

# Getting started with action research

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IATEFL ReSIG webinar

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## Warm-up question:

How do you think  
this image might  
relate to action  
research?



## Warm-up quote

“the more I know, the more I become aware of the things I don’t know”



(comment from an interview with a teacher in Australia, in the middle of conducting an action research project)



# Key messages before we start...

**When you conduct action research, you may:**

- end up feeling you know less that you did before (but this is unlikely to really be true)
- **unearth uncomfortable truths** about your teaching – “Opening Pandora’s Box” (but this is a good thing!)
- open up many doors and **feel overwhelmed** by it all (but this is normal and gives you inspiration for future explorations!)



## ... AND on a very positive note

Main themes (sustained impact of AR on teachers)

Sub-themes

1 The teachers felt more confident about their teaching.

- Reassured about being on the right track.
- Equipped with an 'AR toolkit'.

2 The teachers felt more connected to their students.

- Gained a 'student perspective'.
- Communicated more openly with students.

(Edwards & Burns, 2016, ELT Journal article)



## ... AND on a very positive note

3 The teachers were more engaged with and in research.

- Felt increased motivation to read up on theory.
- Had a 'thirst' to do more research.

4 The teachers felt more recognized.

- Recognized more from within the workplace.
- Recognized more from outside the workplace.

(Edwards & Burns, 2016, ELT Journal article)



# Outline for this webinar

- Introductory key messages
- What is action research?
- **Getting started with action research**
- Managing the rest of the action research process
- Planning ahead for sharing your action research project
- Links to useful resources



# Before we start... choose a letter



- A. I don't know much about action research at all
- B. I know a bit about action research but need more examples and/or explanations
- C. Quite confident – I have a plan to get started but am interested in knowing more
- D. Confident – I have conducted action research before
- E. Very confident – I have managed action research programs before



# What is action research?

- Action research “involves taking a **self-reflective, critical** and **systematic** approach to exploring your own teaching contexts.” (Burns, 2010, p.2)
- “Action research is a form of practitioner research which is characterized by particular procedures, which broadly involve the **introduction and evaluation of new practices**, typically through a **number of cycles.**” (Borg, 2010, p.394)

