Nunan, 1987). In fact, a teacher shoulders a weighty responsibility for the quality of his/her students' interaction in the classroom, as "teachers have the role-given right to speak at any time and to any person; they can fill any silence or interrupt any speaker; they can speak to a student anywhere in the room and in any volume or tone of voice" (Cazden, 2001, p. 82).

It is my desire that I can be an ESOL teacher, who can create a communication rich classroom, where my ESOL students can actively "ask for information, seek clarification, express an opinion, agree and/or disagree with peers and teachers" (Kumaravadivelu, 1993, p. 12). To move toward the goal, I aimed "to acknowledge and document present realities" (Nunan, 1987, p. 142) of my classroom interaction, to identify the weakest feature of it, and to improve it through this action research.

METHOD

Who participated in this action research?

As I mentioned earlier, I am currently working as ESOL Specialist Teacher for an elementary school, where the language of instruction is English. The type and aim of the program for ESOL students may vary from school to school, but our ESOL program focuses solely on improving their English proficiency, so that they can have better access to the mainstream curriculum.

The participants of this action research were my 19 ESOL students from three grades, whose ages were from 4 to 7. ESOL students at the school are always grouped according to their age. Therefore, there were three groups of participants. All participants had entered the school with little or no English, and their English language needs were being catered for by pull-out ESOL lessons at the time of this action research.

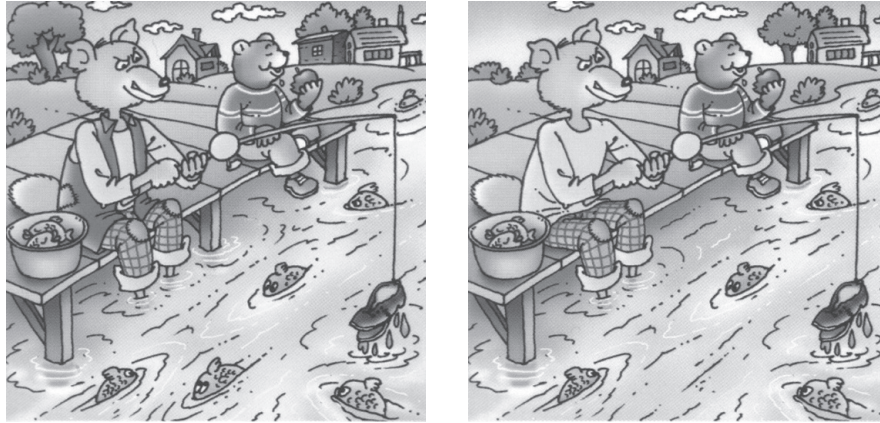
What did the participants do?

As a part of my ESOL pull-out lessons, I try to incorporate various *tasks* for the purpose of improving my students' English proficiency. They are useful and effective to achieve the goal, as they require ESOL students "to function primarily as 'language users' in the sense that they must employ the same kinds of communicative processes as those involved in real-world activities" (Ellis, 2003, p. 3).

This action research focused on this part of my lessons, and I audio-recorded my classroom interaction when my students and I were engaged in an information gap task. The task utilized a pair of picture cards. They were very similar, except that one had five items that another did not. In each task, my students always held the picture card that had five more items, and I held another. The aim of the task was for my students to spot the five items in their picture card which my picture card did not have, by interacting with me.

I used a commercially available material called "Missed Out!" produced by Frank Educational Aids. An example of a pair of the picture cards is depicted below. All the pairs of the picture cards utilized in this action research can be found in the Appendix.

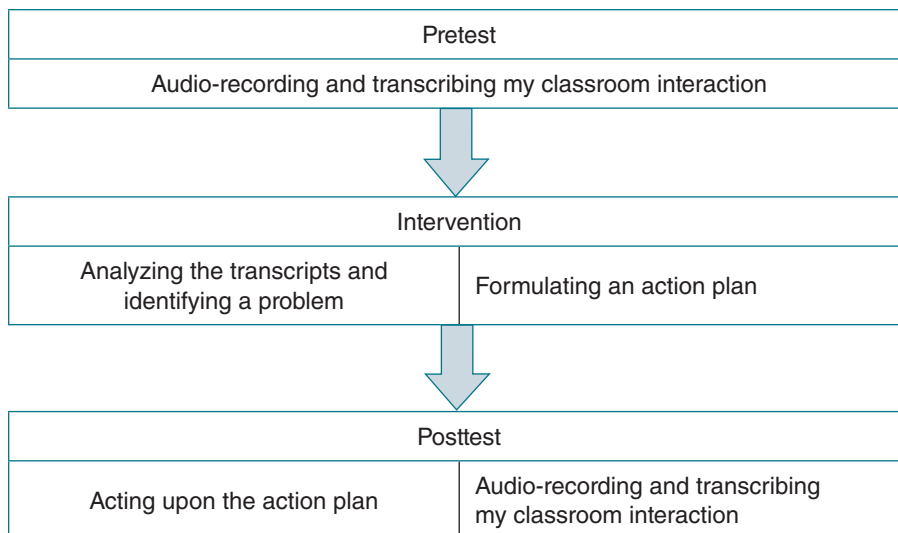
FIGURE 1 An example of a pair of the picture cards



How was the data collected?

I applied a one-group pretest-posttest design for this action research. The diagram in Figure 2 outlines an overview of the procedure.

