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Challenging Assumptions
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ASSUMPTIONS

# Multiple AR Cycles to increase participation in a DVD class

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This paper describes the implementation of four Action Research (AR) cycles to improve the motivation and participation levels of Japanese learners of English in a rural technical college. The discussion phase of a movie essay-composition course is evaluated and improved upon during a four-year period through video recordings, interviews, questionnaires, peer collaboration, and a research diary. The study comprises four AR cycles. Although the third cycle faced problems related to complexity, the other three cycles took steps to improve comprehension, reduce anxiety, and increase motivation. Many research publications explain how a problem was noticed and solved. In contrast, this study illustrates how teachers can implement multiple AR cycles to achieve incremental improvements.

この論文には、地方の工業高等専門学校における、英語学習者の学習意欲や学習参加レベルの向上を目指す4つのアクションリサーチの実施について書かれている。ある映画を題材にエッセイ作成を実施するコースではディスカッションが行わており、この段階の研究では、ビデオ撮影やインタビュー、アンケート、コラボレーション、リサーチダイアリーを使用し、4年間研究が行われ、改善されている。この研究では、教師が改善を行うためにどのように多様なアクションリサーチを実施することができるかを説明するものである。

## Action research definition

**U**nlike many research approaches where the researcher can often be a neutral outsider; in action research (AR), the researcher is investigating a problem or subject of interest in his or her own context. This context can be the teacher's own classroom or his or her wider institution. Burns (1999) summarises the common features of AR:

1. Action Research is contextual, small scale, and localised – it identifies and investigates problems within a specific situation.

2. It is evaluative and reflective as it aims to bring about change and improvement in practice.

3. It is participatory as it provides for collaborative investigation by teams of colleagues, practitioners, and researchers.

4. Changes in practice are based on the collection of information or data which provides the impetus for change (p. 30).

I would also add that the participatory element of AR can involve collaboration with students. In my AR studies, student feedback has been the main driving force for change.

## Action research cycles

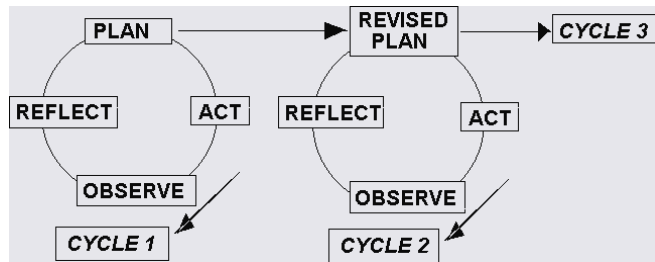Figure 1 graphically demonstrates the series of cycles that can take place in the AR process.



**Figure 1. AR cycles (Riding, Fowell, & Levy, 1995, Action Research)**

Burns (1999), citing Kemmis and McTaggart, describes the following four elements of the AR cycle:

- develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening

- act to implement the plan

- observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs, and

- reflect on these effects as the basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of stages (p. 32).

The model shown in Figure 1 assumes that the action researcher will make incremental improvements to his or her environment. This is a good way to visualise the continual process of action and reflection. However, in reality, it is far messier than this. In this paper, I report my findings by using the following structure: (a) understanding the problem, (b) response, and (c) evaluation. This three-step adaptation works better for reporting AR. Firstly, it is more important for the reader to *understand the problems* that trigger the cycle than it is to read a decontextualised plan. Secondly, I want to highlight that the action stage is a *response* to the problem. Thirdly, although an observation step may be useful to theoretically present AR to new readers, in reality, observation occurs simultaneously throughout all stages of the cycle. In this report, the *evaluation* section covers an analysis of what has been observed.

## Context

Before I explain the four AR cycles that I undertook, it is important to understand three contextual factors that influenced my decisions: Japanese students studying English, my college, and my English course.

### *Low motivation amongst students studying English in Japan*

There appears to be low motivation to study English in Japan. Falout and Maruyama's (2004) study of 164 Japanese university freshmen discovered negative attitudes towards English study that originated from intensive examination preparation study during their high school and junior high days. Shimizu (1995) surveyed 1,088 Japanese college students from a wide number of universities and discovered that over half the students had a negative attitude towards their previous Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs).

Falout and Maruyama's (2004) study also indicates that higher proficiency (HP) learners (based on entrance exam results) "feel cheated" by the six years of pre-tertiary language study, because "…despite their efforts and achievements they 'cannot really communicate'" (Discussion, para. 11). McVeigh (2001) and Burden (2002) blame the washback effect of entrance exams that cause high school students to study the minimum involved to pass the test. "Japan is a good example of a society in which educational testing plays an inordinate role, and as it is used merely for testing; knowledge is sliced, disconnected, disjointed, stored, packaged for rapid retrieval, and abstracted from immediate experience" (McVeigh, 2001, Japan's Educatio-Examination System, para. 1).

