Action Research Inspired by Critical Incidents: Developing Academic Writing Instructions

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Reference Data:

Morooka, M. (2024). Action research inspired by critical incidents: Developing academic writing instructions. In B. Lacy, R.P. Lege, & P. Ferguson (Eds.), *Growth Mindset in Language Education*. JALT. https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTPCP2023-05

This paper focuses on an action research (AR) project that a novice university English instructor conducted in their second and third years of teaching an academic research writing course based on their former study on the analysis of critical incidents identified in the same course in their first year of teaching. The AR project involved adopting new assignments and activities to help students strengthen not only research skills to find and evaluate sources but also writing skills to present their arguments effectively by paraphrasing, summarizing, and referencing sources appropriately. The reflections primarily based on the instructor's observations and the students' survey responses indicate that those implemented changes had some apparent educational benefits in cultivating the aforementioned skills; however, the ongoing challenges about plagiarism, especially with the use of generative AI, reveal the need to make further improvement by continuing to modify assignments and activities in their future courses.

本稿は、著者が大学英語講師として一年目に教えた論文作成の授業で起こった重要事例の分析に関する以前の研究をもとに、二・三年目の授業で行ったアクションリサーチについて取り扱う。本研究では、文献を探して吟味するリサーチスキルだけでなく、言い換えや要約、引用を適切に行うことで効果的に主張を表すライティングスキルを強化するための新たな課題や活動を取り入れた。主に著者の観察と学生の授業アンケート結果により振り返ったところ、これらの変更点は前述のスキルを育む上で概ね教育的効果があったと察するが、特に生成AIを利用した剽窃行為が引き続き起こっている問題を考えると、今後の授業でさらに課題や活動を工夫し改善を重ねていくことが求められる。

Action research (AR) is a beneficial tool for teachers to reflect critically on their classroom practices for improvement, which is significant for their personal and professional development (Burns, 1999). By engaging in AR, teachers can focus on immediate concerns in their daily instructions directly relevant to their local institution and classroom context. In this AR paper, I aim to build on a previous study into my critical incident analysis of teaching a research writing (RW) course for the first time in Winter 2021 (see Morooka, 2022). Specifically, I report on an AR project carried out while teaching the same RW course in Winter 2022/Autumn 2023 and share my reflections on the effectiveness of changes made, ending with a discussion about further challenges and implications for future teaching.

Teaching Context

RW is a mandatory academic writing course for sophomore students taught in the English language program at a private liberal arts university in Tokyo. It is held four times a week over 10 weeks, and students must submit a 1500-2000-word research paper at the end of the term. Each instructor covers a different content theme, within which students develop their specific topic to write about. In my case, the broad theme is technology, including online education, social media, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence (AI). One RW section usually has approximately 20 students, most of whom are B1-B2 intermediate English learners of Japanese based on CEFR. In addition to the RW lessons, students can use university library resources at the Writing Support Desk (WSD), where they can have one-on-one tutorial sessions with trained student tutors.

Literature Review on AR

Scholars have defined AR in a number of ways over time. For instance, whereas Nunan (1992) gives an introductory and broad definition of AR "containing a question/issue, data, and interpretive analysis" (p.18), Burns (2010) shows a teaching-specific definition

by stating that in AR, "the teacher becomes an 'investigator' or 'explorer' of his or her personal teaching context, while at the same time being one of the participants in it" (p. 2). As can be seen from those definitions, AR is characterized by unique aspects, such as "contextual, small-scale, and localised" (Burns, 1999, p. 30), and attempts to reflect on the practice and implement changes to identified problems based on the data collection (Burns, 1999).

