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Academic Paper

Help Yourself with Action Research:

**A glimpse into Action Research's theoretical foundation
followed by a practical example on
'How do I know the right balance
between teacher and student talking time?'**

eingereicht von:
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1. Introduction: What is Action Research and why do it?

Any textbook on scientific research will mention three pillars of science: objectivity, validity and reliability. When Kurt Lewin coined the term Action Research in the 1940s, he wanted to describe work “that did not separate the investigation from the action needed to solve the problem” (McFarland et al., 1993: 14). This definition of Action Research rattles the pillars of science because objectivity cannot be promised. The lack of a textbook definition of objectivity and the belief that amateurs would be at work were reason enough for scholars in the 1950s to condemn Action Research. Action Research, however, was not confused with unscientific work for too long. It regained popularity in the 1970s and 1980s by emphasising what was once before its apparent lack: the involvement of teachers in problems in their own classrooms (cf. Ferrance, 2000: 8; Borg, 1981: 313). What Action Research asks for is the investigation and analysis of a teacher’s own teaching, as this is “more likely to change [his or her] own practice” (Curey, 1953: 70). Practice is key to Action Research; it trumps scientific research designs in their applicability to solve educational issues (cf. Ferrance, 2000: 8).

Action Research can be viewed as a tool for professional development. Other tools for professional development like, for instance, teacher trainings and education workshops, often rather focus on teaching. Action Research, on the other hand, refines this focus by bringing the learner’s point of view to the fore. This naturally happens when teachers examine their lessons and methods themselves. Action Research often results in solutions only applicable to a particular situation and thereby becomes much more effective than prescriptions advised by *professional education researchers* giving teacher training or leading education workshops.

In the Journal of Staff Development, Heidi Watts gives away what she thinks about Action Research already in her article’s title: “When teachers are researchers, teaching improves” (1985). Watts believes that one can work best on problems identified by oneself and that to be “encouraged to examine and assess [one’s] work and then consider ways of working differently” (Watts, 1995: 118) is more effective and motivating than merely reading about suggestions in teacher handbooks that may seem far-fetched or unfitting.

The first part of this paper will give an overview of how to do Action Research in general. This overview must not be understood as an extensive and all-embracing manual, but rather as a glimpse into a rewarding concept of shaping and changing one’s lesson practice.

The second part will link theoretical aspects with a practical example. It will provide an attempt at tackling a novice's problem, that is, finding the right balance between student and teacher talking time in the subject of English as a foreign language.

2. Action Research in Theory: How to do Action Research?

Action Research can bring about desirable change and produce knowledge that can at least be applied to the *experimental* group, that is the class investigated. The question is, however, how to produce the knowledge bringing about this desirable change?

It is important to know that there is not *the* definitive one way of conducting Action Research. There is a plethora of handbooks available trying to map out what Action Research is about and how to best apply it. Eileen Ferrance's Action Research Cycle (2000: 9) combines numerous approaches and highlights what is central to most of these. Ferrance states five different phases of inquiry, which can be viewed in the figure below (cf. fig. 1).

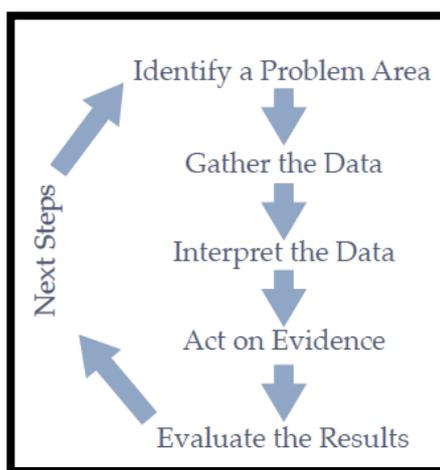


Fig. 1: Action Research Cycle (cf. Ferrance, 2000: 9)

2.1. Identifying a Problem Area

The first step is at first sight the easiest, but can appear to be tricky. Identifying a problem area means finding a research question: What do I want to analyse? What do I regard as problematic? Where would I like to improve? What would I like to see changed? The research question must be concise and should not be of a polar kind, i.e. being merely answered with yes or no. This first step is complex and demanding because whatever problem will be identified, it needs a specific and measurable component to guarantee some kind of outcome. Since the outcome shall be something the teacher can affect, it is best to investigate issues over which teachers have influence.