FIGURE 2 An overview of the procedure



Pretest

I started this action research by audio-recording my classroom for two weeks. Each participant experienced three or four tasks in this period. After that, I transcribed the audio-recordings.

Intervention

I analyzed the transcripts from a qualitative perspective in order to specify a problem in my classroom interaction. Based on the analysis, I formed my action plan to improve it, referring to related literature.

Posttest

I implemented my action plan in the classroom for two weeks. Again, each participant experienced three or four tasks in this period. I audio-recorded my classroom and transcribed it in order to analyze and confirm the effectiveness of my action plan.

Note on transcripts:

In all examples, I refer to myself as *Teacher*. When only one student is involved in an example, the student is simply referred to as *Student*. If more than one student is involved in an example, I assign a number to each student sequentially, as in Student 1, Student 2, etc., and the same numbered student in the example represents the same student. However, the numbers assigned in one example are not carried over into the other examples; for instance, a student referred to as Student 1 in one example may or may not be Student 1 in the others.

As is often the way with young children's conversation, some utterances happened almost simultaneously, and in such cases, I subjectively decided the order.

RESULTS AND REFLECTION

What was my weakness?

Analyzing the audio-recorded and transcribed data allowed me to observe my classroom interaction objectively, and uncovered many "present realities" (Nunan, 1987, p. 142) which I had never realized before. While some aspects made me happy, others did not, and I started concentrating on the latter in order to identify an aspect which seemed to be the most problematic, and therefore, which I felt needed to be improved through this action research.

I found out that my interaction had had a tendency described by Musumeci (1996) as follows: "In lieu of asking learners for an expansion or reformulation of their response, the teachers often provided rich interpretations of students' speech" (p. 308). There had been many situations where my students' sentences had been neither correct nor sufficient enough to be understood. In such situations, however, I had sometimes understood exactly what my students had meant by myself, without asking them for any further clarification. In addition to it, I had provided so much extra information for my students. In some cases, therefore, I could not help feeling how "loquacious" (Musumeci, 1996, p. 314) this teacher was! A good example to illustrate this aspect is as follows.

EXAMPLE 1

Student:	Cat is . . . mummy's cat is . . . no drying he inside like a water?
Teacher:	Ah you mean the basin. The red basin like for washing. OK. A very, very big bowl.
Student:	Yeah.
Teacher:	Yes, I have a red basin. I have a big bowl for washing.

In Example 1, from the student's first utterance, it seems rather hard to understand what the student wanted to convey, and to specify which item in the picture card the student was really talking about. For some reason, however, I did understand what the student was talking about was the basin, without asking any clarification or modification. Indeed, I "appear to understand absolutely everything the students say, sometimes even before they say it" (Musumeci, 1996, p. 314) in this example!

EXAMPLE 2

Student:	There's a . . . mouse and the . . . the color is grey and blue and red . . . and yellow and purple . . . and it hangs to the line.
Teacher:	Hmm. There is a mouse. He is hanging on the clothes line and he is wearing yellow shorts and a blue and red striped t-shirt. I have this mouse.
Student:	Yes.

Although the student's first utterance is clear enough to convey what he/she was talking about in Example 2, there seems to be a lot of room for improvement in terms of the content and grammar, especially in the part where the student enumerated the colors. Instead of asking the student to do it, however, I improved the student's first utterance, by clarifying and providing more detailed information.

I found this aspect of my interaction rather problematic, as it seemed that I had denied my students opportunities for "comprehensible output" (Swain, 1985). I pondered why I had had such a tendency, and realized that I had held the wrong idea about interaction and tasks.

For one thing, I had placed too much emphasis on having "a coherent and flowing discourse" (Walsh, 2006, p. 24) with my students. As I mentioned earlier, my students join the school with little or no English, and are in need of developing their Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (Cummins, 1984) for a long time; they often have difficulty expressing fully what they want to say in English, and even when they could, it tends to be hard for them to do it without any grammatical mistakes. Therefore, I realized that I had naturally established my own system to communicate with them, by understanding them with limited clues, and providing information from my side as much as possible. Furthermore, I had not tried to correct their grammatical errors particularly, as I had felt it to be too early, punctilious, and distracting for them.

What is more, I had tended to focus on the outcome of the tasks rather than the process; I had tried to navigate each task so that my students could have completed it as quickly and accurately as possible. However, I should have realized that “the real purpose of the task is not that learners should arrive at a successful outcome but that they should use language in ways that will promote language learning” (Ellis, 2003, p. 8). Ellis further reminded me that “whether learners successfully identify the difference between two pictures is not what is crucial for language learning. It is the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in reaching the outcome that matter” (p. 8).

What was my action plan?

In light of the analysis above, I decided to bring the following strategies into my interaction as my action plan:

1. If I do not understand exactly what my students are talking about, I will ask my students for clarification instead of using my “rich interpretations” (Musumeci, 1996, p. 308). When they make grammatical errors which I find too serious, I will point them out; and
2. I will not rush to proceed and finish a task, remembering that “allowing interactional space is clearly the domain of the teacher, who has a responsibility not only to make sure that learners are interacting, but also that they have time to reflect on and learn from their interaction” (Walsh, 2006, pp. 30–31). As a result, my students may not be able to find all answers and complete a task, but I will accept it because “ultimately the assessment of task performance must lie in whether learners manifest the kind of language use believed to promote language learning” (Ellis, 2003, p. 8).

How effective was my action plan?

