

A little less aimless conversation, a little more action research

So what's the problem?

There is a gap between the research conducted on second language acquisition and language teaching. Put crudely, brainiacs aren't particularly interested in teachers and their classrooms and, likewise, the teachers aren't necessarily motivated to read stacks of academic papers, especially if they doubt their usefulness.

Right... and are they useful?

Well, yes! In this session, I focused on the speaking skill and found lots of interesting research which I then adapted into materials for the classroom. Here is some of the research we looked at regarding the speaking skill:

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|---|---|
| <p>Information Gaps</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students find them very motivating 2. Improves the students' self-esteem 3. Improves their speaking test scores | <p>Spoken Grammar</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Helps students manage the difficulties of real conversation 2. Coursebooks often lack real examples of this 3. Research suggests a high correlation between fluency and use of spoken grammar |
| <p>Pairwork</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Beneficial for students of all levels 2. Allows students to negotiate meanings 3. Different pairs, different conversations 4. Approaching students during pairwork will alter the conversation | <p>Preparation time</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Less silence and 'I don't know' responses 2. More students volunteer better answers 3. Students' academic achievement test scores tend to increase 4. Beneficial to teaching too |

So that's how we solve the problem, having teachers read the research papers?

That's one way, yes. But it might be even more fun to do it yourself!

Ah, and that's what this 'Action Research' is?

Indeed! It's when the teacher identifies an issue related to their own teaching and investigates it. Similarly, they may choose to investigate features of their classroom that they would simply like to know more about (exploratory practice).

Hmmm...and the benefits?

In the session we talked about the idea that paying closer attention to scientific research should help us improve our teaching and stop us from doing unhelpful things (e.g. so-called Learning Styles). It could also help us measure progress more easily. And hopefully it might help future-proof our jobs a little more too! Finally, *research* has shown that teachers participating in *research* were more likely to have a positive view of *research*!

Ok, ok, I've got it. **Research** is good. So where should I start?

Well, you could start with the resources I used to create this session...

- Thornbury, S. 2005 *How to Teach Speaking*. Pearson (An excellent starting point by the other 'Scott' in EFL teaching)
- Ur, P. 1996 *A Course in English Language Teaching: Practice and Theory*. Cambridge: CUP (A classic and comprehensive book of language pedagogy, esp. for newer teachers)
- <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4402/6fc058f4b8098f82904084d6ad0b0de320e1.pdf> (McCarthy's fascinating exploration into fluency and spoken grammar using corpus data)
- http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/briefs/apply.pdf (Smith, et al. A paper looking at the benefits and limitations of engaging with research)
- <http://www.ericdigests.org/1995-1/think.htm> (A paper looking at the advantages of wait time)
- <https://education.msu.edu/NCRTL/PDFs/NCRTL/ResearchReports/Rr955.pdf> (A paper looking at research and teachers' attitudes towards it)
- <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/100047/chapters/What-Is-Action-Research%C2%A2.aspx>
- <https://tinyurl.com/j3zte7t> (The relationship between SLA research and Language Pedagogy)
- <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Kayi-TeachingSpeaking.html> (More speaking activities)
- http://nus.edu.sg/celc/research/books/reit/vol9/no1/01to18_ellis.pdf (Creating an SLA course for teachers)
- <https://tinyurl.com/zd3ndvz> (Paper by Afrizal on the benefits of information gaps)
- <https://elt-resourceful.com/2012/04/25/the-wonder-of-wait-time/>
- <http://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2015/06/just-speaking-developing-student-speaking-skills/>
- <https://tinyurl.com/h785bmh> (Smith, et al. on the benefits of pairwork, including with beginners)
- <http://www.actionresearch.net/> (A website supporting and encouraging Action Research)
- https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/52-4_3_hilliard.pdf (A great article on Spoken grammar by Hilliard)

....or, I've got another idea!

You're going to plug something, aren't you?

Yes! A blog! Hear me out... Earlier this year, using a new, trendy professional blogging site, I started a publication as a follow-up to this talk. My intention is for it to be a place where: current research can be shared among teachers in a practical, digestible way; and where teachers can share their own classroom experiments.

Ooh, I'm sold! Where do I sign up?

Great! The blog's address is <https://medium.com/a-little-more-action-research>. As well as articles on Learning Styles, the Spanish 'shame' and Checking Understanding, I've put some of the activities from the session up there and on [facebook.com/alittlemoreactionresearch/](https://www.facebook.com/alittlemoreactionresearch/). If there is anything else from the session that you are interested in, or any questions you have, please contact me at scottdonald94@gmail.com. I would love for the blog to become a collaborative effort with posts from various teachers, so please get in touch if you want to get involved.