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), AR is a cyclical process that involves four stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. In the planning stage, action researchers recognize the issue to be examined, which is often a puzzling moment or a "burning question" (Burns, 2010, p. 3) for teachers, and devise an action plan for improvement by developing research questions and methods (Dikilitas & Griffiths, 2017). In the acting stage, they implement an action plan, and collect data systematically with a combination of different tools, such as interviews, questionnaires, and classroom documents. In the observing stage, they analyze the data and try to interpret the impact of the action. In the reflecting stage, they deeply reflect on the entire research and increase understanding about their teaching beliefs and practices, and develop revised plans for further progress, which returns to the first stage.

Thus, this iterative feature of AR allows action researchers an opportunity to promote awareness for their ongoing professional development. Therefore, AR is not only a problem-solving tool to enhance teaching practices but also a tool for teachers to gain fresh insights about the nature of the problem (Dikilitas & Griffiths, 2017). Although AR is often considered weak as a research methodology for its lack of generalizable results, Hanks (2017) claims that research "good enough to contribute to understandings in the field, good enough to build upon, good enough to inspire others" is acceptable (p. 36). Furthermore, AR might facilitate collaboration among faculty for curriculum and materials development and provide valuable data for institutions and departments, while encouraging individual teachers' autonomy (Ahmad, 2020). As such, I decided to implement this AR project to explore my classroom practices, and rely on my reflections as a primary source of data, because I am in the best position to compare my previous teaching experiences of the same course.

Summary of Four Critical Incidents in the First-Year Teaching

Richards and Farrell (2010) define a critical incident as "an unplanned and unanticipated event that occurs during a lesson and that serves to trigger insights about some aspect of teaching and learning" (p. 113). Reflecting on critical incidents enables teachers to explore their teaching beliefs and understand their experiences from new perspectives (Farrell & Baecher, 2017). The following section summarizes four critical incidents that happened in my first year of teaching RW, which forms the foundation for this AR project (for more information, see Morooka, 2022).

Critical Incident 1—Questioning Assignment Rationale

In the initial phase, I gave students two different assignments: topic submission and research proposal. The topic submission involved writing ideas briefly, answering questions about their topic choice, background information, and possible research questions, whereas the research proposal required putting those ideas together into one coherent writing piece. However, they were essentially the same task, and one student asked me about the difference between these two assignments. This incident led me to question my assumption that a research proposal assignment was necessary for RW and made me realize the importance of having a clear rationale behind assignments. It would have been more meaningful to have students revise the topic submission document at this stage so they can refine their topics rather than focus on their writing coherence. The suggestions from this critical incident analysis included assigning a revised topic submission and an annotated bibliography instead of a research proposal, which could have helped students develop ideas about the topic and evaluate the quality of their sources.

Critical Incident 2—Sample Paper Analysis

After the research proposal, I had students analyze a sample paper in terms of content and organization that had been written by one of my colleagues. For example, students completed a simple outline of the sample paper by matching the most appropriate headings and created a detailed outline by adding subheadings of their own. Additionally, they evaluated and critiqued the sample paper, and wrote the conclusion, which had been intentionally removed for the exercise. Overall, they seemed to be highly engaged in this analysis and found it helpful to grasp expectations regarding their final paper, which was a successful teaching moment for me. This incident helped me confirm the effectiveness of analyzing a sample paper, but because it was not a sample paper written by a student, it did not meet all the requirements of the final paper for my course. Therefore, analysis of this critical incident suggested that sample papers written by former students should be used to show the requirements for the final paper more precisely and motivate future students with exemplars of high-quality peer work.

Critical Incident 3—Changing Arguments

After the outline submission, students submitted their first draft containing the introduction and the first half of the body and had an individual tutorial with me. One student writing about the advantages of online learning had relatively weak arguments with generally unreliable sources, so I advised them to find more trustworthy sources. However, they found it difficult to collect academic sources to support the benefits of online learning; therefore, in their second draft, they completely changed their argument and wrote about the drawbacks of online learning, mainly the digital divide and its solutions, using more reliable sources. I was surprised by their bold attempt to take the totally opposite stance and rewrite the second draft from scratch after having submitted their first. This incident showed me how important it is to choose a topic and a position after researching the topic adequately and finding strong evidence for the argument. Thus, analysis of this critical incident indicated the need for me to check the reliability of sources earlier in the outline stage before the first draft submission, or in the annotated bibliography assignment where they summarize and evaluate their sources.