I tried to act upon my action plan throughout the posttests. In order to confirm its effectiveness, I audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed my classroom interaction again. Fortunately, I could observe that my action plan had made a positive impact on my classroom interaction. In many situations, I could confirm that I had been following my action plan, encouraging them to try to extend or modify their original speech, and that my students had tried to respond to my requests.

EXAMPLE 3

Student:	Do you have shoe . . . two shoes?
Teacher:	Two shoes? Where are these shoes, (student’s name)?
Student:	One shoes is . . . hmm . . . the front of the bag and second one is next to the ball.

In Example 3, instead of simply answering *yes*, or providing more information on where the two shoes were, I asked the student to explain more. As a result, the student tried to explain where each shoe was with much more information.

EXAMPLE 4

Student:	Do you . . . um . . . see um she is wearing a ribbon? Um on her hair.
Teacher:	Can you say that again? Ask me again.
Student:	Do you see a girl wearing a . . . um red ribbon on her hair?
Teacher:	Yes, I do.

In Example 4, the student's first utterance was clear enough for me to understand. However, I knew that this student could repair the sentence, and therefore, I gave the student another chance. Accordingly, the student could reformulate the first sentence in a more grammatically appropriate way, adding extra information that the ribbon was red.

EXAMPLE 5

Student:	Do you have a bush in the flower?
Teacher:	Say again?
Student:	Uhm. Do you have a bush on the flower?
Teacher:	Do I have a . . . ?
Student:	No, no, no! Do you have a flower on the bush?
Teacher:	Yes, I do.

In Example 5, the student made a mistake in the word order of *bush* and *flower*, so I tried to let the student notice it. At first, the student misunderstood that his/her mistake was about the preposition, and changed *in* to *on*. Then, I gave the student a second chance, and finally, the student could change the order.

Although their modified utterances were still not sufficient or perfect in grammar most of the time, I did not ask for further clarification, if I could feel that they had tried their best. In fact, Swain (2005) emphasizes that the real importance of comprehensible output lies in the process of stretching their speaking ability and attempting to improve their original output "in terms of its informational content and/or its grammatical, sociolinguistic, or discourse features" (p. 473). From this viewpoint, it seems fair to say that my action plan helped to provide my students with more opportunities for comprehensible output.

Contrary to my expectations, my students could indeed find all the answers successfully in the posttests.

What do I want to explore after this action research?

I would like to reflect on the next step after this action research here, as “action research is *not* conclusive” (Mertler, 2006, p. 12).

In addition to my students’ attempt to extend or modify their original speech, I have confirmed another remarkable change in the posttests. In the pretests, interaction mostly occurred between me and one student alone, and other students rarely joined in our conversation; in the posttests, however, my students started doing so in order to ask their classmates for clarification, which is illustrated in the following examples.

EXAMPLE 6

Student 1:	There’s a bag, a green bag hanging on the bed and a . . .
Student 2:	Color?
Student 3:	It has yellow, green and it’s beautiful.

EXAMPLE 7

Student 1:	Do you have a shoe?
Teacher:	A shoe, ahmm . . .
Student 2:	Where?
Student 3:	Where?
Student 1:	In the ground of the bed.
Student 2:	Ah, here.
Student 3:	Oh, this one?

The most likely explanation is that my frequent attempts to ask them for clarification actually triggered their sense of ease to notify their incomprehension and to ask their classmates for clarification. In view of Long’s (1996) suggestion mentioned earlier, the fact that they started doing these holds of great significance, as it helps them to make incomprehensible input comprehensible, and to receive more opportunities for “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1985) from their teacher and peers.

Although I am happy to confirm this aspect, it seems that they were not familiar with phrases to ask for clarification, such as *Sorry?*, *Pardon?*, or *I don’t understand*. Due to this, they sometimes sounded rather rude or mean unintentionally, as in Example 8.

Admittedly, it is a difficult task for ESOL students to pick up on the small nuances of English expressions, especially when they are young. However, it is the knowledge that they need to be taught explicitly and expand over time, so that they can avoid making a

EXAMPLE 8

Student 1:	Do you have a picture?
Student 2:	Ha?
Student 3:	Ha?
Student 1:	Picture, a picture.
Teacher:	Instead of saying 'Ha?', can you say, 'Pardon?'
Student 2:	Pardon?
Student 3:	Pardon?

false impression on others, even after they come to speak English more fluently. Thus, in the future, I would like to teach them useful phrases to ask for clarifications along with the nuances and suitable situations to use them, and observe if my students will start using them in an appropriate way.

Thanks to the positive changes brought by my action plan, I could often feel that my students and I were united toward a common goal in the posttests, helping each other out. After experiencing such moments, I have come to grips with what Kumaravadivelu (2003) really means by stating that “it is only through collaborative work that teachers and learners generate classroom discourse, and in generating classroom discourse, they also generate a wide range of learning opportunities” (p. 76). It is my desire that I will make a continuous effort to enhance the quality of my classroom interaction, and my classroom can be such a place for my young ESOL students.

CONCLUSION

How do I feel about classroom interaction in the end?