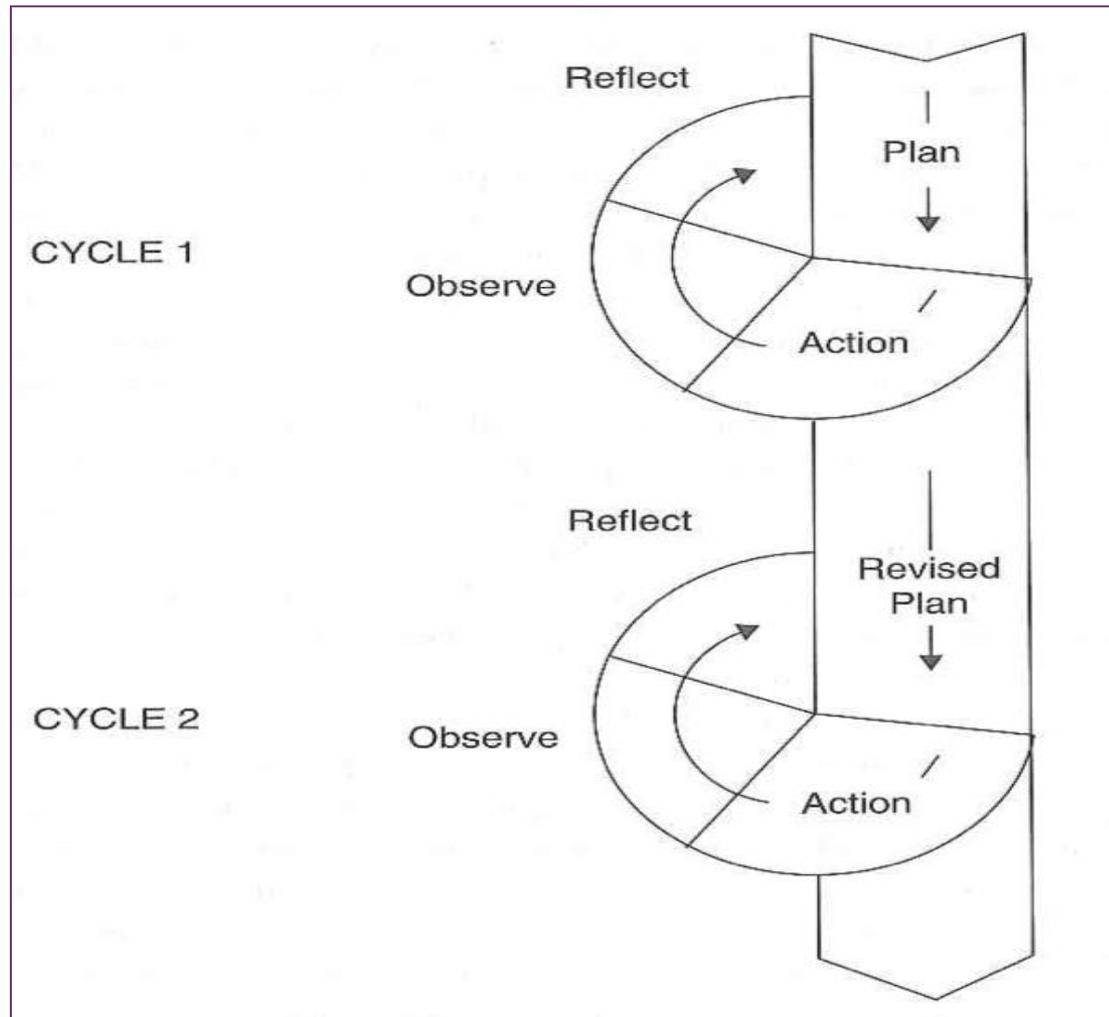


# Key arguments about action research

- Action research for **curriculum development** (Stenhouse, 1975)
- Focus on **collaboration** (with colleagues, students, parents, managers/coordinators) (Burns, 1999; Freire, 1972)
- **Technical, practical** and **critical** forms of action research (Carr & Kemmis, 2005) – the research should analyse problems and policies, not simply find solutions



# Action research cycles



Kemmis &  
McTaggart's  
action research  
spiral  
(Burns, 2010, p.9)



# Action research cycles

- Plan -> Act -> Observe -> Reflect
- More than one cycle, often three or four

## BUT...

- ... not always linear – often very messy!
- ... you might start with an ‘exploratory cycle’ with no ‘act’ (just observe -> reflect) to help you refine your focus



# Contexts of action research

- Individual teacher with your class
- Collaborative – several teachers/classes together
- School-wide
- Part of a national program (e.g. English Australia, English UK)
- Part of an online program (e.g. British Council)
- On a university degree program



# The Cambridge English/English Australia Action Research in ELICOS Program



<https://www.englishaustralia.com.au/action-research-program>



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# The Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Award Scheme



<https://www.englishuk.com/action-research>



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# Exploratory action research in Chile

## Champion Teachers: stories of exploratory action research

Edited by Paula Rebolledo, Richard Smith and Deborah Bullock



<https://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/continuing-professional-development/cpd-teacher-trainers/champion-teachers-stories-exploratory-action-research>



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# Summary so far...

- Action research involves systematic reflection on practice, which should also be critical
- The systematic process is in the form of cycles (plan -> act -> observe -> reflect) – but these cycles may be messy!
- There are many contexts in which you could engage in action research – try to find a collaborative one
- Action research may uncover uncomfortable truths – embrace them!



# The starting point for action research

**A puzzle, issue,  
passion or area you  
(and your students)  
would like to explore  
further**



# Getting started with action research

## Ideas from Burns (2010, pp.22-23):

- Is there something in your teaching situation that you would like to change?
- What 'burning questions' do you have about your students' learning?
- Have you ever tried out a new teaching idea in your classroom and wondered whether it really helped your students to learn?
- What new approaches to learning or teaching are you interested in trying?

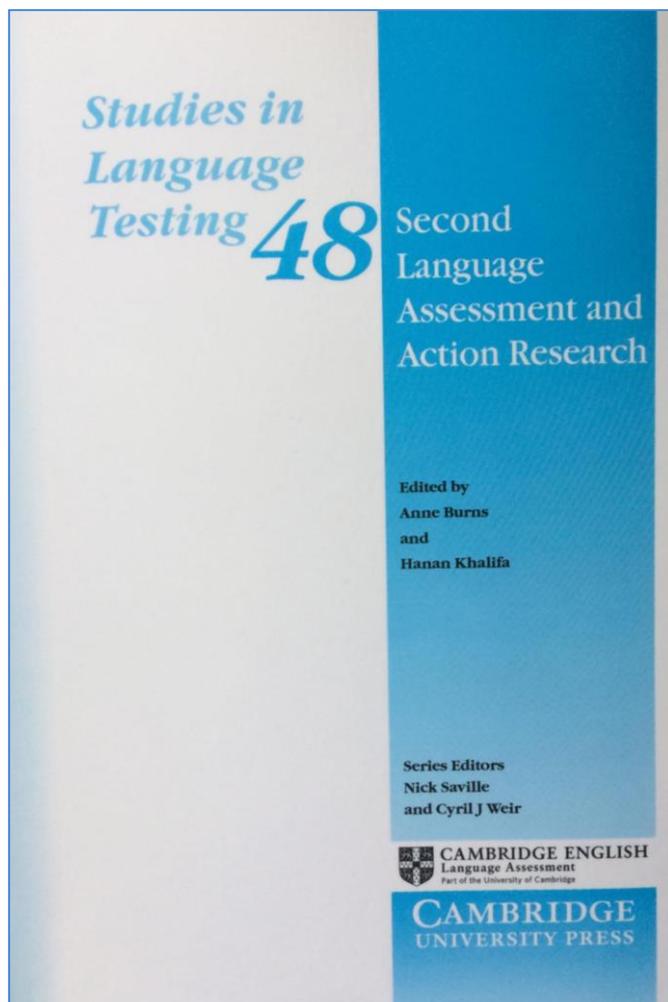


# Getting started with action research

- Think about what you are currently most interested in/puzzled by in the classroom or in your teaching
- Brainstorm ideas with a colleague
- Ask your students what they find puzzling or especially difficult
- Keep a diary to note your thoughts while/after teaching
- Read other teachers' action research reports
- Read a couple of journal articles or teaching magazine articles on a topic you are interested in
- Attend a conference and note down inspiring ideas



# Examples of action research projects



Burns, A. & Khalifa, H. (2017) (Eds.). *Second language assessment and action research*. Studies in Language Testing, 48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



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# More examples of action research projects...