Critical Incident 4—Plagiarism

Before the first draft submission, the students had a lesson about plagiarism, and discussed the definition, possible penalties upon violation, and ways to avoid plagiarism. However, one student plagiarized their second draft heavily by copying and pasting numerous passages from several websites without proper citations. I arranged an individual tutorial to ask them why they had plagiarized and to explain how unacceptable it was, but they only gave me vague reasons that they did not think what they did would count as plagiarism, even though they were aware of plagiarism itself being impermissible. I offered them a chance to rewrite their second draft and fix all the plagiarized parts, but they did not resubmit it and subsequently failed the course, despite submitting their final draft with some fixed parts. This incident made me consider various reasons why students choose to plagiarize, such as lack of time, awareness, English writing skills, and knowledge about citation formats. The suggestions from this critical incident analysis included stressing the severity of plagiarism by sharing the previous case of a failed student due to plagiarism, and teaching essential writing skills, especially paraphrasing, summarizing, and referencing, more extensively.

Reflections on the Changes Made in Recent Teaching

In the following section, I report on the changes I made in my second and third years of RW teaching based on the suggestions drawn from the critical incident analysis above. Each explanation of the change is followed by my reflections, most of which are complemented by student survey results.

Change 1–Revised Topic Submission and Annotated Bibliography

In Winter 2022/Autumn 2023, I gave students a topic submission document, and asked them to revise it based on my tutorial feedback, instead of having them write a unified paragraph in a research proposal document. The topic submission document had six different sections about their topic, background and information that they had researched, research questions, thesis statement, references, and further areas for research (see Appendix A). In my written feedback, I mainly asked them to clarify or elaborate on some points to guide them to think about the topic deeply and narrow the focus of their topic. Subsequently, they needed to prepare questions based on my comments and discuss them in the tutorials. Afterward, they added more information and sources to the same topic document and highlighted the changes they had made in yellow for resubmission.

With the revised topic submission, students seemed to be able to develop their topics and refine their ideas further. They were better able to incorporate tutorial feedback and expand their ideas by adding information. It also helped me to check their revisions more efficiently by asking them to highlight the changes they had made. Compared to my first year RW teaching, it was evident to me that this assignment revision led to a wider range and greater specificity of topics. While the topics in the first year of teaching tended to be more general and typical, such as the digital divide, remote work, and technology for the elderly, those in more recent courses were more original and unique, ranging from information and communication technology, educational technology, medical technology, to agricultural technology. Examples include self-driving cars, electronic voting, targeted advertising, K-pop fans' social media, technology for detecting pirated manga, cyberbullying, AI for chemical experiments, and vertical farming.

In addition to the revised topic submission, I gave students an annotated bibliography assignment, where the students included a citation, a summary, an evaluation, and a reflection of at least five sources, also indicating the source types (see Appendix B). For the evaluation part, they needed to review and apply the CRAAP (Currency,

Relevance, Accuracy, Authority, and Purpose) evaluation criteria they had learned in a freshmen research skills course. More specifically, students checked when the source was published, how relevant it was to their topic focus, how accurate the information was, who published it, and with what intention it was published, and evaluated the reliability of sources by giving scores to each of the aforementioned criteria and writing brief explanations for their scores. For the summary, they needed to write a paragraph of approximately 100 words summarizing the main points from each source. Similarly, for the reflection, they needed to describe in approximately 100 words how useful the source is for their research or how they plan to use it in their paper.