Burden (2002) surveyed 1,057 students from three universities in western Japan and discovered what he called the "I'm poor at English" Syndrome. He claims that many Japanese students have "learned helplessness" and therefore see failure as due to a lack of ability (Discussion, para. 3). More specifically, Falout and Maruyama's (2004) study reveals that Japanese lower proficiency (LP) learners tend to internalise their problems more than the HP ones. Alternatively, Brown (2004) suggests that students are reluctant to speak in front of their peers, because there is a "double bind" (Fear of Negative Evaluation and Modesty Norms in Japan, para. 4): firstly, to modestly avoid showing off their knowledge and secondly, to avoid criticism for mistakes.

These readings influenced my course development. It is important to explain, therefore, that I believe strongly in encouraging my learners to use English to express opinions rather than study grammar for tests. However, during the period of AR, I have moved away from voluntary, spontaneous, whole class discussions towards low pressure group work that aims to be enjoyable.

### *My college*

Kinki University Technical College is an engineering institution situated in a rural area of Japan's Honshu Island. The majority of the students enter after junior high school at 15 years old and they graduate 5 years later. This is therefore similar to high school plus 2 years of tertiary education.

There is a low perceived need for studying English. Regular Japanese high school students usually need to pass

English tests to enter university, but only a small minority need to at my college. Their 2 years of tertiary education is transferable, which means that they can enter the third year of a university without sitting an exam. English is taught 5 hours per week to the first to third years (equivalent to Grades 10-12), but this falls to only 3 hours in the fourth year and it is an optional 2 hours in the final fifth year. This decline in the number of hours of English occurs due to the increased focus on the engineering specialisations. The low perceived need for English may be further compounded by the rural setting of the college, because the students meet very few foreigners and therefore may not develop the expectation of using the language in the future. In spite of these problems, however, many students are interested in talking to me about western culture.

### My course

I teach a movie-discussion course that is designed to stimulate my learners' interest in Western culture and help them to express their opinions in English. The course has the following steps:

1.  Select movie. I bring in a shortlist of DVD movies and then let the students look at the boxes and vote for the film they would like to watch.

2.  Watch the movie in English with Japanese subtitles for comprehension. Ideally the movie would be watched in one complete showing; however, in my context, class period restrictions means that the movie is watched in consecutive "episodes" of approximately forty-minutes.

3.  Watch the movie in English with English subtitles to catch key words.

4.  Question-response phase. This is the focus of AR Cycles 1, 2, and 4 in this paper. (The response in AR Cycle 3 replaces this step.) The students answer five thematic questions. I ask them to answer which characters and scenes they like or dislike and why. They also compare similar movies, discuss the plot, and respond to a philosophical question. The collection of these individual responses allows them to be shared with the whole class.

5.  Group-essay composition. The learners form groups of four, which write fairly short essays that are 400 to 500 words. They base the structure of their essays on the five thematic questions of the previous phase.

## Cycle 1: Combating low participation
### Understanding the problem

In June 2003, during the teacher-directed, question-response phase, over half the students passively refused to raise their hands to answer the questions. Therefore, I decided to try and widen the range of active participation. I videoed the class and issued a questionnaire to the students to understand the problem more clearly.

The video was a sobering experience for me, because I realised that I was not as funny or interesting as I thought I was. I talked too much, and when the students did not

answer, I talked more. Silent participation was however observed as high, because most of the students copied answers diligently from the whiteboard. Therefore, their focus on writing and possibly reading their notes conflicted with my desire for them to answer my questions verbally.

I developed a questionnaire based on the video evidence, as well as the problems that I perceived. The questionnaire indicated that there were difficulties caused by embarrassment and a lack of comprehension, but the main problems were thinking of the correct English to answer my questions and the lack of Japanese usage in the class.

### My response

Based on the video evidence, I decided to initiate a note-taking ban in October 2003. This change was to enable the students to focus on what I was saying and therefore give them time to participate. I then provided handouts in the following class based on their answers and had a recall session to ensure that they could understand what was written. This revision session would also be easier, enabling wider participation, because they could read the English from the handouts.

I decided to allow the students to articulate new ideas in Japanese, because this would help them to express complex ideas freely and they could then pick up the teacher's English translations for what they wanted to say.

### Evaluation

The first noticeable improvements were that there was a faster response time to my questions and some students

answered that had not done so previously. An analysis of the teacher-student interaction could have provided further insights, which could lead to an improvement in the task and teaching technique. Such critical discourse analysis to address other specific problems could be incorporated into a future AR cycle. In this instance, student opinions were gathered through another questionnaire and I searched for further insights from additional video evidence.