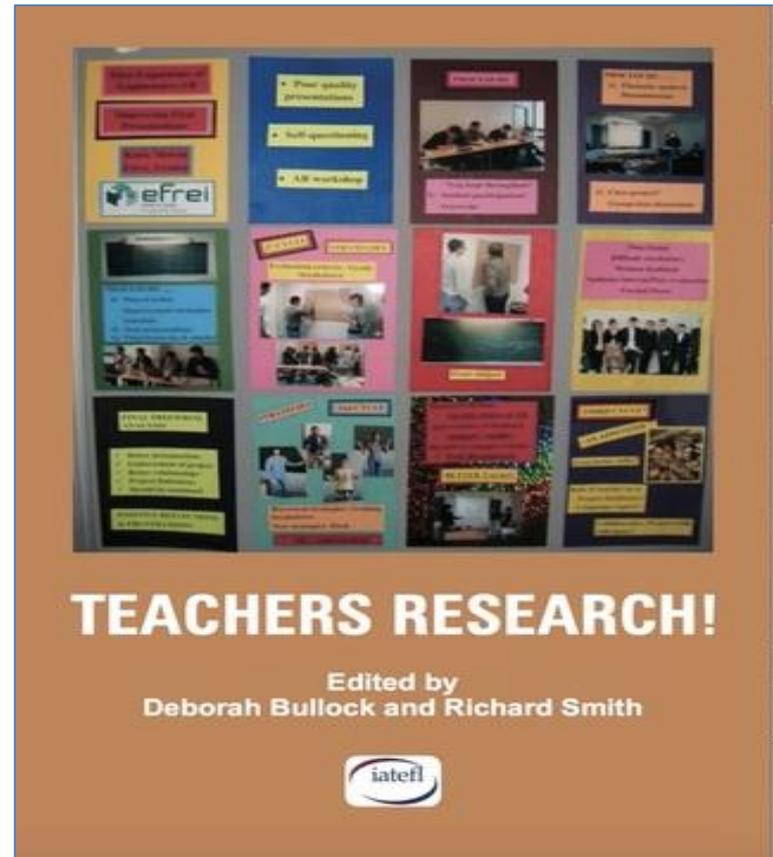
<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/research-notes/>



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# A book of action research examples...

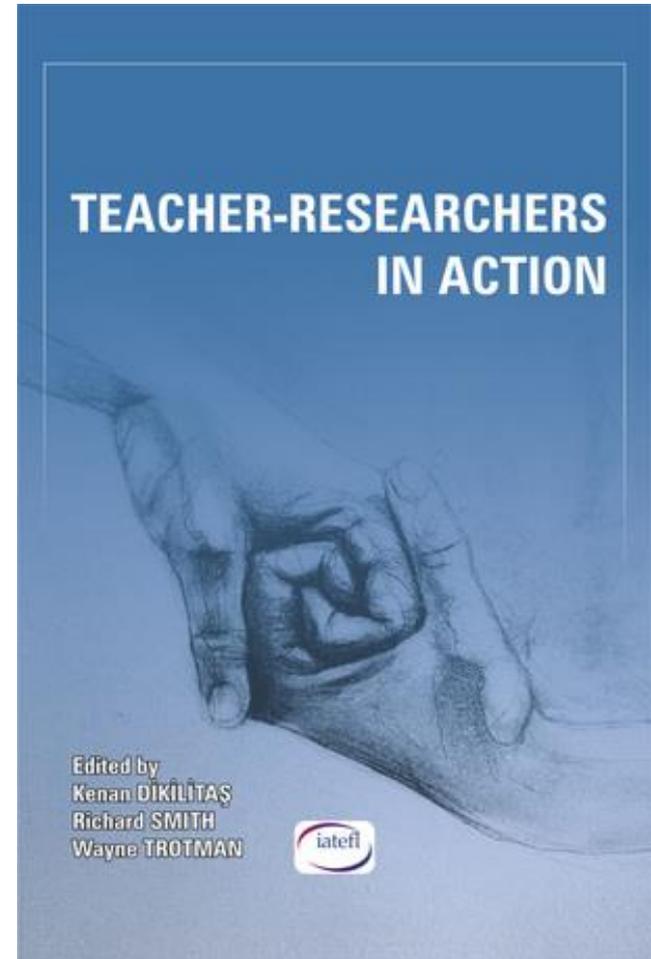
<http://resig.weebly.com/teachers-research.html>