With the annotated bibliography, students seemed to be able to examine each source more carefully than they had before. Many of them chose journal articles and newspaper articles rather than blogs or websites for the five sources. Accordingly, they incorporated more reliable sources, especially more journal articles, in their final draft, for which they were required to cite at least ten sources. Surprisingly, in the third year of teaching, almost all students who submitted their final draft used many more sources than the minimum requirement, and some even used nearly 20. The number of sources used in the final drafts might not necessarily reflect the quality of students' final products, but it still demonstrates their dedicated effort and ability to find appropriate sources. In fact, the end-of-term course questionnaire shows that most of the students found the annotated bibliography assignment helpful, although some pointed out that it was a little overwhelming to write approximately 1000 words in total. In particular, the evaluation part of the assignment using CRAAP criteria seemed to allow students to scrutinize each source from various perspectives. It appeared effective to do the evaluation and the reflection because students needed to apply the specific tools they had learned and judge how they would use the sources in the paper, which made it difficult for them to plagiarize those parts easily.

Change 2—Student Sample Paper Analysis

In Winter 2022/Autumn 2023, in addition to the aforementioned sample paper, I shared several student sample papers with students at an early stage so they could learn what was expected from their final draft. First, to familiarize them with an expected research paper style, I had students analyze the main idea, thesis statement, essay type, structure, and types of evidence of a sample student paper. Subsequently, to give an idea about outlining, I had students create a detailed outline based on another student sample paper. Furthermore, to discuss what makes a paper introduction effective, I compiled only the introductions of three student samples and had the students evaluate and critique the hook, thesis statement, and the logical flow of each work.

It appeared that the students were engaged in the student sample paper analysis each time, actively exchanging their ideas in groups. In fact, the end-of-term course questionnaire shows that all students who responded found the student sample papers either very helpful or helpful. Although one comment said that it would be more helpful if the sample paper topic suited their interest, considering the main purpose of the sample paper analysis to show not the content but the features of an expected product, the sample paper analysis seemed successful overall. That being said, it would be ideal to share several papers on various topics to satisfy different students' interests and thereby increase motivation.

Change 3—Library Orientation and WSD Tutorials on Outlines

In Winter 2022/Autumn 2023, I gave students more opportunities to utilize the university library resources than before, following Critical Incident 3 about changing one's arguments. Because Critical Incident 3 indicated the need for students to choose a topic after researching sufficiently, I incorporated a library orientation about how to use various library tools and databases to find academic sources, mainly journal articles, before the topic submission. After the librarian's explanation, students tried searching for academic sources about possible topics of interest using keywords and search filters and shared their findings in groups. In addition to the library orientation, I made it mandatory for students to go to the WSD in the library and attend an individual tutorial with student tutors about their paper outline. In this additional assignment (see Appendix C), students wrote brief notes about what they discussed in the tutorial and how it helped them with the outline revision and attached the revised outline with the changes highlighted in yellow.

Unlike merely watching library videos about how to find sources online in the first year RW during the pandemic, the students in the second and third years seemed to benefit more from the face-to-face library orientation. It seemed that they were able to apply the search tools and collect more reliable sources, which was possibly reflected in their increased use of journal articles in the annotated bibliography. As a matter of fact, the end-of-term course questionnaires reveal that all the respondents found the library orientation either very helpful or helpful. Furthermore, students seemed to appreciate the WSD mandatory tutorials on their outlines, which is supported again by the questionnaire results that all the respondents found it either very helpful or helpful. Several students left positive comments about WSD services for additional

advice and fresh perspectives they gained from others. One student even attended the WSD tutorials three times, saying that it helped them to clarify their thinking. Through this assignment, it seems that students were able to discuss their paper outline further, especially the organization and the strength of their arguments. In fact, I do not recall any students in my recent teaching who changed their topic or argument position drastically due to the lack of appropriate sources after the first draft, even though some students did narrow down their topics or change the argument structures after the outline.