It is also in the teacher-researcher's interest to choose an issue that is "quite narrow in scope. [...] [L]arge-scale, complex issues are probably best left to professional researchers" (Fraenkel et al., 2012: 593). The research question should not be global, like, for instance, "Is inquiry teaching more appropriate than more traditional teaching?" (ibid.), but rather focus on smaller fractions of one's own teaching. It is more suitable to ask: 'What teaching method has students learn more vocabulary?' The former on inquiry vs. traditional teaching is without doubt important and an interesting question, "but too broad for easy resolution with a single classroom or teacher" (ibid.), who is the researcher as well. The latter, though, is aimed at a specific learning outcome (vocabulary), can be affected by the teacher (teaching methods) and seems to be a feasible question for an investigation in one's classroom.

The following steps of the Action Research Cycle require time and effort from the teacher-researcher. It is therefore not a simple trivial aspect that interest in the topic is crucial to keep up the work and not lose focus.

2.2. Gathering the Data

If the research question seems worthwhile, the process can continue. The second phase is collecting data. At this point, it is also necessary to think about the students' involvement in the process. There are plentiful means of collecting data like, for example, interviews, questionnaires, student diaries, audio and video recordings. All of the examples require the students' approval, may it be from a legal or motivational point of view. It is not wrong to fill students in on the fact that the teacher would like to see his or her lessons improved. Quite the contrary is the case: Students are more likely to see the benefit of the extra effort. This can become quite important when gathering data means for the students to complete a form at the end of every lesson. How far students need to be informed on what is observed needs to be in balance with the risk of falsifying the data. Over a longer period of time, however, falsification will inevitably wind down.

Collecting data for the teacher-researcher always means an extra effort, rarely compensated with time or monetary means. That is why many teachers shy away from trying out what Action Research has to offer. To keep the effort within a feasible realm, it is, according to Klaus-Börge Boeckmann (2009), important to ask oneself the following three questions:

- 1) Does the data I am going to collect fit my research question?
- 2) Are teaching practice and the collection of data compatible to one another? (Can they co-exist? Are they in harmony?)
- 3) Can I, as the teacher, master collecting all of the data in addition to my function as a teacher? (cf. Boeckmann: 2009)

If all three questions can be answered positively, the teacher-researcher can continue with his or her work.

The introductory statement of this paper suggests that Action Research is not academic research in its classical sense. This is by no means to belittle Action Research, but important to bear in mind during the process of conducting this kind of research. Classic academic research wants to confirm or refute an initial hypothesis. The research question devised at the beginning of Action Research is of a different kind. Action Research does not necessarily seek confirmation or refutation of a hypothesis, but it is acceptable to “change [...] the initial understanding [...] during the [research] process” (Altrichter et al. 2005: 58). Herbert Altrichter and Peter Posch clarify that

[t]he researching teacher is interested not merely in confirming insights once they are gained, but in further development in depth and analysis of understanding. All actions – those that are primarily to do with teaching and those that relate to the research itself – can open new insights, no matter whether they happen at the beginning or at the end of the process (Altrichter et al. 2005: 58).

In Action Research, it is recommended to take the insights acquired on the way into consideration, make full use of and derive benefit from them.

Another argument against Action Research is its apparent lack of objectivity. Although the teacher is the researcher, objectivity does not need to be lost entirely. There are ways to increase the degree of objectivity. The ladder of interference (Argyris, 1985: 56; cf. fig. 2), for instance, exemplifies “the extent to which data are accessible to examination by people other than the researcher” (Altrichter et al., 2005: 72). The highest degree of objectivity will be ensured when collecting observational data, i.e. the ladder’s first step. Data that are accessible to observation are clear, precise and not as easily open to debate as an interpretation of a *message* would be, which is the case with the second and third step of the ladder of interference.