The students indicated in the questionnaire that they supported the changes (especially the handouts), they understood the class better, and they intended to participate more. The video showed that I was still talking too much and students were still reluctant to volunteer. Therefore, despite the positive questionnaire responses, this cycle seemed to have had a negligible effect in the classroom on the problem of increasing interaction and participation in the question and response activities. This may indicate that while students have additional awareness of the expectations, there still seemed to be a barrier to their active participation.

One unexpected thing did happen. I had asked 3 students in class to answer why they thought certain characters that they had voted for were interesting. These characters only had small parts in the movie, and I myself genuinely had no idea what they could say to justify voting for them. They could not initially provide justifications; therefore, I allowed them to answer in the following class. Two of the three students had never answered any of my questions before. Amazingly, all 3 students used good English and had excellent opinions. These results caught my attention to consider a new approach and a new AR cycle.

## Cycle 2: Improving verbal responses and reducing anxiety

### Problem

Regardless of the fact that the students could now use Japanese, the content of their answers was too simple. Moreover, many students were still too reluctant to answer.

### Response

In January 2004, I decided to make it compulsory for all the students to verbally answer the five thematic questions. Instead of asking them spontaneously, I nominated students a class in advance to answer specific questions. Forcing the students to speak went against my democratic instincts, but I decided that they might actually welcome it. I was influenced by reading Brown's (2004) comments about peer pressure in Japan and the resulting nature to be modest and to avoid mistakes. I decided that if learners are nominated by the teacher, then they cannot be accused of showing off. Plus the advance nomination gave them time to consider the accuracy and quality of their responses.

### Evaluation

Rather than using Japanese, these same students who participated in the first cycle again had to answer in English. However, the responses they provided demonstrated improved output because they included detailed reasons and examples for their opinions. Video evidence showed that the classroom atmosphere also became more relaxed. My own stress was also reduced, because the increased student participation enabled me to reduce my own share of the classroom interaction.

## Cycle 3: Complexity

### Problem

This third cycle targeted two new classes of students who employed a limited range of vocabulary in their essays. In particular, there was a lack of cohesive ties and opinion lexis. The students over-employed "I like" and "interesting" to express opinion; moreover, "but" and "and" were overused for cohesion.

### Response

In September 2004, I downloaded an internet review of the movie that they were watching. An experimental class used the review and the control group continued the normal discussion style. The former group then did activities based on the article such as clause-matching, recognising the themes of the paragraphs, and summarising it in their own words. They also had to search the text for cohesive ties and opinion lexis.

### Evaluation

I compared the essays from each class by checking the frequency of cohesive ties and opinion lexis. I then related these to the occurrences in the discussion handouts and the review. The control group students frequently reused words from the handouts, but the experimental class rarely employed words from the review. However, the review

students' essays contained far more complex sentence and paragraph structures, and there was a much wider range of cohesive ties and opinion lexis. It seems that the increased awareness from the text analysis activities had encouraged them to focus on these aspects to improve their essays. One unplanned benefit from the experimental class was the group dynamism. Students had worked well in groups completing the tasks that I set. They also seemed to enjoy talking to me as I circulated rather than standing at the front.

Unfortunately, achieving these results in the experimental course took longer than I had allowed for. Therefore, I had to cut some of my planned activities. Moreover, many of the students struggled to understand the instructions. This cycle taught me not to be too ambitious. Instead of focusing on texts such as reviews, I needed to concentrate on the students' abilities.

## Cycle 4: Increasing collaborative motivation and choice

### Problems

In April 2006, this AR cycle tackled two problems. Firstly, a small but frequently repeating theme in the open response sections of my questionnaires was that some students wanted test preparation with textbooks rather than this movie-discussion style. I think it is quite natural that some learners are more field independent. "Field-dependent learners operate holistically, whereas field-independent learners are analytic" (Ellis, 1994, p. 37). Field independent students are more likely to enjoy learning individually and concentrating on form-focused exercises, in preference to my class that

demands more interaction. The second problem has been a lack of cohesion between the members in some of the essay composition groups. This problem of working in teams seemed to be less evident in the experimental class in the third cycle, which was probably due to the longer time they spent together in groups before beginning the essay composition.