Change 4—Paraphrasing, Summarizing, and Referencing Exercises

In Winter 2022/Autumn 2023, I assigned paraphrasing, summarizing, and referencing exercises more explicitly than before to deter plagiarism. When students were still exploring different topics, they had a newspaper article post-assignment where they wrote a summary and reaction to an article of their choice. Among the summaries, I selected the ones that were poorly written with almost the same wording as the original texts, and had the students paraphrase these sentences in groups. I told them to understand the meaning of the original sentences in the context by reading the sentences around them, and to paraphrase the ideas by using synonyms and different sentence structures. Another new classroom activity was an error correction exercise about in-text citations and references. The students were given a sample paper written in the APA citation format with multiple deliberate errors, and they corrected the errors in pairs, referring to APA guidelines. Moreover, in the lesson about plagiarism, I mentioned the past case of the student who had failed the course due to plagiarism and emphasized the grave consequences of such a violation of academic integrity. In my third year of teaching, I also referred students to a university website stating the university's perspective on the students' use of generative AI and had them discuss what the policy entails and why the university has the policy.

Students appeared to be engaged in pair and group work for those exercises, as indicated in the course questionnaire results that all respondents found the activities either very helpful or helpful. It seemed especially effective that the texts they needed to paraphrase came from the newspaper articles of their choice, not a random text I had given them. However, the responses from the course questionnaire also suggest the need to practice paraphrasing skills more, as some of them still said that paraphrasing was difficult. In reality, despite repeated warnings about plagiarism, two cases of plagiarism still occurred in my second and third years of teaching. One case was intentional plagiarism due to lack of time and being overwhelmed by other coursework, while the other was unintentional plagiarism because of inadequate paraphrasing skills, merely swapping some words with synonyms. In each case, I had a talk with the student, helped them understand why it was wrong to do so, and told them to rewrite the parts, which they did. These students were eventually able to pass the course, unlike the previous student in my first year of teaching RW. Even though most students did not plagiarize, these incidents imply that awareness-raising activities about plagiarism might not completely stop students from plagiarizing.

Further Challenges and Improvement

As noted in the section above, plagiarism still remains a serious issue. In particular, plagiarism using generative AI tools presents another level of challenge nowadays. Even though detecting software programs do exist for AI-generated texts, it is still difficult to prove AI use in students' writing. In fact, a study conducted by Mohammadkarimi (2023) revealed participants' unanimous agreement on the negative impact of AI allowing students' academic dishonesty. In my RW course in Autumn 2023, too, there was a case where it was hard to tell whether a student used a generative AI tool to write an introduction, which looked somewhat generic, but because there was little evidence that I could present to the student, I could not investigate further. Therefore, it is essential to know how to deal with a possibly plagiarized text and how to manage these cases with the limited capabilities of AI detectors. To minimize students' urge to use generative AI tools, changing the type of assignments or activities might be helpful. For example, students could compare a human-generated text and an AI-generated text and discuss the flaws of the AI-generated text, or they could give an oral presentation of a summary instead of a mere written summary in the annotated bibliography.

In addition, I could make other specific changes for future course improvement. According to the end-of-term course questionnaire, some students were overwhelmed with the large number of words they needed to write for the summary and reflection parts in the annotated bibliography, so I could decrease the number of words for each part to reduce their burden. Furthermore, in the questionnaire, some students still expressed difficulty in paraphrasing texts; therefore, I could give them more in-class paraphrasing exercises, asking them to bring texts they found challenging to paraphrase.

Conclusion

This AR paper is informed by a previous analysis of critical incidents that occurred in my first year of teaching an RW course. Based on suggestions from the critical incident

analysis, in my recent RW courses, I have implemented changes to address some prior issues, such as unclear assignment rationale and plagiarism. The changes include the following: (a) new assignments, such as topic revision and annotated bibliography; (b) various uses of different student sample papers; (c) promotion of library resources, such as the library orientation and WSD services; and (d) more activities on paraphrasing, summarizing, and referencing. Overall, those changes seem to have improved my teaching practices and student performance, as supported by the end-of-term course questionnaire. Nonetheless, there remains a major unresolved issue, that is, plagiarism, especially the serious concerns about plagiarism using generative AI tools. Therefore, in future teaching, I plan to implement further changes, such as increasing in-class paraphrasing opportunities and adapting the type of assignments or activities to deter generative AI plagiarism.

