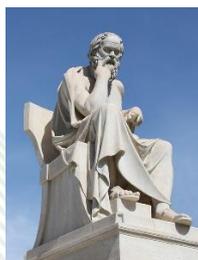


A guide to development of a research question

Marianne Jacquin

All beginnings are difficult, but each beginning is filled with a magic....: From topic to research questions.

A block of granite before the sculpture takes shape. From raw material to a work of art....



Starting out

How can I start my action research project (ARP)? What are the characteristic starting points for an ARP? How can I find a starting point and how can I formulate my thoughts? What are the criteria for choosing a research question? How can I clarify the starting point? What is a good research question? Which concrete instruments are available to help me get started?

1. What can I develop and research?

As a language teacher you will most likely have experienced one of the following situations. You have thought hard about finding and introducing a method to encourage your learners to speak in the language classroom. Instead of carrying out the dialogues as suggested, your students write down the dialogues word for word and the “spontaneous” speaking situation is transformed into a tedious writing task.

2. Discrepancy experiences

Or maybe you are convinced of the benefits of co-operative forms of learning, but have observed that your learners do not really work together or take advantage of the setting to chat. Or perhaps you ask yourself why your learners do not use the vocabulary list you had intended as a support or why they see this a form of pressure. Such experiences are discrepancy experiences.

- In the first case the discrepancy is between the planning, your expectations and the reality in the classroom;
- In the second case, the discrepancy is between an idea of values or an aim and the situation; and in the third case between the ways in which several people see the same situation (teachers, students).

Naturally, there are challenges which teachers face at school every day. Certain topics in the curriculum are complex and difficult to teach, students are difficult to motivate, there are problems with a class or a particular learner. Or there is a puzzle that you would like to solve, there are surprises that you would like to understand. Or you are interested in a particular issue: you would like to experiment with a new method for reading comprehension, enhancing the way you organise group work or testing new materials.

These discrepancies are the starting point for formulating action research questions and will help you to decide on the orientation of your research.

3. The orientation of the research

Here are some examples

- *Goal orientation*: taking a more global reflection on your role as a teacher you might question aims in your language classroom.
- *Innovation orientation*: experimenting with forms of teaching that are new for you, to implement new ideas.
- *Method orientation*: questioning your teaching methods in general and looking for new approaches to make the content more interesting.
- *Time orientation*: developing and trialling new forms of time management.
- *Material orientation*: reviewing the course book or other materials.
- *Media orientation*: updating your approaches to using media in the classroom.
- *Learner orientation*: finding ways of motivating a class or individual learners.
- *Collegial orientation*: working more intensively in a tandem or in subject groups and to develop questions of professional development together...
- (Adapted Hermes, 2001: 63)

The core of the first phase is finding a research theme or a possible research question. **Documenting** such a process is always useful, i.e. noting all sorts of thoughts, observations and ideas about your theme and your research question, thus supporting reflection. Here is a range of processes and sources of inspiration, e.g. the research diary (see overview of instruments).

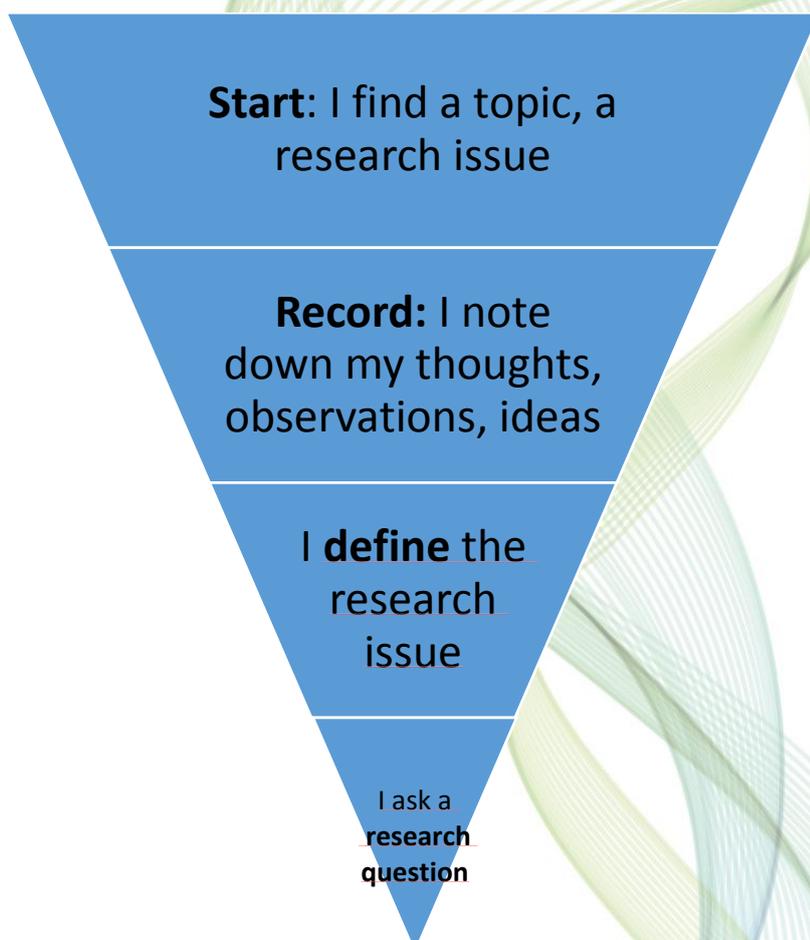
4. How can I get going in a concrete way?