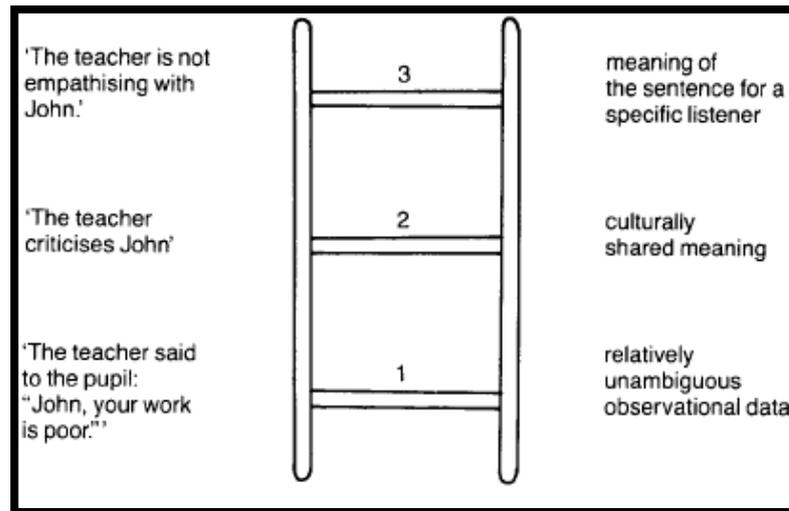


Fig. 2: The ladder of inference (Altrichter et al., 2005: 72)

2.3. Interpreting the Data

The next step is interpreting the data. Depending on time and what methods and instruments contributed to the collecting process, the amount of data retrievable can be extensive. First of all, all of the data need to be classified as qualitative or quantitative data. In academic research, both kinds of data require skills in statistics. If technical assistance or knowledge in statistics is available, there is no need to shy away from applying it. If, however, such statistic expertise is absent, an adequate interpretation of the data is still possible.

Qualitative data like, for instance, information stemming from interviews, portfolios, journals, video or audio recordings “can be summarized in table form [...], reviewed holistically and important elements or themes can be noted” (Ferrance, 2000: 12). With quantitative data, on the other hand, certain tendencies or trends can be located even without deeper knowledge on how to professionally analyse numerical data.

At this point, the teacher-researcher must ask him- or herself again what led to the initial research question. This helps to “[a]nalyze and identify major themes” (Ferrance, 2000: 12) and to detect a general direction in which whatever investigated is developing or changing. This, in turn, leads to the next step, that is: to act on evidence.

2.4. Acting on Evidence

The fourth phase of the Action Research Cycle is where it gets to the bottom of why Action Research is regarded as a valuable tool for professional development in education (and elsewhere). The steps before provide data on the present situation; a situation that is the very reason for conducting this research. The task now is to bring about slight changes to teaching methods, ways of targeting learning outcomes or other perhaps even smaller things that have been in use so far. Anything goes as long as it might have a positive effect on the students' learning behaviour. If the change, may it be substantial or hardly noticeable, is put into practice, the collection of data continues similar to the process of the second phase (see fig. 1). It is crucial to change only one factor at a time to be able to track down what has brought about variation in the new data compared to former insights.

This distinct stage of the process must be understood as a testing phase for theories on how “to improve learning and teaching in schools” (Altrichter et al., 2005: 151). It is likely that before arriving at the stage, the researching teacher will already have in mind adjustments to teaching methods or alike. Before embarking on applying all of these first thoughts, however, it is sensible to sit down and rethink the situation again and develop action strategies that fit those practical theories (cf. *ibid.*): What do I think will potentially improve the situation? What can I do to help? What can the students do to produce a better learning outcome? Under which circumstances can the desired effect be achieved? Can I change things that are usually taken for granted, for instance, the classroom environment? May this alter the present situation?

Action strategies do not necessarily need to include what is regarded as *fashionable* on the education market. It is reasonable to apply teaching methods or alter learning conditions that are conflicting to current trends of education research, or perhaps, what a more *experienced* colleague has suggested. This conflict is an opportunity because only when thinking and acting critically, the dissatisfying situation can be challenged and will have a chance to be transformed into a more desirable state. This is, however, not to say that what has been suggested elsewhere cannot be tested, too.

Once the plan of action is designed, the collection of data continues. At this stage, all data need to be correctly linked to whatever has been changed with great accuracy. This is to make sure that in the end the teacher-researcher can determine which action might account for the variation in the data (cf. Ferrance, 2000: 12). What must never change during this process, though, is the way of how the data is gained. This would otherwise falsify the results.