Although I am happy to confirm that I could provide my students with more opportunities to talk, and that they tried to extend or reformulate their speech in response to my requests, there were still many situations where my response did not seem ideal in the posttests. In fact, to be able to analyze audio-recorded and transcribed interaction is one thing, and to be able to translate it into action in the real classroom is another; when interacting with my students in the classroom, I certainly cannot afford the time to think twice, “What’s the best thing to say now?,” and good decision-making on a moment-to-moment basis is naturally sought for creating ideal interaction (Walsh, 2006). In this regard, audio-recording and transcribing my interaction through this action research was a precious opportunity, allowing me to analyze my interaction objectively, to get a grip on “present realities” (Nunan, 1987, p. 142), and as a result, to enhance the quality of my moment-to-moment decision making in my classroom.

Under the current program applied by the school, my role as ESOL Specialist Teacher is confined to a focused area of developing ESOL students' English language proficiency. However, it is my desire that I could go beyond that; in the ESOL pull-out lessons, I would like my students to get equipped with knowledge which they can transfer and utilize in their mainstream classroom. It is what Perkins (1995) calls "generative knowledge" (p. 5), which he defines as "knowledge that does not just sit there but functions richly in people's lives to help them understand and deal with the world" (p. 5). I believe that how to communicate and interact with others is surely such knowledge, as it helps them not only to develop their English language proficiency, but also to "develop ways of thinking that will enable them to travel on intellectual journeys, so that they understand and are understood in wider communities of discourse" (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, p. 19).

This action research set out with my doubt about the effectiveness of my effort to keep abreast with different curriculums, methods, etc., in order to meet my students' diverse English language needs. My conclusion, after this action research, is that it *is* important for me to make such an effort, as it certainly lays the groundwork for achieving the goal. In an attempt to get closer to it, however, it seems more important both to remember that no single method or curriculum can cater for each ESOL student's unique needs (Genesee et al., 2006), and to recognize the potential of meaningful interaction which can "go well beyond the planned method" (Allwright, 1984, p. 165) to develop each student's English language proficiency. In this respect, it is not too far from the truth to say that "interaction is the most important element of the curriculum" (van Lier, 1996, p. 5).

Classroom interaction indeed involves many factors, and it seems too complex to figure everything out. However, I would like to rely on the following quotation as a lodestar, and continue to sail toward a genuine communication rich ESOL classroom: "There is no set of rules of how to talk to a child. . . . If you concentrate on communicating, everything else will follow" (Brown, 1977, p. 26).

MY MESSAGE TO THE EARCOS COMMUNITY

How can the results of action research impact us?

Action research is done "in order to benefit *you* and *your* students in *your* classroom" (Mertler, 2006, p. 83), and, therefore, "*is not* done 'to' or 'by' other people; it is research done by particular educators on their own work" (Mertler, 2006, p. 12). However, this does not mean that we cannot learn from the results of action research conducted by others. Actually, Dr. Krajczar, Executive Director of EARCOS, makes a powerful statement that they "will impact not only the researchers' practices but also those of others with whom they share their findings" (Krajczar, 2011, para. 3). I believe that the implications of this statement are twofold.

First, it implies that we may be able to seek for direct relevance from the results of action research conducted in a similar setting to our own, as they can serve as "general guidance in the form of hypotheses, to teachers who wish to develop their understanding of the particular situations in which they teach" (Elliott, 2007, p. 126). In the case of the results of my action research, for instance, educators in a similar situation, that is, ESOL teachers or classroom teachers who teach lower elementary ESOL students, may be able

to find some information relevant and useful. This nature of the results of action research is suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as follows: “The original inquirer cannot know the sites to which transferability might be sought, but the appliers can and do. . . . the responsibility of the original investigator ends in providing sufficient descriptive data to make such similarity judgments possible” (p. 298).

Secondly, we can reaffirm the significance of action research as a means of reflection. The results of action research are indeed a proof of the advancement and improvement of each educator’s teaching through reflection. By witnessing it, therefore, we can realize that “experience alone is insufficient for professional growth, but that experience coupled with reflection can be a powerful impetus for teacher development” (Richards, 1991, p. 5). Moreover, in the book mentioned at the outset, Powell and Kusama-Powell (2010) explain that reflection is a conscious process of building up learning relationships with our students, with which we can enhance the quality of our teaching, and in turn, our students’ learning. In this respect, the results of action research can also convey each educator’s attempt to establish such relationships with his/her students.

Either way, it is my hope that the findings of my action research can fulfill its role to impact many educators in the EARCOS community.

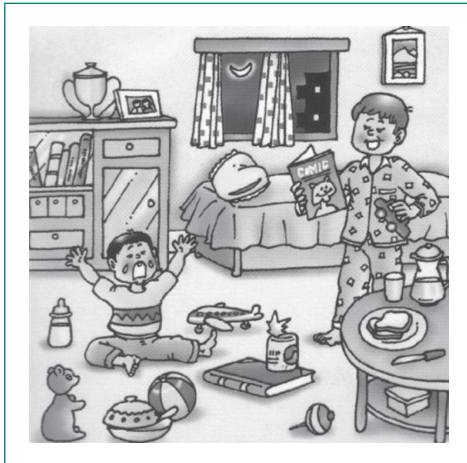
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APPENDIX

