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## Research Notes

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# Foreword

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Welcome to *Research Notes 71*, which presents a sample of the outcomes of the 2017 Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Scheme. The scheme supports the professional development of English language teachers and improved learning outcomes through the funding of small-scale research projects into teaching and learning. The scheme is open to any teacher working in schools or institutions who are members of English UK, the national association of accredited English Language Teaching (ELT) providers in the UK. English UK and their members strive to raise and ensure standards in all aspects of the student experience both inside and outside the classroom, promoting quality in everything they do. This pursuit of quality is reflected in their commitment to the Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Scheme.

Cambridge English is delighted to collaborate with English UK and get the principles and benefits of research out of academia and into the classroom. I hope that this issue of *Research Notes* inspires teachers to undertake their own projects. If you would like to find out more, watch Dr Fiona Barker and Professor Anne Burns present 'Getting to grips with action research for teachers' at IATEFL 2016: <https://bit.ly/2qwzDFD>.

# Practical inquiry in action

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## Introduction

Action research (AR) is systematic practical inquiry. Firstly, it is *inquiry* as it requires the investigation of an issue in order to better understand it. Secondly, the inquiry is *systematic* because in AR teachers work through planned cycles of implementation (e.g. trying out new techniques in the classroom) and evaluation (collecting information to assess the effectiveness of these new techniques). Thirdly – and this is why AR is so relevant to teachers – the inquiry is *practical* because it focuses on teaching and learning, and impacts directly on what happens in the classroom. AR, then, is an excellent way for teachers, through methodical classroom study, to develop a better understanding of some aspect of their work. Numerous published examples of AR by language teachers are available (including many examples in past issues of *Research Notes*) and in this article I would like to discuss two recent additions to this body of work that are being published in this issue of this journal. I will first summarise each article before commenting on the key features of AR that they illustrate.

## Movement activities for teenagers

In the first article, Daniela Martines presents an AR project on the theme of movement activities among teenagers. Daniela is an experienced teacher of younger children and values the role that movement-based activities play with this age group. She also teaches teenagers, though, and was curious about the extent to which movement activities would work with this older group too. This was the motivation for the AR study she reports here. Following a brief discussion of literature on the value of movement in education, Daniela describes the focus of her study, how she conducted it and her results. She was driven (as teachers doing AR should be) by a clear practical goal – ‘to deliver dynamic and motivating lessons in which students could have fun while they learned’ (p.10, this issue) and her research questions had strong pedagogical relevance – understanding how 12- to 17-year-olds engage with movement activities, and which activities they enjoyed. Such questions are very suitable for AR because they promote practical inquiry in the classroom and generate results which can inform teachers’ subsequent instructional decisions.

AR unfolds through cycles of planning, action and evaluation, and Daniela’s study had two cycles, which took place in two contexts that she worked in. In Cycle 1, Daniela experimented with different movement activities in two classes of Italian students. Cycle 2 took place with one class of multinational students. In Cycle 1, Daniela tried out a total of 11 movement activities (see Table 1 in her article) and six of these were tried out again in Cycle 2. In each cycle, Daniela collected different kinds of evidence to help her assess students’ engagement with and preferences among the

movement activities she was trying out. She made observation notes about student behaviours during the lessons and collected feedback from the students (individually, in pairs and in groups) on the activities they did. Daniela also explains the ethical arrangements she made for the study, ensuring that appropriate consent was obtained for the research activities she wanted the children to participate in.

In Cycle 1, Daniela's observations of how the students responded to the movement activities she used indicated that six of the activities stimulated more participation and that, in most of the activities, levels of enjoyment were high and inhibition was low. Daniela also focused on student interaction during the activities (most of which required students to work together) and discusses interesting relationships she found between participation (whether they were doing the activity as required, especially moving) and interaction (whether they were working with other students). Feedback from the students was also reported and this highlighted a number of factors that students liked and disliked about the different movement activities. While moving around was something that students liked, lack of space to do so was also a common dislike (this was noted both in the group feedback and the individual interviews).