Words such as ‘change’ or ‘improvement’ “may give the wrong impression that only significant and radical breaks with existing practice count” (Altrichter et al., 2005: 156). The changes that are made in the teaching practice may not be visible at first sight and may seem apparently irrelevant. Often the research and analysis of one’s performance and behaviour “lead to corroboration of existing practice and underlying theories” (ibid.). Altrichter and Posch (2005) give an example of a teacher, who introduced herself to a new rule. The rule was to take a deep breath “whenever she felt that her explanation[s of terms or concepts in Social Sciences were] becoming nervous, jerky and difficult to understand” (ibid.: 155). Before applying this rule, the teacher noted that she is becoming tense when students indicate no understanding of the matter. As a result, she would explain things again and again, but “even less clear” (ibid.). The teacher says in an interview:

Whenever something unexpected pops up or I pick some sign that they are not understanding, I react immediately and abandon my lesson plan. I must learn to observe these things and store them away to think about later, without being put off my track (Altrichter et al., 2005: 154).

Taking a deep breath after picking up signs of students not understanding, or after anything happens she did not consider beforehand, helps the teacher to not lose focus of what she has planned. Taking a deep breath seems to be a minor ‘change’, but can, for some, lead to great ‘improvement’.¹

2.5. Evaluating the Results and Next Steps

If all data from both the present, unaltered stage and the experimental phase are gathered, a closer look is required to make a statement on the Action Research’s results so far. Is there a significant deviation in the data before and after acting on evidence? Do the data of the experimental phase show similar effects? Does one of the applied changes appear to be more effective than others? In other words: Is there a significant improvement?

In order to have Action Research help teachers improve professionally, an extensive phase of reflection and thought is necessary. To reflect on experiences, “whether these are experiences of teaching or A[ction] R[esearch, is] one of the most basic and essential aspects of [teachers’] development as classroom professionals” (Burns, 2010: 142). Reflection is and shall be present at all stages of an Action Research Cycle. At this point, however, it must be decided whether whatever has been investigated needs further research. An

¹ Altrichter and Posch (2005) provide a detailed look on Action Research. They explain every step with precision and give an explicit overview of suitable ways on how to gather data. Altrichter and Posch’s insights are most useful, however, when it comes to the numerous and diverse examples they are giving. Since this paper cannot include a great variety of examples of how Action Research is put into practice, it is recommended to read Altrichter and Posch’s *Teachers Investigate Their Work* for motivation and inspiration.

ideal situation would be, of course, if the issue the teacher “wanted to explore has been resolved to [his or her] satisfaction” (Burns, 2010: 144). But it may also be the case that the teacher has the feeling that further research is unlikely to help or that he or she simply cannot afford the extra time and effort to embark on another Action Research Cycle just yet.

As figure 1 (see page 4) suggests, the Action Research Cycle is regarded as never-ending. There will always be things that are worth to take a closer look at. But it is reasonably fair to take a break after an Action Research Cycle has come to some kind of ending and result. If, however, the fruits of one’s labour are sweet and tasty and one is still willing and determined enough to undergo another round, the next step would be rethinking the entire process and trying to either verify one’s results or to embark on an entirely different Action Research Cycle.

No matter whether finishing or continuing an Action Research Cycle, it is essential to rethink the entire process before taking any consequences or stating explicit results. The following questions are a selection of Anne Burns’ questions (2010) teacher-researchers should ask themselves before taking their apparent findings as the ultimate truth or even communicating their results, may that be to colleagues or in publications:

- How did I select my practical actions to improve my classroom situation?
- Why did I select these particular actions?
- How did the actions I selected work to improve the situation? For me as the teacher?
For my students?
- Where the actions effective?
- How have I collected data [...]?
- How did I use the data to illuminate what was working in my classroom?
- How did [my beliefs about teaching] affect the decisions I made as I did my research?
- How has my research deepened my understanding of my personal beliefs and values about [...] teaching?
- What were [my] personal reactions to the changes that resulted from [my] actions?
Where they positive or negative? (Burns, 2010: 143-5)