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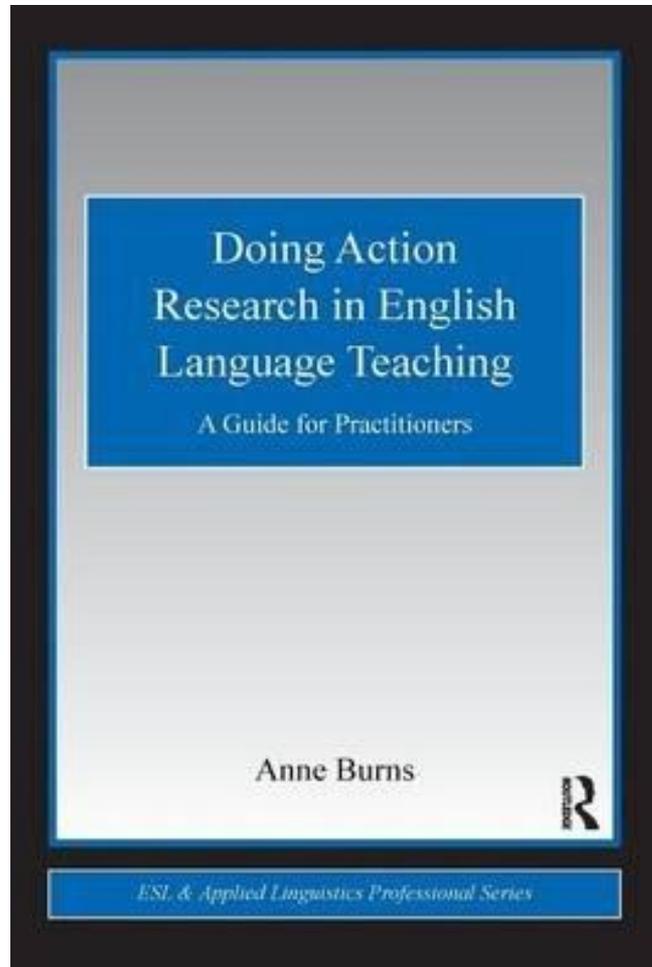
# Another book of action research examples...

<http://resig.weebly.com/teacher-researchers-in-action.html>



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# Getting started with action research



Burns, A. (2010).  
*Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners.*  
New York & London:  
Routledge.



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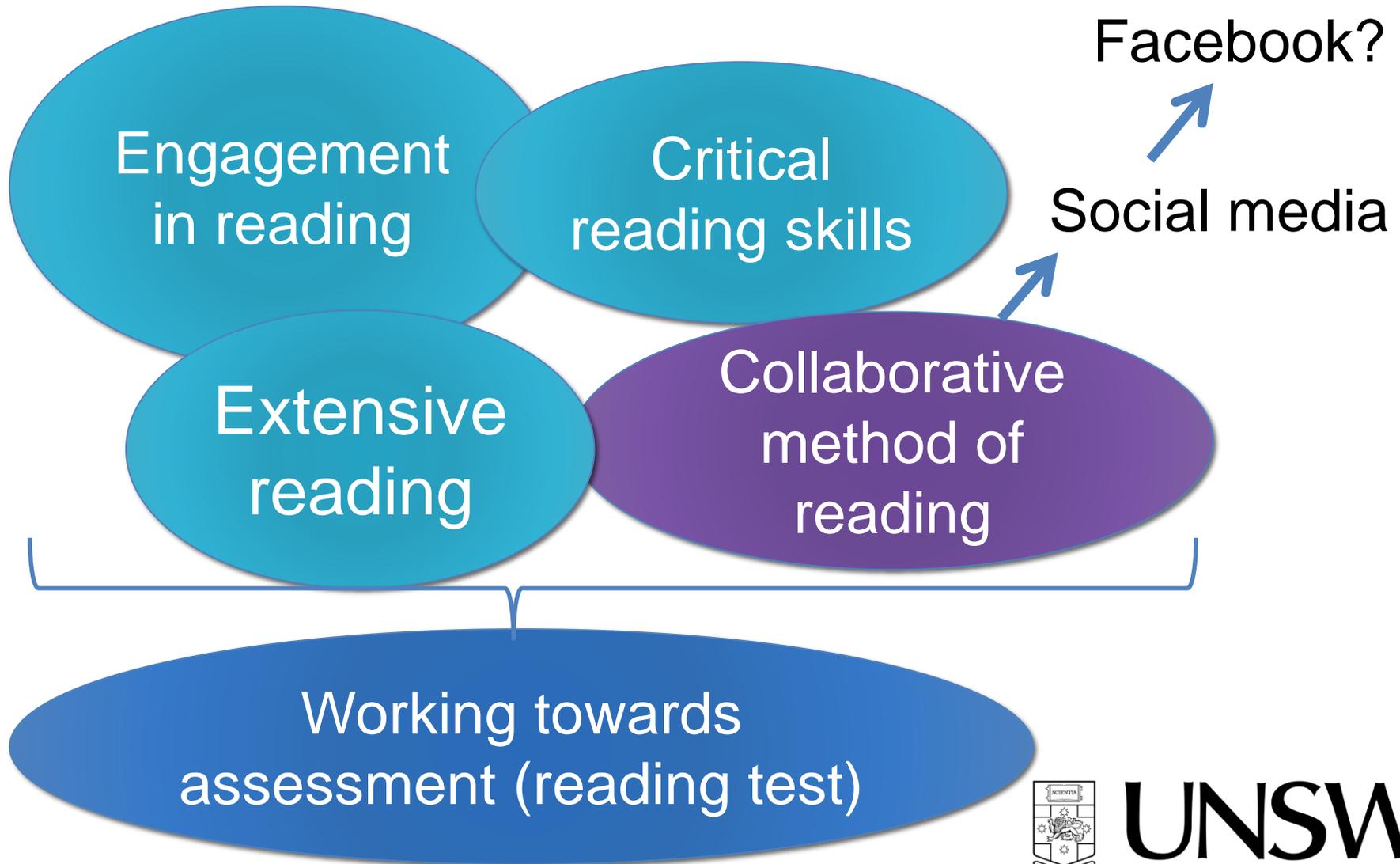
# List the key aspects of your current situation

