

# 1 Why action research?

## 1.1 Aim of this book

As professional people, most teachers would accept that our expertise should progressively develop as we continue in our chosen occupation. My aim in this book is to demonstrate a particular strategy for accelerating and enhancing that kind of development, with special reference to language teaching.

This strategy is basically a way of reflecting on your teaching (or teacher-training, or management of an English department, or whatever it is you do in ELT). It is done by systematically collecting data on your everyday practice and analysing it in order to come to some decisions about what your future practice should be. This process is essentially what I mean by the term *action research*. In this first chapter, I am going to try to locate action research within the context of professional development.

## 1.2 Professional development

The value that is placed on ‘experience’ in most job-descriptions shows that the expectation of improvement after a period of practice is true, not just of professions, but indeed of a wide range of other employment. However, in some jobs, the expectation may be that the process of professional development levels off after an adequate level of competence is reached. This may be after a shorter or longer time, depending on the complexity of the tasks involved in doing the job, the aptitude of the person engaged in those tasks, and other factors. People working in a profession like teaching, on the other hand, may have more demanding expectations of themselves and their colleagues, because they regard the process of professional development as continuous and on-going.

One of the qualities that we should therefore expect in the strategies that we consider for professional development is that these strategies should help us to turn the problems we face in our professional careers

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Excerpt

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into positive rather than negative experiences. In other words, how is it possible for us to turn our felt need for self-improvement into a challenging rather than a threatening process?

In fact, most of us tend to use a wide variety of strategies for our professional development, some formal, some informal. One informal but very effective strategy is discussions with our colleagues on classroom experiences or problems relating to specific students. This kind of ‘talking shop’ can have a whole range of useful functions: accessing useful background information, articulating possible solutions to everyday classroom problems, improving self-esteem, relieving tension, and so on. A very different kind of activity (much less common!) is reading professional journals for ideas and suggestions. Perhaps at this point you might wish to reflect on the ‘strategies for professional development’ that you currently use, or have used in the past.

#### PERSONAL REVIEW 1.1: Strategies for Professional Development

What are the strategies, formal or informal, that you either as a matter of policy or perhaps almost unconsciously use for your professional development? (I am thinking of things like attending conferences, reading professional journals, etc.) How useful/helpful do you find these ‘strategies’? (Use a scale of 1–5, where 1 = not really useful/helpful and 5 = extremely useful/helpful.) How congenial do you find these strategies? In other words, do they come easily to you, or does it take a real effort of will to embark on some of these strategies? (Use the same 1–5 scale, where 1 = least/worst and 5 = most/best.)

	Strategy	Useful?	Congenial?
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			

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## 1.3 Commentary

How many different strategies did you come up with? Were the six spaces sufficient, or did you want to list more? There are many possibilities, of course. You may have listed the *membership of a professional association* as one of your strategies. This has many of the advantages of *informal discussions with colleagues*, and in addition a wider scope for social interaction. Membership of an association may or may not go along with *attendance at conferences*. If you listed this, you may have found it difficult to grade, since conferences can vary so much in their impact upon one. *Departmental meetings* and *membership of working parties* can also be very positive or very frustrating experiences, partly depending on one's relationships with the colleagues involved! *Evening/week-end/twilight* (i.e. after school) *classes* can also vary widely on their effectiveness and congeniality. Taking up *new challenges*, for example by career moves from one post to another, is another way in which many people expand their professional expertise. There is also, of course, *private reflection*: sometimes we do our best professional thinking while silently driving to or from our place of work, or while reading a book on some aspect of language teaching.

There is clearly a wide range of possibilities, and as I have already noted, the aim of the present book is to extend that range of possibilities still further.

## 1.4 Areas for development

Some teachers tend to be very self-critical – sometimes too much so. But this is better than being totally complacent, since self-development will never take place without the perceived need for it. Self-awareness of potential areas of improvement is therefore helpful provided it goes along with a reasonably good self-image. The leap into the unknown is unlikely to take place unless it can be done from a secure and stable platform of self-esteem. In this spirit, let us attempt two further 'Personal review' sections.

Just because something is a 'strength' does not mean, of course, that it need not be developed further – particularly if it is an important or 'key' strength in your professional repertoire. This point should be remembered when we turn to our next topic.