Important steps

In the previous sections, we have seen which possible starting points there are for an ARP and which can give direction. These general hints and examples illustrate the core of the first phase, finding a research theme or the idea of a possible research question. **Documenting** such a process is always useful, i.e. noting all sorts of thoughts, observations and ideas about your theme and your research question, thus supporting reflection. In order to do this we have assembled a range of processes and sources of inspiration, e.g. the research diary (see overview of instruments).

Important steps

Narrowing down the question



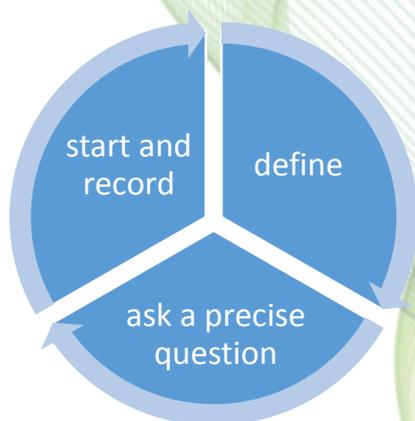
An example

You have seen that your students approach reading tasks with a low level of motivation and self-confidence. They stumble over unknown words and complain that they are understanding very little. As the teacher you would like to understand the reasons for this better and to make changes. Such questions arise:

- What are the reasons for this pattern of student behaviour?
- Does the *problem* concern all learners?
- Are learners facing problems with all texts?
- How do effective learners approach the reading tasks?
- What was my approach up to now?
- Which other methods are available?
- What might be the view of colleagues, instructors, the literature.... about the situation?
-

The aim of the process is a gradual pinning down of the research question

Step one



How to reach the question

Step 1: Discovering an area of interest and recording thoughts and observations.

- **Global: Reflecting on your teaching**
 - Brainstorming & written reflection
 - Evaluation of competences (EPOSTLE)
 - Thoughts on what constitutes good teaching
 - Creative exercises
 - Reflecting on the reflection process
- **Focused: Day-to-day reflection**
 - Planning a classroom sequence
 - Evaluation
 - Working with new learning materials
 - Teaching diary (see corresponding rubric (documentation of reflection, p. 47)
 - Recording a lesson & associations

Step 2: Clarifying & defining the area of interest.

- Analysis conversation
- Discussion with critical friends
- Graphic reconstruction
- Sequencing experiences
- **Explaining similar situations**
 - Discussions with colleagues
 - Reading subject literature

Step 3: Asking precise research questions

- **Questions about the research question**
- **Asking targetted questions**

Finding a topic

The concrete search for a research topic or question may begin with global considerations on your teaching:

- asking basic questions about your role as a teacher or the quality of your teaching - i.e. goal or innovation orientation

- reflections closely related to your everyday duties as a teacher or which are integrated into your teaching activities.

Even if you have little idea about your research question, both approaches are appropriate.

Here are some possible approaches

- Global: Reflecting on your teaching
- Brainstorming & written reflection
- Evaluation of competences
- Thoughts on what constitutes good teaching
- Creative exercises
- Reflecting on the reflection process
- Focused: Day-to-day reflection
- Planning a classroom sequence
- Evaluation
- Working with new learning materials
- Teaching diary (see corresponding section)
- Recording a lesson and associations

•Step 2: Clarifying & defining the area of interest.

a list of Instruments for finding questions:

- Global: Reflecting upon teaching
- Brainstorming process, written reflection
- Questions about your teaching (Hermes, 2001: 62; 64)
- Written reflection (Altrichter & Posch, 1998: 49)
- The paradoxes of the everyday teaching routine (based on Schart & Legutke, 2012: 44)
- Creative exercises: (Altrichter & Posch, 1998: 48)
- Stocktaking – Areas of competence – self-evaluation (EPOSTL)
- Routine (Hermes, 2001: 51)
- Teaching methods (Hermes, 2001: 56)
- Competence areas (Hermes, 2001: 58)
- Reflection processes (Hermes, 2001:53)
- Exercises on good teaching

Reflection as part of a daily routine

- Planning a classroom sequence
- Evaluating learners
- Working with new learning materials
- Teachers' diary
- Recording a sequence & keeping a memory log (Memory log)

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