One potential limitation of this paper is the primary reliance on my own judgment about the changes I made in the course. Although the student responses in the end-of-term course questionnaire supplemented my personal observations on how the changes went, it is still true that these data lack objectivity or substantial evidence, as they are all subjective perceptions after all. However, as explained in the literature review above, AR's "explicitly interventionist and subjective approach" (Burns, 2005, p. 60) could be justifiable for its "small-scale, localized, context-specific" (Walsh & Mann, 2015, p. 352) nature that allows individual teachers to examine their practices in certain situations. Thus, writing this paper has enabled me to reflect on my experiences of teaching the same RW course over the past three years from fresh viewpoints and to identify areas for further improvement in my future instructions. Although this project might not be generalizable to other contexts, I sincerely hope that this paper will inspire other instructors to pursue AR in their own classroom settings to gain deeper understanding about their teaching practices.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Topic Submission

Write down your ideas for each of the following items in the space below. Use the questions as a guide to help you think about each item.

1. Topic

- What is your topic?
- Why did you choose this topic?
- What is the significance of this topic? (Why is this topic important?)

2. Background knowledge/Researched information

- What do you already know about this topic?
- What information have you gathered so far? Include simple citations (the author's last name, published year) for the information you gathered from certain sources.

3. Research question(s) (temporary)

- What issues/aspects do you want to examine about this topic in your paper?

4. Thesis statement (temporary, if possible)

- What do you want to say about this topic?
- Try to develop an answer to the research question(s) above (can include your arguments about the topic, impacts of an issue, solutions to a problem, etc.).

5. References (for any sources you have found so far)

- Try to list at least 5 online sources here (Add more when you revise this topic submission. You need to use at least 10 sources for your final paper.).
- Put "the title (the author's last name, published year)".
- If the sources are available online, put the website links, too.

6. Further research areas

- What information will you need to gather more?
- What keywords can you use for searching?

*For the revised parts, highlight the changes you made in yellow.

Appendix B

Annotated Bibliography

Write annotated bibliographies for more than 5 sources.

Put the source type first (book chapter, newspaper article, journal article, etc.) and write the following information about each source.

- APA citation (with the link to the source if available)
- Summary (main points and arguments)
- Evaluation (whether it is reliable, use the CRAAP criteria and give reasons for the scores)
- Reflection (how it fits your research/questions, how to use it in your paper)

Use the table for each source below.

Your topic: **Research Question(s):**

1. Source type ( ) × 5

APA citation (+ source link if available)	
Summary (main points in one paragraph, around 100 words)	
Evaluation (reliability based on CRAAP criteria)	(Currency: /5)
	(Relevance: /5)
	(Accuracy: /5)
	(Authority: /5)
	(Purpose: /5)
Reflection (how useful it is for your research, how to use it in your paper, around 100 words)	

Appendix C

WSD Tutorials and Revised Outline Submission

Go to the Writing Support Desk (WSD) in the library and revise your outline. Incorporate feedback from the teacher, your peers, and tutors as needed. Submit this document with the revised outline.

*You can choose face-to-face or online sessions, reserved (9:00-17:20) or walk-in (12:50-13:40) sessions. Both English and Japanese tutorials are available. Each reserved session is 40-min long.

Date and time: Q. What did you discuss in the tutorial? How did it help you with the outline revision?

Refer to the template and revise your outline for your research paper in the space below.
Make sure to include the sources you will use by putting simple citations.
Highlight the changes you made in yellow.

- Name:
- Topic:
- Research Question(s):

Your paper outline revision here