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**PERSONAL REVIEW 1.2: Strengths**

Pick six areas of your professional competence which you feel are strengths of yours. The figure 'six' is quite arbitrary, of course, but go on – stretch! (If you have more than six – write them all down. Don't be modest!)

If you are working in a group and you feel this task is a little too 'personal' then set yourselves this task: What are the teaching strengths that you would say are most common among the teachers that you know?

Can you rank them in importance? (Or, alternatively, put an asterisk beside the key strengths.)

	Professional strengths	Rank/importance
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

**1.5 Increased effectiveness**

The next 'Personal review' section should be easier because it is concerned with areas of our expertise that we feel could be improved. In my experience, teachers and colleagues in the education field generally, are much more conscious of such areas than they are aware of their strengths. I would like you to imagine that you wish to become a more effective teacher, inspector, adviser, administrator, project organiser, head of department, teacher-trainer – or whatever. The 'Personal review' section will also ask you to think of the possible application of action research to these areas of concern.

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#### PERSONAL REVIEW 1.3: Areas for Improvement

Use the chart below to make a list of, again say, six areas in which you think you could be more effective in your work. The areas can be very general (e.g. keeping discipline) or very specific (e.g. finding interesting topics for composition tasks).

As before, if you are working in a group, this task may be a little too private. In that case ask yourselves this question: In your experience, what are the areas in which most teachers could be more effective than they are now?

When you have done that, go back over the areas you have listed, and ask yourself if there is any serious possibility that 'research' (whatever you understand by that term) is likely to be of significant help to you in addressing some of those concerns. If you think it is, put a tick (✓) in the final column of the chart.

	I (most teachers) could be more effective if:	Would research help? (✓)
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

### 1.6 Commentary

Since I don't know what you put, let me give an example of a statement that many teachers have made in doing such an exercise: 'I could be more effective if I had more time to prepare my teaching.' This is probably a sentiment that many of us would share!

Putting to one side, for the time being, the issue of 'research', let us just look at this statement in terms of some questions it might raise:

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- How much time do I currently spend on school work out of class?
- Is that a rough estimate? If so, how could I make it more accurate?
- How much of that time is spent on preparation (as distinct, from, say, correction)?
- Have I any idea of how these figures compare with my colleagues?
- Are there any ways in which class time could have been used for preparation without reducing the effectiveness of my teaching?
- Have I discussed this with my colleagues at all – have they any ideas?
- How about my use of time generally? Would I say it was efficient?
- What do I know about time management? Have I read any books on time management. If so, what do I think of them?

Please note two things about these questions which make them useful questions to ask. Firstly, they relate to your *personal practice* – so the answers ought to be relevant. Secondly, they are *answerable*, even if occasionally the answer is a matter of judgement rather than fact.

These questions might be of much greater interest to you if they applied to one of your own areas of concern. The next ‘Personal review’ section gives you an opportunity to do this. Just in case you haven’t been able to think of a ‘suitable’ topic, the ‘Personal review’ section includes suggested areas of concern which you can use if you prefer.

#### PERSONAL REVIEW 1.4: Generating Questions

Take one of the areas that you have specified in PERSONAL REVIEW 1.3 and see whether you can generate some questions on the topic. Alternatively, you can try one of these areas, which have been suggested by other teachers:

I could be a more effective teacher if:

1. I could keep better discipline
2. I knew a wider range of teaching techniques
3. I didn’t have to follow such a tightly-specified syllabus
4. I had more teaching resources
5. I wasn’t so disorganised

Note: if you have trouble generating questions, try relating the topic to the question-words *Who/Whom?*, *What?*, *Why?*, *Where?*, *When?*, *How?* Remember to ask questions that are *personal* and *answerable*.

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### 1.7 Commentary

You were asked to make up questions to this ‘Personal review’ section which were ‘personal’ (i.e. specific to your own professional practice). However, just as a check that you are on the right track, I would like to show how questions could be generated from one of the given topics. Let us take the first one (*I could be a more effective teacher if I could keep better discipline*). This topic could generate questions like these:

- *When* have I experienced indiscipline this session?
- *What* form did the indiscipline take?
- *How* did I react?
- *Did* I react appropriately, or not?
- *How* should I have reacted?
- *Who* was responsible?
- *Why* did the indiscipline take place? *What* were the immediate causes? *What* were the underlying causes?
- *What* is the appropriate strategy for me to take? In the short term? In the long term?
- *What* sources of help or guidance are available to me?