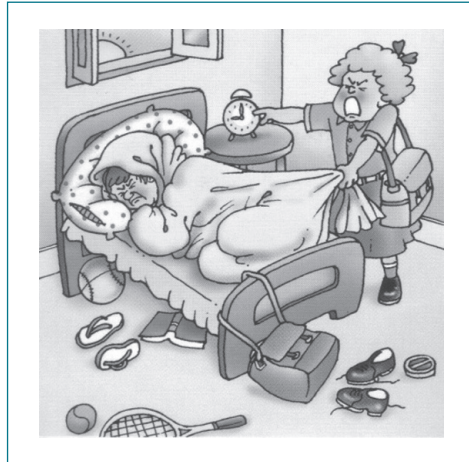
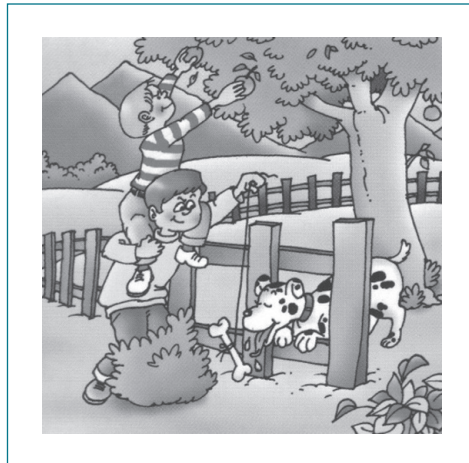
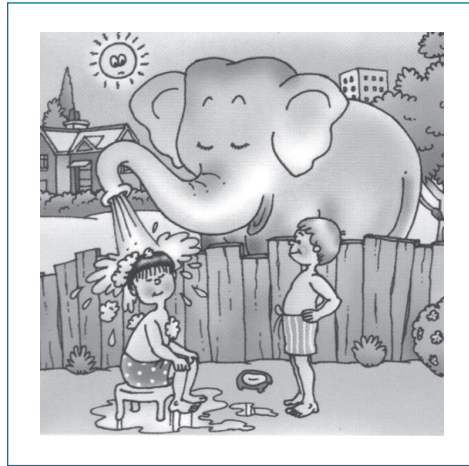
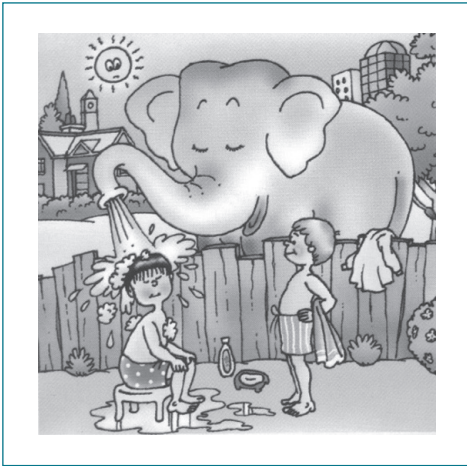
Picture cards used in the pretests





SOURCE: "Missed Out!" by Frank Educational Aids.

Picture cards used in the posttests





SOURCE: "Missed Out!" by Frank Educational Aids.

Appendix E

Sample Action Research Report

Meditations on Motivation: Collaborative Teacher Action Research 2000–01

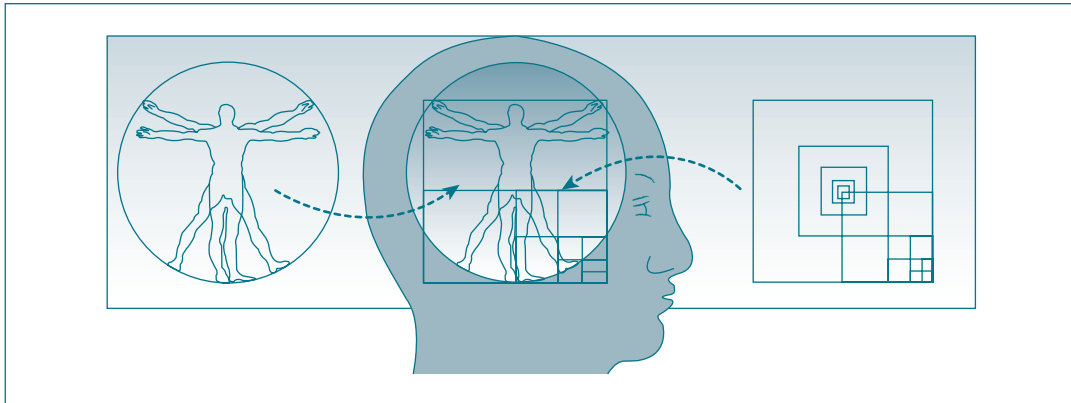
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During the 2000–01 school year, three teachers examined methods of increasing their students' motivation to learn. The process started with these teachers looking at motivation and exploring the various factors that affect student motivation. After identifying the attributes of a motivated student, each teacher designed methods which they hoped would increase student motivation and therefore student learning in their classrooms. This website briefly examines each teacher's project, and then offers discussion as to why the data offered here may be meaningful to other teachers as well.

Question

The question that I researched this year was, "How can I motivate seniors?" This question is probably universal to every high school in the United States, but it is especially relevant to me as I teach all senior courses and I notice a significant drop in my students' level of motivation as spring draws closer and college acceptance letters start being received in the mail. I believe that senior year is the time when my students are best prepared to do their finest academic work, and I am not content to simply let them slide off into summer and graduation. Thus, understanding that seniors are unique creatures in the high school environment, I was determined to find unique ways of motivating them to stay focused and productive right up to graduation day.