The last three questions indicate a risk that any teacher-researcher will include in his or her Action Research Cycle actions that he or she is convinced to bring about positive change. This does not have to be destructive to the process – quite the contrary is true, but it brings a critical issue to topic: Evaluating results can “challenge [a teacher’s] most dearly held teaching approaches or routines” (Burns, 2010: 144). In Action Research, teachers must understand the process as “the art of the possible” (Altrichter et al., 1993: 175). Action Research is an opportunity to work on one’s own problems and figure out ways to make a change; it is not a test of success or failure of teachers (cf. Burns, 2010: 144). Ac-

tion Research is a means of “trying to find the changes that make a difference, however small they seem to be” (Burns, 2010: 144). Finding out that one’s own approach to this or that issue does not bring about the desired change does not indicate a bad teacher. Realising this can be a confronting experience (cf. Burns, 2010: 144), but it can also mean a new starting point for one’s own professional development, which is, after all, what Action Research stands for.

3. And Action! Action Research in Practice: “How do I know the right balance between teacher and student talking time?”

After a short glimpse into the mere theoretical foundation of the work and progress of Action Research, the same structure will be used to give an example of what such a teacher-researcher project may look like for an English as a foreign language teacher. In accordance with the preceding theoretical framework, the following example is meant not only to illustrate what can be done in one’s classroom, but also to motivate interested teachers to become teacher-researchers, who actively work on their classroom issues and find solutions applicable to their matter in question.

3.1. Identifying the Problem Area

The fictional problem that will be identified in the following example is not so fictional after all. It is a long discussed and broadly analysed question how many students speak during a language class and how much of a lesson’s talking time is and shall be devoted to and performed by students, particularly in relation to the teacher’s part.

Studies of the early and late 1980s (Lörscher, 1983; Schönwälder, 1988), of the 1990s (Schiffler, 1998: 23) and more recent academic research (DESI in Helmke et al., 2008; Inamullah, 2008; Walsh, 2002: 4) come to similar results: Student talking time in relation to teacher talking time makes up on average 33 to 36 per cent of the overall talking time in a modern foreign languages classroom. In practice, this result means 15 to 16 minutes speaking time in a 45 minutes language class for a number of students well over 20, perhaps even 30. If all students were to say something in every class, each individual’s active oral contribution would not be longer than a few seconds, not even a minute.²

A committed and engaged modern foreign languages teacher will find him- or herself confronted with such numbers (and accusations) in like, for instance, further teacher train-

² This calculation does not count instances of group work where more students can speak at the same time.

ing, teacher workshops or educational research magazines. But then, such a teacher may think that these results are just numbers and do not count the students' opinion on what they think best for themselves. Some students may very well be less perceivably active than others and thereby granting extra talking time to their more *lively* classmates.

To have all students be active in class is a challenging objective. Yet, it may be true what the imaginary voice of the teacher from above argued, namely that some students – though not perceivably active, but still taking part – may be happy with this circumstance. But how can one be certain of this belief?

Regardless of the answer to this question, there is another matter to think about. Especially newly qualified teachers of modern foreign languages must find a balance between two maxims: giving authentic foreign language input vs. letting students produce foreign language output. Despite textbooks, novels, articles, audio books, video clips or other audio-visual media used in class, the teacher often remains the prevailing foreign language input to his or her students. This begs the question: How do I know the right balance between teacher and student talking time?

3.2. Gathering and Interpreting the Data

Before this question can be answered, the current situation of one's language classroom needs to be observed. A mere *impression* of the situation at hand is not enough. Such vague intuition and feeling is counterproductive in this case. Data is required to get a picture of what the students' take is on a desirable balance between their own and their teacher's talking time. The teacher-researcher must find or design an instrument, which can help in drawing such a picture that would be more valid than the teacher's subjective impression.

The instrument, whatever form it may have, must fulfil certain criteria in this example. Since it requires the students' attention, the instrument has to be as appealing as possible to the students. This means, for instance, that, if a questionnaire will be distributed, it must not take off too much time of the students and also of the language lessons in question. Hence, students cannot fill out a questionnaire of multiple pages after each lesson. That is why by answering only a few questions, students must be able to tell whether and to what degree they are thinking that they were not given enough speaking time in class, whether they are satisfied with the situation and all is well, or whether they would actually have liked to speak less in the class that has just finished.