The following article is taken from the blog (medium.com/a-little-more-action-research)

The worst question in teaching (Part 2 — Five alternatives)

In [the last article](#), I described 'do you understand' as the worst question in teaching and stated that there are a variety of better methods for checking students' understanding. This article will look at five alternatives to this question.

The questionnaire

The 5 techniques below were selected for a questionnaire on how teachers check understanding in their classrooms (the results of which, we'll look at in the next article.) Various techniques for checking understanding were researched, but these 5 were chosen due to the range they offered in terms of their likelihood of use, and their effectiveness as perceived by language theorists (this was determined through background research and initial conversations with peers).

We will now examine these 5 contenders, and how they can be applied to classroom teaching. For these explanations, I have chosen the dark, yet oddly disarming, lyrics of Sting and The Police.

1. Concept Checking Questions (CCQ)

This is when the teacher asks questions to reveal the core meaning of the target language.

*Oh, I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien
I'm an Englishman in New York*

Teacher: *Is Sting a creature from space?*

Student: *No*

Teacher: *Is he from New York?*

Student: *No, from England*

Teacher: *Does he have permission to be in New York?*

Student: *Yes, he says 'legal'*

Teacher: *Where would you be considered an alien?*

Student: *Hmmm, England?*

These are often closed (yes/no) questions, but may end in a more open question. They should ideally go from the most important elements of the definition, to the finer ones.

2. Personalisation

This is when the teacher uses the target language in a personalised example. This can then be followed up by a personalised question intended to check students have understood.

*I can't, I can't
I can't stand losing
I can't stand losing you*

Teacher: *In this song, Sting thinks he will be very sad or angry if the girl leaves him. So he is telling her that he 'can't stand', or tolerate, it. Something that I can't stand, is when people are walking in front of me, and they are walking reeeeeeally slowly. Sometimes they even stop right in the middle of the pavement! I hate it. It makes me want to shout at them, or push them over. Is there anything that really annoys you, something that you can't stand?*

3. Extension

This is when the teacher gives the students a prompt using the target language and students must finish the sentence to show they have understood.

Roxaaaaanne you don't have to wear that dress tonight

Teacher: *Sting is saying that it's not necessary for Roxeanne to wear the dress. She can choose to wear the dress if she wants, but there is no obligation. For example, I don't have to teach tomorrow, so I can...*

Student: *Have a beer in the morning?*

Teacher: *Exactly.*

4. Eliciting definitions/explanations from students

This is when the teacher tries to elicit the definition from the students. It is sometimes used by teachers as a delaying tactic when they have to clarify the meaning of a word on the spot.

I'll send an S.O.S to the world

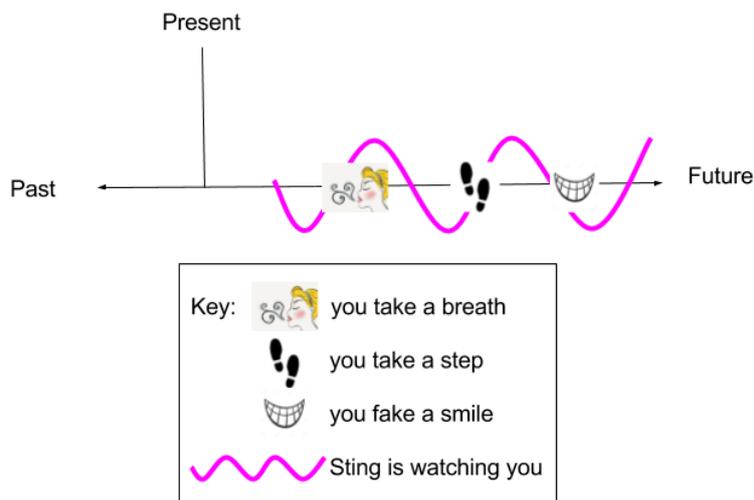
Teacher: *Does anyone know what an 'S.O.S' is?*

Student (teacher's pet): *Is a thing...what you do...when you are in a beach...in an iceland... aaand is a bad situation... and you need help.*

5. Timelines

This is often used with things like tenses or expressions relevant to time or verb tenses, e.g. future continuous.

Every breath you take...every step you take...every smile you fake...I'll be watching you



The teacher could then follow up with some CCQs. *Is Sting watching us in the past, present or future? (Future). Is he watching us for a short time, or a long time? (Long time). Is it ok to use this song at a wedding? (No).*

These five techniques are often used in conjunction with each other and there is obviously a certain degree of overlap with them. Nevertheless, they are five much better alternatives to simply asking students *do you understand*.

Now, this is all well and good, but do teachers actually use these techniques? And if so, which ones do they love, and which to they hate? Find out now, in the follow-up article:

<https://medium.com/a-little-more-action-research/the-worst-question-in-teaching-part-3-action-research-d56ff8boe811>