The Classroom

My research was conducted throughout two semesters using two different courses that I teach. First semester I taught a Political Science class. This class is an introduction to American government course that focuses on teaching the Constitution, the structures of the federal government and current issues in American politics. The class is composed solely of seniors and is a semester elective course. The students enrolled in political science bring a wide variety of academic skills with them to the class. The majority of the students are college bound and have a genuine interest in law and politics; most of these students are on high academic tracks. A significant portion of the students however, are low achieving students who need one more social studies credit to graduate high school. Demographically, most of the students (approximately 85%) are white and are middle/upper class children. The remaining 15% of my students are Hispanic and African-American, some of whom come from families living at or near the poverty line. This mixture of student demographics and academic abilities possess some unique instructional challenges and opportunities.

Second semester I taught a psychology course. This class is essentially an introduction to the field of psychology as most students have never taken a psychology course before. Among the topics the class examines are: the history of psychology, research methods, the brain, sensation and perception, learning and memory, personality and identity, and abnormal psychology. The class is composed primarily of seniors, though sophomores are eligible to enroll in the course and many do. Out of a class of 25 students, I will usually have 3 to 5 sophomores enrolled. The majority of students who take this class are college bound, high achieving students. Recently, however, more academically challenged students have begun to take the course.

Demographically, the course is nearly identical to the political science course described above.

The Idea: Real World Projects

After reading several articles about student motivation, and after reflecting on methods of teaching that I believe are engaging and effective, I decided that the focus of my study this

year would be to try to motivate my students by challenging them to participate in “real world” projects. “Real world projects” is a term I use to describe the learning activities that I created for my students to work on during the semester. It was my hypothesis that if I reduced the amount of traditional classroom instruction and evaluations (i.e. lecture and exams) and increased the number of alternative assessments (student centered projects), that I ultimately would find my students more motivated to complete my coursework. Thus, my work this year centered around me designing and implementing real world projects into my curriculum to attempt to increase the motivation my students had for learning my course content.

THE PROCESS AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Step 1: Designing the Projects

This year I decided to use real world projects to try to motivate my seniors to produce high quality work. The real world projects that I created are amalgamations of several pedagogically sound methods of instruction. For example, all real world projects that I developed were experiential, collaborative, interdisciplinary, and authentic in their design (for a more thorough explanation of the projects and the philosophy behind them, please visit my “Real World Projects” link).

For every class of seniors that I taught, I carefully examined my curriculum and searched for areas where a project might be incorporated into the curriculum. Once I identified areas where projects would fit, I began designing the projects. In designing projects I took several factors into consideration:

- **Theme**—All my projects revolve around a theme. The reason a theme is important is because many of the projects require a great deal of time to complete and as a teacher you will be covering many topics in your course. You don’t want to be stuck talking about one topic for four weeks, so a good theme enables you to discuss many different topics in your curriculum, but all of them relate to your central theme in some way. For example, in political science a theme I use is “representation.” With this theme I can discuss topics of: direct vs. representative democracy, the presidency, the congress, the judiciary, and even local politics. Students also enjoy a curriculum designed on themes because it affords them a great deal of freedom. Each of my projects allows my students to explore an aspect of the theme that is particularly interesting to them.
- **Skills**—All my projects are designed to teach my students academic skills as well as course content. I feel this is vital to any good project because I am hoping to teach my students to become “lifelong learners.” If I just teach my students content, they will only be able to use this knowledge in a few, specific situations. If I, however, teach my students skills (such as research, computer, and writing skills) they will be able to apply these skills to any new situation they may encounter in their futures.

- **Relevance**—All of my projects must be relevant to my students' lives. The key here is that the project (or content of the course) must be relevant to their lives NOW, not five years from now. My students must believe that the work they are completing will have an immediate and obvious impact upon their present lives. Very few students (and for that matter, very few adults) are motivated to work on projects that they think will only benefit them four years from now.
- **Audience**—All of my projects are designed so that the students must present their work to an audience. If you want to really hold students accountable for their work, they must believe that other people (aside from their teacher) are going to see and evaluate their work. When I design a project I think about “what audience could my students present this information to?” I have used audiences of kindergartners, parents, community members, senior citizens and other high school students with equal success.
- **Final Product**—All of my projects are designed with the end in mind. What will be the final product the students are responsible for creating? How can I make this a “fun” product to create? The key here is making the final product something relevant to the students and something requiring creativity to create. In my opinion, one problem affecting student motivation in a negative way is that students are not asked to be creative. Thus, all of my projects offer and encourage my students to use creative thinking skills. It is amazing how designing a children's book on the Constitution, rather than simply writing an analytical essay about it, will stimulate my students' interest and effort on this topic.

Step 2: Gathering Data (Measuring Motivation)

After designing these projects, I began implementing them into my curriculum. As I did this, I was faced with the challenge of monitoring and measuring my students' motivation levels. This, I learned, was a very difficult task to complete. How could I determine if a student was motivated or not? How could I measure if a student's level of motivation had increased or decreased as the semester progressed? With students' lives being incredibly complex, and with my students attending six other classes throughout the day aside from mine, how could I know if my projects were making a difference to my students or not? These questions challenged me to think critically about my research and they led me to the development of the following research methods.

Method One: Student Surveys

The easiest method for gathering information on student levels of motivation was through the use of surveys that were designed solely for measuring motivation levels. I administered these surveys to my students several times throughout the semester, each time looking to see how their motivation had increased or decreased from the time before. I also used this survey to determine what aspects of my course were affecting my students' motivation. For example, was the difficulty of my class affecting motivation? Did the projects affect motivation? Did the classroom environment affect motivation? The surveys yielded invaluable data and

allowed me to sharpen my understanding of how to motivate my students. For a more thorough explanation of the survey and a complete discussion of the data it produced, click [here](#) or see my “data” page.