### Responses

I implemented two changes. Firstly, I made the class optional. Students in my college are assessed based on questions adapted from the *Eiken* Test. Students who tend to be successful at memorising vocabulary and analysing language can perform better on these tests. Previously, 25-30 of the highest scoring students were forced to take the class I had structured around movie discussions. Under the new system, approximately 55-60 of the highest scoring students could select between my movie-discussion course and a traditional alternative that focuses on reading and grammar. My course includes a minimal amount of reading and error-correction, but it has a greater emphasis on holistic learning and, in particular, unstructured language production. Secondly, instead of forcing them to individually answer the discussion questions in front of the whole class; I circulated amongst the groups to discuss their answers. The intent was to reduce the perceived peer pressure that causes students to be reluctant to speak in front of the whole class (Brown, 2004). Moreover, group motivation could be fostered earlier through the development of cooperative goals (Dörnyei, 1994, 1998).

## Evaluation

The academic level of the learners in my class section dropped, because roughly only half of the higher proficiency students opted for the DVD discussion course. However, many of the lower proficiency students injected new enthusiasm into the classroom. I interviewed students to ask why they had chosen to take my course. Most of them said that they wanted to speak English to me or they thought the course looked fun. Some students also perceived this course to be easier than the alternative course, because there would be less grammar-preparation or vocabulary memorisation.

Discussing the movie with the students in small groups has also been beneficial. Students who often appeared to be disinterested in the whole class discussions became more enthusiastic when they spoke to me in their small groups. From a personal perspective, I have enjoyed seeing their individual characteristics and humour flourish in these discussions. Previous dialogues had been very limited, but students were now trying harder to express themselves and I had created more time to listen to them and try to understand. This form of interaction seemed to provide students opportunities "to get meanings across" (Ellis, 1994, p. 516). Using the language to communicate met the purpose of many learners for taking the class and could also contribute further to intrinsic motivation.

## Discussion

Some problems existed in my context such as a lack of motivation and a low perceived need to study English. This was countered by opportunities such as the flexibility to introduce new courses and a strong interest from many students in western pop-culture. These constraints and opportunities led me to develop the movie-discussion course. However, one of my principal goals of the course, encouraging students to interact, has been difficult to achieve. The first cycle noticed this problem and partially solved it through banning note-taking and providing handouts instead. The students supported this change and listened more intently, but their participation levels increased only marginally. The second cycle was developed based on a classroom incident that was observed during the first cycle. Students who were forced to answer, but given advanced preparation time, produced more relaxed and more complex answers. The third cycle combated the lack of lexical range in the students' essays. The genre-analysis tasks that were introduced to this phase were successful in achieving this aim, but the difficulty level was too high for the students. Each AR cycle has brought me closer to the students, because I have been bringing the course closer to their needs, but the fourth cycle was the most successful in achieving this. This final cycle has allowed students to "opt-out" from taking my course. This is important, because it had developed from a greater personal awareness that I cannot develop a course that suits everybody. Moreover, it opened my course to students who might be less academically-inclined, but have a strong desire to communicate with non-Japanese. Moreover, allowing the students to discuss their ideas with me in their essay-composition groups (a) removed the stress of talking in front of the whole class and (b) enhanced mutual cooperation between group members.

The use of Japanese has been a constant cause for reflection. I began to permit the L1 in the first cycle, and then abandoned it in the second. I now allow limited Japanese when we discuss beyond their prepared answers.

## Problems, advantages, and future directions

No magic bullet has been developed to solve all problems in the course. Instead, this study has developed solutions gradually over four years. Each AR cycle has concentrated on overcoming problems that have been discovered during previous cycles. Rather than a grand plan, therefore, the improvements have been incremental. Problems have been solved as they have been discovered during the process of action, observation, and reflection.

My perspectives have changed and developed due to the influence of my reading and my desire to experiment. The first AR cycle arose from noticing the participation problem in my class and the second phase naturally occurred from the evaluation of the former one. However, the third cycle was influenced by genre analysis literature and the final phase has been influenced by motivation theories. Therefore, the use of AR cycles in research to address classroom level problems can appear very messy when it is compared to longitudinal experimental studies that focus on selected hypotheses. However, it is personally empowering, because I have learnt from my mistakes and I feel confident that my course has improved. Moreover, this form of research has been very student-centred. My learners have appreciated the collaboration, because they have seen the changes that have occurred as a direct result of their feedback.

Due to the personal and context-dependent nature of this AR, I do not expect my results to be generalised to other situations. However, I hope that readers can find resonance from some of my insights or be encouraged to apply AR in their own contexts and publish their results: especially studies that cover several cycles, which highlight the difficulties as well as the successes. Regarding my own future AR, I will see what evolves as I continue to read, observe, and reflect.

Finally, as this paper is a brief overview of four connected studies and due to space limitations, I have needed to omit much of the research methodology for the individual cycles and many details concerning my movie-discussion course. Readers are welcome to contact me for further details.

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