These are only some of the possible questions: others may have occurred to you. Asking the questions does not of course solve the problem. But even the act of writing the questions and perhaps writing out the answers may help to ‘objectify’ the situation and enable you to think your way through to a proactive plan of action (instead of merely *reacting* to problems as they arise). At the very least your questions should give you a range of options.

### 1.8 Inquiry

Let us briefly review where we have got to so far. It has been suggested that a continuous process of professional development is a rational and intrinsic part of the good professional’s life. The motivation for this development is often an interest in, or perhaps even an anxiety about, some aspect of our professional performance. We have seen that there is a wide range of possible activities that we can get involved in to develop our professional expertise.

One possibility which we have just been exploring is to isolate an area and ask ourselves some questions about it. This is not very far from what Cohen and Manion (1994) have called inquiry. *Inquiry* in its most basic sense simply means the act or process of seeking the answer to a question. So academic inquiry means seeking to answer academic questions. Some examples within ELT might be:

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- What makes a good ESP syllabus?
- How do you design good materials to develop listening skills?
- How should I teach the present perfect tense?
- What are the relative advantages of teacher-centredness and student-centredness?
- Is teaching English as a foreign language a form of linguistic imperialism?
- What are the processes by which someone learns a foreign language?
- How effective is task-based learning?
- What happens when people try to learn a language without the help of a teacher?

Notice that I have deliberately made these questions of very different types in order to show the range of questions that ‘inquiry’ can convey. Some of them (e.g. What makes a good ESP syllabus?) could be answered without collecting any *data* (facts) at all, but could be argued from certain principles (e.g. principles concerning the nature and function of ESP).

Other questions (like the last one: What happens when people try to learn a language without the help of a teacher?) are purely descriptive and any worthwhile discussion would have to be supported at some point by data recording the successes or failures of people trying to learn languages on their own.

Depending on the job we do within ELT, the answers to such questions might be quite important or completely irrelevant. But for someone, somewhere, any one of them may be a question worth answering, or at least attempting to answer, with reference to his or her particular practice.

Knowing what questions to ask, and how to ask them, is by no means as straightforward as it might appear, and this is an issue that we will have to return to later. In the meantime, let us have another look at questions that were raised about the ‘not enough time for preparation’ problem.

## 1.9 Research

Looking at these questions, you will notice that many of them relate to established *facts* (e.g. How much time do I spend on school work out of class? How much of that time is spent on preparation? How do these times compare with my colleagues?). Some have to do with collecting *views* and *opinions* of colleagues – what are their suggestions about preparation time?

Both these sets of facts and these opinions can form the raw data,



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which, after a period of reflection or analysis, we can use as a basis for our decisions on what, if anything, we are going to do about the problem we have identified.

This process of *data collection*, the setting up of a *database*, and the subsequent *analysis* of the data we have collected forms the core of what we call *research*. There are many other aspects of research, and other procedures may also be involved, but this process forms its essence. We see that, according to this definition, research is a special kind of inquiry, since not all inquiry is based on data collection and analysis. Some inquiry, for example, takes the form of pure reasoning from first principles and is especially common in disciplines like mathematics or philosophy. This form of inquiry, or something approximating to it, is also quite common in ELT. Many of the influential writings on methodology of teaching languages have been based, not on data about classrooms or language learners, but on deductions from principles of what constitutes good language teaching, or what is the appropriate philosophy for a teaching programme. So, we find that some national language teaching syllabuses specify that the syllabus should incorporate moral teaching in a systematic way. Other foreign language programmes contain elements designed to create mutual understanding between cultures, because this is felt to be a desirable pedagogic aim. And so on.

We have already used in the previous paragraph the expression ‘deductions from principles’: this kind of inquiry or investigation can be characterised as *deductive*. This is often contrasted with the *inductive* kind of inquiry which is derived from data collection and analysis (i.e. ‘research’ in our terms). It will hopefully be clear from what has just been said that *research* is here being viewed as being included in the term *inquiry*, just as, for example, *rose* is included in the term *flower*. I am labouring this point about the distinction I am making between *research* and *inquiry*, since *research* can be used with a wide variety of meanings, some of them very close to what I have here called *inquiry*.