Method Two: Natural Observation

As a teacher, I am acutely aware of my students’ moods, attitudes, feelings, and actions. I observe my students daily and I come to know their behaviors quite well throughout the year. Thus, to measure student motivation I simply observed my students’ class performance and participation and made judgements as to what this revealed about their motivation levels. Though I watched all aspects of my students’ behavior, I was particularly interested in the following actions:

- **Preparedness**—Did students come to class ready to learn and participate? Was homework complete, assigned readings read, and all necessary course materials brought in? A motivated student would generally be well prepared for class.
- **Engagement**—Were students actively engaged in class discussion and activities? Did the students spend a great deal of time on task when given class time to work? Were class debates lively and intelligent? Were class discussions used for teacher-student interaction? Motivated students would be engaged and interested in what was occurring during class time.
- **Enthusiasm/Enjoyment**—Did students appear to be excited about what they were doing? Did the class enjoy working on the projects that were assigned to them? I believe that motivated students would generally enjoy working on class assignments more than non-motivated students.
- **Attendance**—Did my students attend class or were there large amounts of absences? Motivated students would attend class more, thus I monitored my attendance closely.
- **Making Connections**—Did my students make connections of my course content to other aspects of their lives? Did students stay after class to talk to me about a movie they had seen that related to our course? Did students tell me that they now understood something in their lives that they hadn’t before? Did students bring me clippings from the newspaper related to our class? Motivated students tend to reflect on their learning outside of the classroom, thus, I was looking to see if my classes were recognizing the concepts we had discussed in class in their daily lives.

Throughout the semester I kept a journal and recorded thoughts and observations about these qualities in my classes. For a complete discussion of this journal see my “data” page.

Method Three: Student Reflections

A third and final method of collecting data was for me to ask my students to reflect upon their learning and their levels of motivation throughout the year. To do this, I would ask my students to write reflections at the conclusion of our units, and whenever

they had completed a project. Educational research supports student reflective thinking, claiming that in order for students to internalize their learning, they need to actively reflect upon what they have learned. I utilized the reflection process not only to increase student learning, but to gather data about how their levels of motivation shifted throughout the year.

For a more thorough discussion of this data please see my “data” page. Results of this work are detailed on the following pages.

DATA COLLECTION

As the year progressed, I gathered a great deal of data about my research question. Much of that data is summarized here.

Course Survey

A survey was issued to the students in the class on five separate occasions throughout the year. On each occasion, student motivation was measured along with the degree of difficulty for the course, the students’ level of enjoyment for the course, and the value of the content to the students’ lives. An example of an actual survey’s results is shown in the table on page 291.

From this data I have concluded that at that time, students were very motivated to participate in my course and that they valued and enjoyed the content they were studying. At different times throughout the year, I found that motivation would frequently decline as the value of content and enjoyment also declined. In turn, as value and enjoyment increase, so too does motivation. I believe that [there] is a positive correlation between motivation, value of content, and student enjoyment, though it is important for me to state that no scientific analysis of this correlation has yet been conducted. As a teacher, this validates my belief that my students will be more motivated to perform in my class if I can design curriculum that is both relevant and enjoyable for them to study. I think that in order to do this effectively, I must seek my students’ input into what it is they feel they should learn about my course content and how they would enjoy doing this.

Student Survey Results (March 2001):	
Topic of Survey Question	Student Response (scale of 1–5 / 1 = low 5 = high)
Overall Motivation	4.5
Value of Content	4.1
Overall Enjoyment	4.6
Degree of Challenge	3.2

Anecdotal Evidence and Student Reflections

In keeping a journal this year, there were several occasions on which student behaviors yielded insight into levels of their motivation. What follows are examples of student behaviors that I observed this year or comments students made to me in their reflective activities. Students continually stayed after class to discuss ideas for their final projects with me. The students frequently commented about how they were nervous about presenting to audiences and wanted to make sure they did a good job.

Students frequently brought in articles from magazines or newspapers that dealt with our course content. Three students even taped television programs that dealt with topics I had taught them and gave me these tapes to use with my classes next year.

In choosing topics for their final projects, many students told me that they chose their topic because “it was very relevant to my life.” In psychology, many students chose to complete projects about Alzheimer’s disease to better understand the illness their grandparents had, and one girl chose to complete a project about grieving to better understand how to deal with her own mother’s death.

During the political science “voter education symposium” many students told me that they had “never worked so hard on a project.” The reason for their efforts was due to the fact that they knew they would have to present their information to a live audience and that they did not want to be embarrassed.

On student evaluations of my course, the vast majority of students commented that the projects made them more interested in what we were studying.

POLITICAL SCIENCE PROJECTS

For political science I chose to create three projects for my students to work on. Two of the projects were short (3–4 weeks) unit projects that were used as alternatives to unit exams. The third project was an entire semester long project that I developed in an attempt to give my students a more intensive project to focus upon.