Criteria (each /20)	To achieve EAP 1 (9 out of 20)	To achieve EAP 2 (12 out of 20)	To achieve EAP 3 (15 out of 20)
Response to question  13 /20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Responds to most parts of the task</li><li>• Includes a position / thesis / purpose / outline, but this may not be clear</li><li>• Presents some relevant information, but this may not be well developed or supported</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Responds to all parts of the task</li><li>• Includes a position / thesis / purpose / outline</li><li>• Presents relevant information, which is mostly developed and supported</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Responds to all parts of the task fully</li><li>• Includes a clear position / thesis / purpose / outline</li><li>• Presents relevant information which is well developed and supported</li></ul>

- 1) We have basic Academic English **assessment rubrics for writing**, but think many students are confused by them
- 2) I think my students need more help to make **progress with their writing**
- 3) I want to continuously encourage **autonomous learning skills**



# Mind map your ideas



# Narrowing and focusing



- Language skill?
- Aspect of teaching/ learning?
- My context/ school?
- Type of learners/ class?



# What are you interested in exploring?



Let's pause for a moment and think about areas of teaching and learning that you would like to explore.

These ideas could just be key words like 'writing', 'motivation', 'confidence in speaking' etc.



# Developing a research question

- A research question gives you focus for your action research project
- Generally start with **‘how’**, **‘why’** or **‘what’**

## Challenges:

- The question needs to be both specific and flexible!
- You can and probably should refine your question as you go (which often happens with qualitative research) – so think of the question as a ‘guide’



# Research questions: examples

- **What** is the relationship between **progress** and **motivation** in high-level general English students in my class/school?
- **How** can my students be encouraged to become **more aware** of specific aspects of their **pronunciation difficulties**?
- **What grammar teaching approaches and techniques** receive a positive response from my students?
- **How** will the use of **formative speaking assessments** through **VoiceThread** impact on **outcomes** and **engagement** for students on ESP courses I teach? (Edwards, 2014, ETp article)



# My research questions

## At the start:

1) **How** can explicit use of **assessment rubrics** in my Academic English class most effectively enable students to **assess and monitor their own written assignments**?

## Narrowed down:

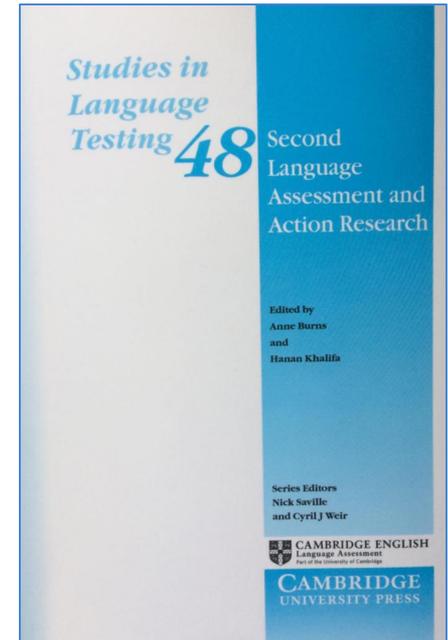
2) **How** can **goal setting** using assessment rubrics in my Academic English class most effectively enable students to **assess and monitor their own written assignments**?



# Kerry and Jade's multiple questions

Kerry and Jade (see Chapter 4) wanted to explore these general questions:

- 1) How can we better **engage** Academic English students in **reading**?
- 2) How can we develop a more **collaborative method** of reading?
- 3) How can we help students to improve **critical reading skills**?
- 4) How can we improve students' **assessment preparation**?



# Kerry and Jade's specific question

Kerry and Jade then refined these areas down to a specific research question:

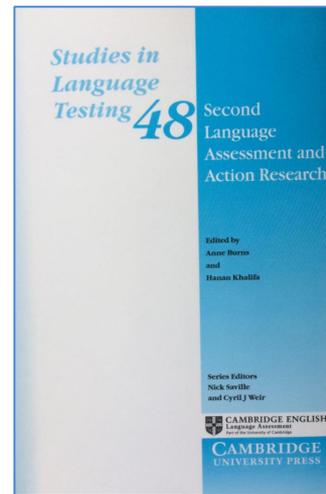
How can **social networking media** be used to facilitate students' **critical engagement** with **extensive reading** of the news in English?