The following figure (fig. 3) is what could be such an instrument. It is a brief questionnaire designed for German students learning English as a foreign language. The questionnaire gives students the opportunity to utter their opinion on a lesson they have just finished. They are asked to mark horizontal lines with a cross in accordance with their feeling towards four questions. The first and second question asks the students for their perceived and desired talking time. The next two questions ask the students to have a say about their perceived and desired values of their teacher's talking time in class.

Schüler-Fragebogen für den 1. April 2012

Code: Y1234M

Liebe Schülerin, lieber Schüler,

im folgenden Fragebogen darfst du anonym deine Meinung zum Unterricht äußern. Es geht aber nur um die eben unterrichtete Stunde. Bei den Fragen sollst du auf der Linie an der Stelle ein Kreuz setzen, wohin deine Antwort eher tendiert. Versuche beim Ankreuzen nur dein Gefühl und deine Eindrücke dieser Unterrichtsstunde zu berücksichtigen.

Vielen Dank für deine Unterstützung!

1. Wie viel Englisch hast du in dieser Stunde gesprochen?

gar nicht _____ sehr viel

2. Wie viel Englisch hättest du gerne in dieser Stunde gesprochen?

gar nicht _____ sehr viel

3. Wie viel Englisch hat dein Lehrer in dieser Stunde gesprochen?

gar nicht _____ sehr viel

4. Wie viel Englisch hätte dein Lehrer in dieser Stunde sprechen sollen?

gar nicht _____ sehr viel

Fig. 3: Questionnaire designed for German students learning English as a foreign language by Kampa, 2012

The strong points of this questionnaire are that it is short, can quickly be handed out at the end of a lesson and can make a fair statement on the students' perceptions and desires of teacher and student talking time. The teacher-researcher only needs to take a glance at a questionnaire, to see whether his or her student would have liked to have had the opportunity to say more, less or was just happy with the lesson and his or her active oral participation. That would already be enough to get a clearer image of one's students' perceptions and desires. If, however, a teacher is interested in finer nuances of his or her students' opinions, basic statistical knowledge can be applied.

To get numerical data out of the four crosses on each questionnaire, the four scales can be divided into any amount of equal parts. As this questionnaire has already been tested in the author's Master Thesis³, an amount of 19 equal parts can be recommended. If it is decided what will be a suitable length for a part, the questionnaire can be printed on a transparency – including the defined sections of each scale. The result is a grid that can quickly serve as a means to literally measure the students' perceived and desired values for their own and their teacher's talking time.

If a student's value for perceived talking time is deducted from the student's value for desired talking time, the result is a value describing the student's contentment. A difference above zero indicates a higher desire for more talking time. A difference below zero points to the reverse effect: The student would like to have talked less in this particular class. If the difference matches zero, or is very close to it, desire and perception correspond to each other, or, in other words, the student is *content*. The benefit here is that such a numerical analysis cannot merely say whether a student is content or not, but also determine a student's degree of contentment or dissatisfaction.

There is much room for definition, which is concerning both the grid and degree of contentment. But no matter what the definition will be, with the help of this questionnaire, teacher-researchers can identify their students' contentment on talking time and start acting on its evidence.

3.3. Acting on Evidence and Evaluating the Results

If interpreting the data leads to the result that the students are generally dissatisfied with their talking time, it is time to act on evidence. In this case, it does not matter whether or not their dissatisfaction stems from too much or too less perceived talking time. Both

³ This is not meant in anticipation of the upcoming Master Thesis, but as a pretesting phase to it.

are reason enough to try out anything that is meant to see this changed. At this point, it is crucial to keep on handing out the questionnaire, comparing its results with former lessons and, particularly, coming up with new ways of teaching or handling this issue. The reasons for the students to feel either way are diverse and plentiful. It can, for instance, be the topic which is not to their liking and hardly motivating to speak at all. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the student, who thinks so, would not like to speak more in class. But when dealing with this topic, it could be that he or she prefers to say nothing. This may sound harsh, but such results are what teachers can get from working with questionnaires or other instruments collecting data on their students' opinion.

Action Research means also to be open to results of this kind. Teachers must not feel discouraged or despaired when realising that what they had hoped was working well turns out to be the core of the problem. It is essential to sit down and think about alternatives and strategies that help change this problem. Colleagues or professional advice in teacher handbooks can be of help. The teacher can then apply and test any of those alternatives while keeping on collecting data from the continuously distributed questionnaire.