### 1.10 Research, inquiry and professional development

By this time, you may feel that we have wandered quite a way from our starting point of professional development. Let me, therefore, try, to pull these issues together at this point.

I have elsewhere (Wallace, 1991) proposed a model for teacher education at the core of which is a process of *reflection on professional action*. I suggested that it was this process (called the ‘reflective cycle’) which provided the momentum for increased professional competence.

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In the present context, the process involved could be summarised by the representation in Figure 1.1.

The whole of the present book is essentially an exploration of certain ways in which the 'reflective cycle' can be managed. Putting it another way, it is concerned with providing 'tools for reflection'.

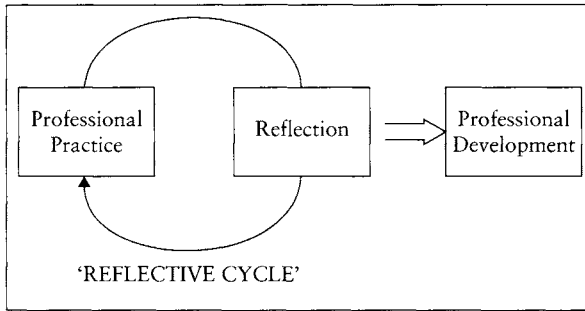


Figure 1.1 The reflective cycle and professional development

### 1.11 Research, inquiry and the reflective cycle

If you now look at Figure 1.2, you will see that I am suggesting that there is more than one way into the reflective cycle. This has to be the case, since the *process of professional development varies from one person to another*. We all have our own different kinds of professional experience, knowledge, background and expertise. Strengths and needs may vary from one individual to another. What may be of great importance to me may be totally irrelevant to you.

You will therefore note in Figure 1.2 that after 'Strategies for PD' there is a fork in the diagram. On the right-hand side are listed a few of the strategies which many of us have used (e.g. attending conferences, informal discussion with colleagues, etc.). Such activities very often give us information or ideas which cause us to reflect on our practice, and perhaps change it. Hence the arrow leading into the REFLECTIVE CYCLE box (which refers back to Figure 1.1).

### 1.12 Informal reflection

It has to be recognised, however, that not all these strategies are equally effective. Certain types of informal reflection can be more therapeutic than productive. Contemplating problems does not necessarily lead to

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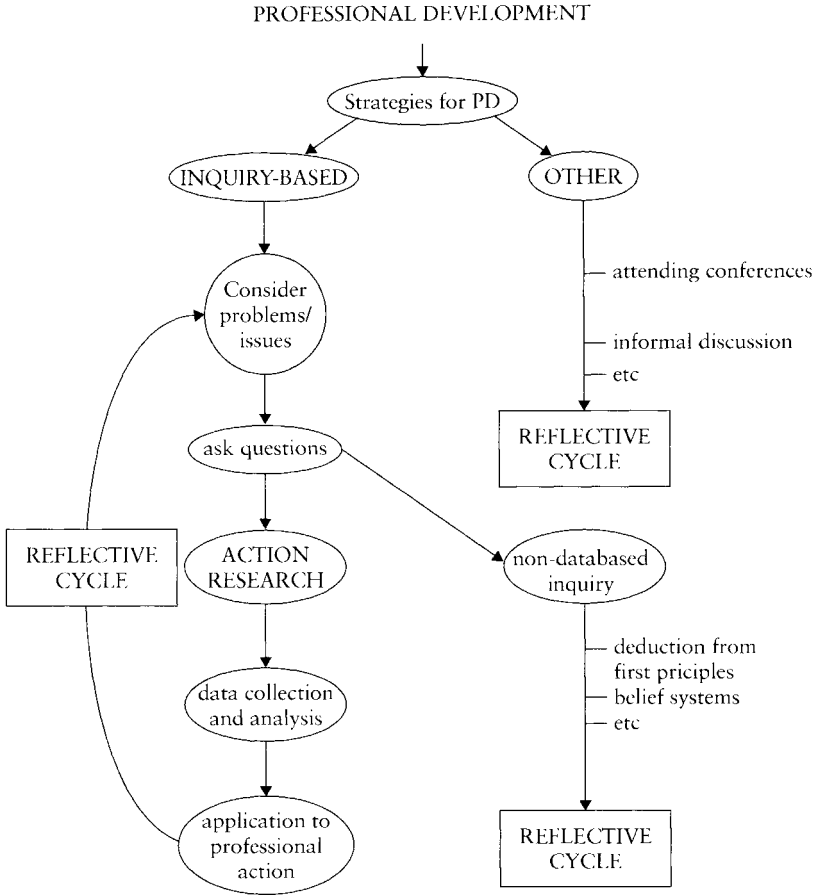