# Martin and Arizio's research context

Martin and Arizio (see Chapter 11)

- **TKT: KAL** assessment for TESOL teacher education
- TKT = Teaching Knowledge Test
- KAL = Knowledge about Language
- **5-week ESP: TESOL program**



# Martin and Arizio refining their question

**“We started our project by wanting to measure the effect on *TKT: KAL* question scores from improving the fluent production of connected speech. However, after some thought, we recognised that our students’ main objective was to do well in a knowledge test rather than improve their spoken fluency....”**



# Martin and Arizio refining their question

... “Consequently, we fine-tuned our research question to reflect this new focus, while not denying the possibility of using communicative activities. As a result, our research question was written as: **What tasks and strategies can we develop to prepare students for *TKT: KAL* items on connected speech?**” (p.192)



## Research question checklist (Burns, 2010, pp.32-33)

1. Does the question have the right scope?
2. Is the question closed or open-ended? (avoid closed questions)
3. Is the question biased? (don't assume X will improve Y)
4. Does the question allow for a logical connection between the action and the outcome?
5. Does the question lend itself to data collection?
6. Does the question relate to current research?
7. Is the question ethical?
8. Is the question stated clearly and concisely?



# What do you think about these research questions?



- 1) What improves motivation in my class?
- 2) Can group work be extended in my classroom?
- 3) How will using electronic dictionaries lead to higher test scores in my students' writing?
- 4) How can I stop beginner low-achieving Chinese students from using their first language (L1) in my class?

(See Burns, 2010, pp.32-33)



# Summary so far...

- **Get inspiration** for your action research project focus from brainstorming, talking to your colleagues and students, reading, or while attending a conference
- **Narrow and focus your topic** by considering your context and the topic critically
- **Design a research question** (which can keep changing!) – what/how/why? And refine it using Anne Burns' checklist



# Getting started with the first cycle

- **Plan your intervention** – a new activity, tool, task, approach, type of technology etc.
- Think about how you will **collect data**:
  - **qualitative** (e.g. interviews, focus groups, open-ended surveys, observation notes, photos, teacher's diary, analysis of student work) ... and/or...
  - **quantitative** (e.g. closed question surveys, analysis of assessment scores, observation with tally or scores)



# Planning your intervention

**What activities/ tasks/ materials/ approaches could you trial to address your research question(s) and identified need(s)?**

“The interventions are critically informed as you question your assumptions about the current situation and plan new and alternative ways of doing things.” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p.12)



# Implementing your intervention

- Try out the activity/task/material/approach as part of your **normal classroom teaching** (or an extra workshop in some contexts)
- **Don't worry if it doesn't go 'to plan'** – that's where research gets even more interesting!
- Make sure you have planned for how to **collect data on your intervention** – and note down some reflections directly afterwards



# Observing the effects of your intervention

Surveys?

Focus groups?

Interviews?

Observations?

Pre and post-tests?

Teachers' diary/ reflection notes?

What method of data collection would give me insights into the research question I have designed?

Assessment scores?

Samples of student work?



# So how did I start?

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Response to question  13 /20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Responds to most parts of the task</li><li>• Includes a position / thesis / purpose / outline, but this may not be clear</li><li>• Presents some relevant information, but this may not be well developed or supported</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Responds to all parts of the task</li><li>• Includes a position / thesis / purpose / outline</li><li>• Presents relevant information, which is mostly developed and supported</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Responds to all parts of the task fully</li><li>• Includes a clear position / thesis / purpose / outline</li><li>• Presents relevant information which is well developed and supported</li></ul>