Project One: Tinkering Toward Utopia (3–4 Weeks)

This project was assigned for students to work on during our “Utopia” unit. The utopia unit is the first unit of the semester and it introduces students to the idea of a utopian society. This concept is appropriate for political science because the students are asked to think critically about the nature and purpose of government and society. Among the questions posed during the unit are: Can a perfect government or society ever be created? If so, how? What type of government will lead to a utopia? What are the responsibilities of the citizens living in a utopian society? Will human nature ever allow a utopian society to be created? To answer these questions the students read several pieces of political philosophy and literature which are provided to them by the teacher. Among the works read are excerpts from: Thomas More’s *Utopia*, George Orwell’s *1984*, Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, [and] William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. We read short stories

such as: Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt," [and] Stanislaw Lem's "Trurl's Machine." Finally we used treatises written by John Locke, Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Jefferson.

After reading and discussing these works, the students are prepared to work on the unit project. The project asks them to create an argumentative essay that argues whether or not they believe a utopian society can ever exist. To support their thesis the students must use evidence from the pieces of literature that they have read. In addition to the literature that I have provided for them, the students are required to find *three* other sources of information to help support their thesis. The students are told to use film, literature, art and music to find works that explore the concept of utopias. Many students use obvious examples such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or Alex Zamyatin's *We*, but others find examples of utopias from less obvious choices like Bob Dylan's "Hurricane" and Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The cumulating activity is for the students to bring their sources to class and to use them as they engage in a debate with their classmates about the possibility of a utopia's existence. The students enjoy this piece of the project because they like seeing the resources their classmates have discovered.

Project Two: Time to Make a Change (3–4 Weeks)

This project has been created as a final project for our unit on "Social Policy." The students read the Alex Kotlowitz book *There Are No Children Here* to introduce them to the nature of urban poverty in the United States. After reading this book the students are given a project that challenges them to develop a solution to one of the problems that the characters in the book face. The students spend a great deal of time researching current government programs to combat such social problems as: gangs, drugs, school violence, homelessness, welfare, and poverty. Next, they propose ways in which to improve the current government initiatives and ultimately help more people overcome their problems. After conducting research, and developing their program ideas, the students must present their ideas to their peers. The students enjoy this project because they believe that the work they are engaged in can truly make a difference in the lives of many of our nation's poor.

Project Three: Presidential Election Symposium (Semester Project)

This project was a natural fit for a political science course in the year 2000. As the nation prepared to elect a president, I developed a project that would challenge my students to learn about the presidential candidates and then teach their community about where each candidate stood on the important issues of the election. To complete this project the class was divided into democrats and republicans (sorry third parties!). The students in the democrat group researched Al Gore's position on the environment, abortion, gun laws, capital punishment, health care, education, and civil rights. The students in the republican group did the same for G. W. Bush. After spending 8–9 weeks researching their candidates, watching the televised debates, and evaluating their candidates' websites, the students were prepared for the final phase of the project. The cumulating activity was for the class

to design a “voter education symposium.” The class chose an evening 1 week prior to the election. They invited members of their families, members of the community, and members of the student body to attend an informational meeting about the candidates and the election. At the symposium, different groups of students presented the information they had gathered on each candidate; each group made a concerted effort to explain how the policies of Gore or Bush would affect the community of Highland Park. From the advertisements, to the organization, to the refreshments, the students were responsible for planning the entire event. The symposium was attended by approximately 250 people and for many students, it was their first opportunity to speak in front of a large audience. The class received rave reviews for their thorough and accurate analysis of the candidates and the issues.

PSYCHOLOGY PROJECTS

In psychology I teach my students many theories about human behavior. One thing that my reflective research helped me understand was that while my students were learning and remembering the theories, they were often unable to understand how those theories related to their daily lives. Thus, in order to help my students connect my course content in a relevant way to their lives, I devised the following project.

Psychology Semester Research Project

With the majority of my students being seniors, I wanted to allow them as much freedom as possible in creating their psychology project. I believed that a true “self-directed” learning project would motivate my students at this point in their academic careers. Thus, the students were able to choose any topic they wished to study (as long as it related to psychology). In addition, the students were able to choose to work independently or with a partner, and they were able to decide exactly how they would present their information at the conclusion of the project.

The project the students were given to complete was to formulate a question about human behavior, research the answer (or possible answers), and then present and educate their peers and community about what they had learned. The focus of the presentations was not to be solely on regurgitating the information the student had learned about his or her topic, but to also recommend how this information may be useful for someone to use.

As the students worked on developing and answering a question, they were instructed in a number of skills that would help them successfully complete this project. First, the students were instructed in various methods of research. In addition to traditional research, each student had to find an expert to interview about his or her topic. This component was built into the project so that students would develop confidence in their interview skills and so that the students would be exposed to a number of careers that involve psychology. A third skill built into the project was for the students to complete a book review. Each student was allowed to pick his or her own book, and then methods of critique and analysis were discussed in class. Many students enjoyed reading an in-depth account of the

concept they were studying. Finally, all students were instructed in computer skills such as PowerPoint, FrontPage, and HyperStudio so that this software might become a method for each student to present his or her data to an audience.

At the end of the semester, all of the students completed their final project and then presented their question and findings to the class.

FINAL REFLECTION

The action research lab was an excellent experience for me. Through my participation I learned better how to motivate my senior students and I believe I have become a better, more reflective educator. I look forward to refining my study in the future. I think that next year I will search for more ways of motivating my students by trying to incorporate actual internships and volunteer experiences into my class projects. I remain thoroughly committed to real world projects and hopefully I will be able to place some more authentic experiences into my curriculum.