Figure 1.2: Professional development strategies (excluding 'conventional research')

solving them. Indeed, sometimes such a process is not even therapeutic: mentally rehearsing certain experiences can lead to an intensification of unpleasant emotions without suggesting any way forward.

**1.13 Structured reflection**

There is therefore a case for also having available as a source for our reflection certain systematic approaches and techniques which will help us to make sense of our experiences, and perhaps through such *structured reflection* come to a solution. It would be extremely naive, of course, to imply that all our professional problems are capable of 'solution'. Some can only be investigated; some we might have to walk

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away from; others we might have to live with. However, it is the received wisdom of those working in caring professions that most problems benefit from being aired and discussed in some controlled or structured way; and this should also be true of professional problems. It is suggested here that action research is a form of structured reflection. Since action research is the main concern of this book, it has been separated and positioned on the left hand side of Figure 1.2. To simplify the diagram I have excluded ‘conventional’ research from the diagram (see discussion below in Section 1.18).

#### 1.14 Action research is problem-focused

Some of our professional development is open-ended and relatively unfocused. We sometimes skim through professional journals just to see if there is anything interesting. We occasionally even enrol on training programmes without a very clear idea of what the criteria will be in terms of our professional development.

Action research is different from this in that it nearly always arises from some specific problem or issue arising out of our professional practice. (We looked at some possible problems of this kind in PERSONAL REVIEW 1.3.) It is therefore very problem-focused in its approach and very practical in its intended outcomes.

#### 1.15 Action research and inquiry

As we saw in PERSONAL REVIEW 1.4 and the discussion leading up to it, problems/issues give rise to *questions*. Generating questions gives us the lead into various possible areas of investigation. As we have already noted, action research is therefore a sub-area of *inquiry*, which simply means the process of answering questions by using various kinds of evidence in some kind of reasoned way.

If you look again at Figure 1.2 you will see that two kinds of inquiry are featured:

1. non-databased inquiry
2. research

#### 1.16 Research and non-databased inquiry

We saw earlier in this chapter that questions can be answered by a process of data collection and analysis (*action research*), or by other means (e.g. by arguing from general principles or by coming to certain

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conclusions according to certain things we believe – ‘belief systems’). Some questions can be answered by either of these processes, or by combining them, but other questions can be answered only by using one method or the other.

Any conclusions or ideas we derive from databased inquiry can also feed back into the reflective cycle. To take a very simple example, when faced with a particular problem, I may go to a more experienced teacher and ask his or her advice. I may reflect on the advice, and then decide to follow it implicitly, modify it, or do something else.

However since we are mainly interested in action research, we will not pursue this any further, and go back to the left-hand side of the diagram. But before that, let us just explore a bit further this business of how we can go about answering professional questions, by doing PERSONAL REVIEW 1.5.

#### PERSONAL REVIEW 1.5: Answering Professional Questions

Look back at the ELT questions that were listed in Section 1.8. Pick any one of these questions. How would you go about answering the question you have chosen?

More specifically:

1. What sort of evidence would you look for?
2. What procedures would you use to collect the evidence?
3. Would the evidence involve the collection of data or not?

To give an example: the answer to ‘How should I teach the present perfect tense?’ could be found to be appealing to an authority (e.g. checking up in a teacher’s book on methodology, asking a more experienced teacher), or by observing various teaching methods (a form of data collection), or by trying out various approaches and seeing how they work. Or you may be guided by certain principles/belief systems (e.g. ‘I don’t believe in the formal teaching of grammar, so this question really doesn’t make much sense to me’).