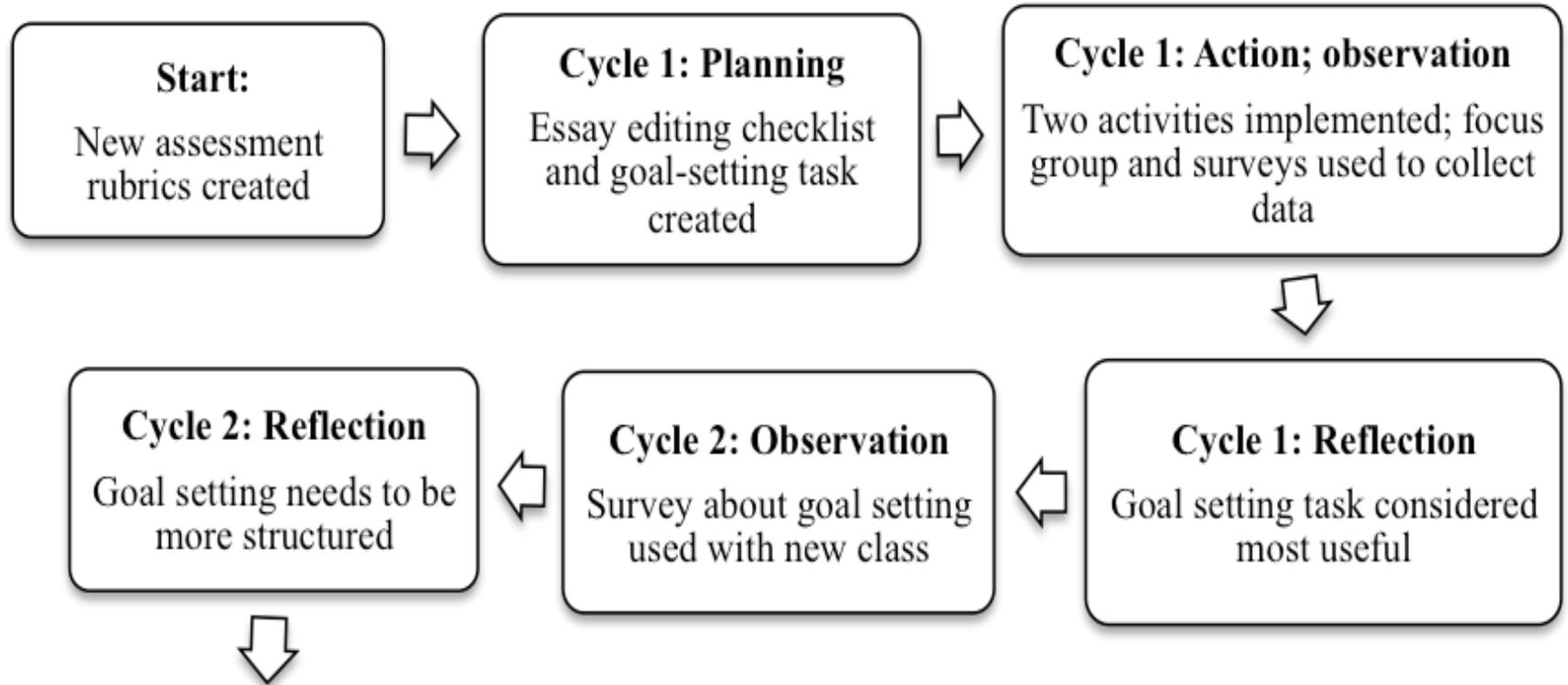
- I designed **new assessment rubrics** that had more detail, but clear and more simple language
- I designed **two activities to trial**: an essay editing checklist and a goal setting task
- I designed a **survey** and **focus group questions** to elicit feedback and ideas from my students



Criteria (each /20)	To achieve EAP 1 ( 9 out of 20)	To achieve EAP 2 (12 out of 20)	To achieve EAP 3 (15 out of 20)
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<b>Structure &amp; organisation</b>  13 /20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is an introduction, body and conclusion, and most of the information and ideas are organized into different paragraphs</li> <li>• Paragraphs show some structure, but maybe no topic sentences</li> <li>• Linking words and signposting are sometimes used, but with some mistakes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a clear introduction, body and conclusion, and the information and ideas are mostly organized well into different paragraphs</li> <li>• Paragraphs are structured, with attempts at topic and supporting sentences</li> <li>• Linking words and signposting are frequently used, but with some mistakes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a clear introduction, body and conclusion and all ideas and information are very well organized into different paragraphs</li> <li>• Paragraphs are well structured, with topic and supporting sentences, and examples</li> <li>• Linking words and signposting are used often and accurately</li> </ul>



# My Cycles 1 and 2



(Edwards & Burns, 2016, Innovation in Language Learning & Teaching article)



# How did Martin and Arizio start?

What tasks and strategies can we develop to prepare students for *TKT: KAL* items on connected speech?"



# How did Martin and Arizio start?

- **Action** (intervention) = new listening and speaking activities, based on existing materials but needs-based – designed each week
- **Observation** = pre-test and post-test in similar format to typical *TKT*: *KAL* questions; weekly quiz using Socratic; end of course survey
- **Cycles** = 1 cycle per week for 5 weeks (the course length)



# Examples of Martin and Arizio's activities

## Week 4 activities:

- **Assimilation Battleships** (adapted from a book of pronunciation games)
- **Listening and role-play** (using BBC Learning English – The Flatmates)
- **Connected Speech Stations** (test practice tasks)
- **Quizlet flashcards** (with examples of connected speech and connected speech type on reverse)

(pp.204-208)



# Managing the rest of the action research process

- Analyse your data carefully, perhaps with the help of a colleague or workshop you could attend
- Take time to reflect on the data collected and analysed in your first cycle before you move on
- You might find reading some articles (academic or professional magazine) useful at this stage to give you ideas
- Your project is limitless, but you may want to limit an initial project to three cycles



# Data analysis: qualitative

Theme	Student comments
1) Goals develop awareness	It's fundamental to set goals because it allows me to be aware of my progress and my difficulties.
2) Goals provide a focus to improve	It helps me to focus on my needs and to do the activities that really will improve my knowledge.  If you don't know where do you want to go, you will not go anywhere.
3) Goals provide motivation	Setting goals provide you the motivation to reach a target, in that case improving English.