Applying this instrument and acting on its acquired evidence will not only help newly qualified teachers to answer the question about an appropriate balance of student and teacher talking time. Teachers will find more purposes in which the questionnaire discussed above can be of great support. Despite a better understanding of one's students' perceptions and desires about their own talking time, teachers, no matter what level of proficiency, can use the questionnaire to test new methods of teaching involving talking time. The greatest advantage of the questionnaire is that it quickly shows a tendency towards one of the three possible impressions students can have in this respect: 'I would have liked to have had the opportunity to say more in class.', 'I was happy with my participation today.' and 'I would have actually liked to see me less active today.'

Ideally, the teacher-researcher will eventually find some methods that appeal to his or her students' desire. Students may find this or that teaching method better regarding talking time, but may as well prefer other teaching approaches furthering reading and writing skills. The applicability of this questionnaire and its results are rich and diverse. Testing can hypothetically go on forever.

3.4. Some Problems and Solutions

Whilst in theory, testing can go on forever, the continuous confrontation with a questionnaire at the end of every lesson can and will be tiresome. In spite of the fact that the questionnaire presented above is short and both easy to fill in and quickly analysed, such a phase of collecting data and acting on its evidence cannot be endured for very long. To ensure that students do not boycott one's Action Research approach it is recommended to inform them about the project and its anticipated length. A beneficial side effect is that this forces one to keep up with the structure of the Action Research Cycle.

In the top right corner of the questionnaire a code is given (see fig. 3). The code was used to guarantee anonymity in the author's study. But since in Action Research the teacher is also the researcher, the teacher cannot give out specific codes to students for later analysis. What the teacher-researcher can do, however, is have their students come up with their own code, which they would have to keep in mind. The latter hints at just another problem, namely that the students might fail to remember their invented code. Yet, it would give at least a chance of anonymity to students. Another attempt to guarantee anonymity, in this case even a feasible chance of anonymity, is by looking at the collective development of the entire class rather than individual processes. This demands no codes. The class is viewed and analysed as a whole, which is perfectly apt and will lead to valid results as well.

4. Conclusion

The journey one embarks upon when undertaking an Action Research Cycle is a passage full of surprises, unexpected realisations and discoveries of new or revived teaching methods. The greatest advantage of this journey is its deep insight into one's own teaching, guided by a structured, yet flexible investigation. The attitude of Action Research is *help yourself*. The tools are out there. And when teachers have “the courage [...] and the willingness to take the time and energy to begin making small changes within [their] circle of influence” (Kalmbach Phillips and Carr, 2010: 179), they will become teacher-researchers, who will find out about what a particular group of students need in order to become (more) successful in learning.

The journey is the reward, could be the motto of Action Research. What teachers find out about their students and themselves lies not only in its results or obtained numerical data. Results and data can very well lead to fine approaches and a positive development of one's own teaching, but the mere fact that teachers sit down and re-think their classroom's situation will inevitably change something. That is what makes Action Research such a great tool for professional development in education: No matter what I will find out, I will be deeply engaged with all learning processes I can imagine for a longer period of time and review *myself* and how *I* influence my students.

As for the practical part of this paper, it is not important if teachers let their students speak more than what is the average student talking time in classes teaching modern foreign languages. This is not a mere quantitative issue. What is important to know, however, is whether one's students have a desire to talk more in class or what they think about their teacher's talking time. Applying this questionnaire in an Action Research Cycle adds a new dimension to the quantitative analysis, that is: describing the quality of certain teaching methods in respect to student and teacher talking time.

With the help of the presented questionnaire, teachers can come closer to an answer to the question: *What* is the right balance between teacher and student talking time (in a certain setting)? The question in the subtitle of this paper was, however: *How do I know* the right balance between teacher and student talking time? The answer to this question, and any other of this kind, was given right at the beginning of this paper. Action Research presents teachers with a professional tool to analyse and investigate their own teaching. Some may say, the teachers' involvement in their own classroom may rattle a pillar of science that is *objectivity*. But the pillars of science will stand solid and strong when students benefit from what Action Research has to offer to teachers, that is the advice: *Help yourself!*

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