### **1.17 Action research and the reflective cycle**

Action research involves the collection and analysis of data related to some aspect of our professional practice. This is done so that we can reflect on what we have discovered and apply it to our professional

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action. This is where it differs from other more traditional kinds of research, which are much more concerned with what is universally true, or at least generalisable to other contexts.

This is a loop process, in the sense that the process can be repeated (reframing the problem, collecting fresh data, rethinking our analysis, etc.) until we have found a solution that satisfies us.

### 1.18 The status of action research

To some readers, it may seem that we have come a long way round to a statement of the obvious. I suspect that for many people, however, the role of action research as an activity for practising teachers is by no means obvious. It is likely that the attitude of the majority of teachers varies between indifference and downright hostility. So it has to be made clear precisely what is being argued for here.

It has been assumed here that it is natural, and appropriate, for teachers (like other professionals) to develop their expertise by reflecting on their practice. It is not being argued, however, that every teacher can be, or should be, a ‘researcher’ in any traditional sense of that word. This seems to the present writer to be an unreasonable requirement. As Wright (1992: 203) has noted: ‘. . . teachers may sense that they are being asked to take on yet more duties in addition to those which already burden them . . .’ As we have previously established, there are many avenues of professional development which different professionals will find more or less useful and/or congenial. It seems unduly constrictive to isolate one of them as a route that must be taken.

Action research has been proposed as an ‘empowering’ procedure. But, as Widdowson (1993: 267) has pointed out, if it becomes another top-down requirement, it turns into the reverse: not only is it an additional burden upon teachers, but it also creates a new kind of dependency on (non-teaching) ‘experts’. Various conditions have been laid down from time to time as to what constitutes proper action research. Some writers recommend that action research should be collaborative or team-based. Others suggest publication or at least sharing of the process and results of the investigation in some way. It has also been suggested that the same stringent requirements of *validity*, *reliability* and *verification* for conventional research should also apply to action research. (These terms will be discussed in Chapter 3, which deals with issues relating to the collection of data.)

If reflection is to be of any real value it must be valid (i.e. the data analysis must be relevant and appropriate). However, since the position being taken in the present book is that action research is primarily an approach relating to individual or small group professional develop-

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ment, the generalisability of the findings to other contexts will not in most cases be of primary importance. The important thing is that the processes involved are helpful to the practising teacher's reflection, irrespective of whether they can be verified by someone else.

Action research, in this definition therefore, overlaps the areas of professional development and conventional research, and for some practising teachers may well form a bridge between the two. The aim, however, is not to turn the teacher into a researcher, but to help him or her to continue to develop as a teacher, using action research as a tool in this process.

If you have identified some problems and you are not clear about the kind of data available or the method of collection, don't worry: this book is intended to help you with these problems!

### **1.19 Summary**

It is assumed that most language teachers wish to develop themselves professionally on a continuing basis. They have access to a wide variety of methods of doing this. One method is by reflecting on interesting and/or problematic areas in a structured way. In this book, we shall be looking at various ways of structuring this process of reflection through the systematic collection and analysis of data. This is what I have called 'action research'. Action research is different from other more conventional or traditional types of research in that it is very focused on individual or small-group professional practice and is not so concerned with making general statements. It is therefore more 'user-friendly' in that (for example) it may make little or no use of statistical techniques. The main function of action research is to facilitate the 'reflective cycle', and in this way provide an effective method for improving professional action.

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### PERSONAL REVIEW 1.6: Professional Problems and Available Data

At the end of this chapter, it might be appropriate to see if you can think of any problem areas in your professional life that might be tackled through collecting or analysing data in a systematic way.

'Problem areas' could cover a wide range of possibilities, for example:

1. problems of classroom management
2. problems of appropriate materials
3. problems related to particular teaching areas (e.g. reading, oral skills)
4. problems relating to student behaviour, achievement or motivation
5. problems relating to personal management issues (e.g. time management, relationships with colleagues/higher management)

These are only examples, and the topics given are probably too broad. Try to be specific.

*As before, if you are doing this as a member of a group, and do not want this exercise to be too personal, ask yourselves this question: What are the problems which an average teacher in our context might encounter or be concerned with? What kind of data might be available to him or her?*

	Problem	Kind of data that might be available and how it might be collected
1.		
2.		
3.		