*Table 1: Student comments about the importance of goal-setting.*

(Edwards, 2013, p.26)



# Data analysis: quantitative

Student	Week 2 (goal-setting instance 1)	Week 4 (goal-setting instance 2)	Week 6 (goal-setting instance 3)	Total change over period
1	No change	+1%	N/A	+1%
2	-1%	+6.5%	N/A	+5.5%
3	+2%	-1%	N/A	+1%
4	+1%	+3%	+3%	+7%
5	+2%	+2.5%	+4.5%	+9%
6	N/A	+5%	+2%	+7%
7	+5.5%	N/A	N/A	+5.5%
8	+1%	No change	+2%	+3%
9	+4%	N/A	N/A	+4%
10	+1%	+2%	N/A	+3%
11	+1%	+1%	N/A	+2%

Table 3: Focus area score % increase and decrease patterns (over six weeks)

Key: Light grey = above average increase in score; dark grey = decrease in score; N/A = not applicable as student was not in the class at this point.

(Edwards, 2013, p.29)



# Planning ahead for sharing the research

What are your goals?	Format for sharing
To improve practice and encourage collaboration in your workplace	<b>School presentation/ workshop</b>
To contribute to practical ideas and strategies for teaching	<b>Professional magazine article or blog</b>
To contribute to academic research	<b>Peer-reviewed article</b>
To network	<b>Conference presentation/ poster</b>
To connect to the community	<b>Local symposium or workshop</b>

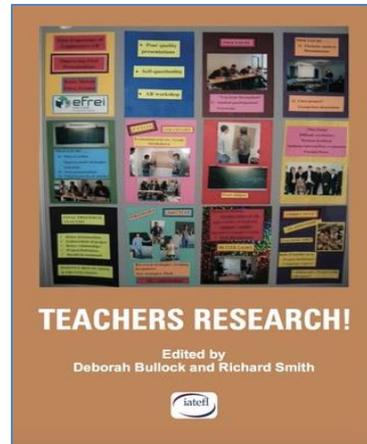
# Planning ahead for sharing the research

**Also think about what changes you might want to make more broadly (the social impact):**

- Pitching a new idea to your principal/ manager to change something in your school
- Writing an opinion piece in a local newsletter, blog or journal to lobby for policy change



# Ideas for communicating the research



# Planning for a peer-reviewed journal article

- Make sure you understand the **methodology of action research** fully, and read up on this (and perhaps the history of action research)
- **Conduct a review of related academic literature** before (or shortly after) starting your project, and identify current academic ‘conversations’ about this topic. How does your research project contribute?
- Read/study/attend a workshop about data analysis, whether qualitative or quantitative, to ensure you use the correct academic techniques and consider issues of **data trustworthiness**



# Examples of peer-reviewed articles by action research teachers

[http://faculty.edfac.usyd.edu.au/projects/usp\\_in\\_tesol/currentissue.htm](http://faculty.edfac.usyd.edu.au/projects/usp_in_tesol/currentissue.htm)

- ‘ESL students in peer review: An action research study in a university English for Academic Purposes course’ (Jane Hislop & Elke Stracke)
- ‘Task-based approaches and interaction in the 1:1 classroom: A teacher’s perspective’ (Rob Cooper)
- ‘Starting self-starters: Strategies to support independent learning’ (Gemma O’Donoghue)
- ‘Using microblogs on Facebook to develop students’ academic reading and writing skills’ (Finlay McCall)



# Useful action research resources

- Borg, S. (2017). Twelve tips for doing teacher research. *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL*, 12, 163-185.
- Burns, A. (2010). *Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Burns, A. & Khalifa, H. (2017) (Eds.). *Second language assessment and action research*. *Studies in Language Testing*, 48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cambridge Research Notes:  
<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/research-notes/>
- Dikilitaş, K., & Griffiths, C. (2017). *Developing language teacher autonomy through action research*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.



# Useful action research resources (cont.)

- Smith, R., Connelly, T., & Rebolledo, P. (2014). Teacher-research as continuing professional development: A project with Chilean secondary school teachers. In D. Hayes (Ed.), *Innovations in the continuing professional development of English language teachers*. London: British Council. <http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/books-resource-packs/innovations-continuing-professional-development-english-language-teachers>
- Teachers Research! book: <http://resig.weebly.com/teachers-research.html>
- Teacher-Researchers in Action book: <http://resig.weebly.com/teacher-researchers-in-action.html>



# References

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- Edwards, E. (2013). Applying action research to investigate the use of goal setting for ESL writing. *English Australia Journal*, 29(1), pp.19-38. [https://www.englishaustralia.com.au/visageimages/colleges/Journal/EAJ29\\_1Final\\_web.pdf](https://www.englishaustralia.com.au/visageimages/colleges/Journal/EAJ29_1Final_web.pdf)
- Edwards, E. (2014). Action research in action. *English Teaching Professional*, 94, pp.52-54.
- Edwards, E., & Burns, A. (2016). Language teacher action research: Achieving sustainability. *ELT Journal*, 70(1), 6-15. <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/70/1/6>



# References (cont.)

- Edwards, E. & Burns, A. (2016). Action research to support teachers' classroom materials development. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 10(2),106-120.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2015.1090995>
- Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (Eds.). (1988). *The action research planner* (3rd ed.). Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press.
- Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An introduction to curriculum research and development*. London: Heinemann.



# Any final questions?



To get in touch:  
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**Thank you for attending today!**



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