In Cycle 2, Daniela narrowed down the list of activities she tried out (from 11 to six), mostly on the basis of those which were most preferred by students in Cycle 1. She also refined the tool she used for observing students and the way in which she collected feedback from them (this allowed her to collect more detailed responses). In terms of results, these supported those from Cycle 1 in indicating that the students engaged positively in the movement activities, though, as in Cycle 1, there were cases where students interacted (e.g. they spoke to one another) without, though, fulfilling the 'movement' part of the activity. Student feedback once more highlighted factors they liked and disliked in the movement activities. For example, doing activities outside the classroom was something students liked, but others said they disliked moving or that the time allowed for the activities was limited.

The article concludes with a discussion of the key findings to emerge from Daniela's AR. One overall finding was that 12- to 17-year-old students did generally engage positively with movement activities, though various factors were highlighted by the study which impacted on how the students responded. For example, one factor was how well the class know each other and the teacher, with higher levels of familiarity more conducive to student engagement. The discussion also presents a summary of the aspects of movement activities which may increase student engagement in them. 'Emotional response' was a key factor here, meaning that students engaged more in movement activities that they enjoyed. Movement itself was also an important factor for students as were opportunities for social interaction.

Daniela concludes her article with comments on some of the limitations of the study and on her experience of doing AR, which she describes as 'enriching' and something that has stimulated her to reflect more deeply on her work.

## Investigating student attention

John Parker's AR project was also motivated by a very practical issue he had observed in his teaching – a gap between students' expressed interests and their levels of attention during

lessons which have been designed specifically to address those interests. This led him to experiment in his classes with different ways of increasing student attention. His paper begins with a summary of relevant research on attention in education and second language learning, and then outlines the conduct of the study, its results and key learning points.

John started by asking his colleagues to provide input on how they recognise attention and lack of attention and on the strategies they use to maintain or restore student attention. For example (see Figures 1 and 2 in his article), eye contact, quality of responses and engagement with task were seen by teachers as indicators of attention, while inappropriate mobile phone use, lack of eye contact and unrelated side conversations were seen as indicative of lack of attention. This input highlighted a range of student behaviours that John could look out for while he was studying student attention during his own lessons. He did this with a group of adult students over 13 weeks, an extended period of time which allowed him to try out, evaluate and reflect on four different ways of increasing student attention.

In his classroom, John tracked attention in a 3-hour baseline lesson (i.e. before he introduced any new strategies) and found that one place where attention consistently dipped was when feedback was being provided after students had completed an activity. As a result, he decided to make feedback the focus of his first intervention aimed at increasing student attention. John describes how he introduced 'buzz groups' to create classroom interaction and movement during feedback, and reports that he observed lower levels of inattention among students as a result.

For his second intervention, John addressed another common indicator of inattention – inappropriate mobile phone use during lessons. He did not want to create negative feelings by banning phones but, rather, tried to integrate phones into a lesson by asking students to use online dictionaries to complete a spider diagram (Figure 4 in his article) around the root word 'job'. This time the results of John's observations were less positive and no reduction in the frequency of inattention behaviours was noticed. This prompted John to reflect on whether his adult students were accustomed and/or willing to make mobile phones part of learning in the classroom.

The third intervention involved playing low-level background noise as a way of creating a positive atmosphere while students were doing speaking tasks. John used the audio (from [coffitivity.com](http://coffitivity.com)) during a running dictation activity. Observations for this intervention pointed to reduced levels of inattention, though some students said in their feedback that they found the background noise distracting.

Finally, to reduce inattention when John was giving instructions orally, he decided to write out instructions prior to the lesson and to go through these with students on the interactive whiteboard. His observations here were that this technique did not result in a significant reduction in levels of inattention while he was giving instructions.

In concluding his article, John offers various reflections on what he learned. Inattention seemed more prevalent during the more 'mechanical' or 'instructional' parts of the lesson, and how to minimise inattention during feedback seemed to be a particularly good focus for further inquiry. The importance of variety in maintaining attention is also noted by John: students need exposure to different strategies with some element of novelty, because the repeated use of the same strategy for boosting attention will in time become less effective. One final learning point for John is the need to match attention-creating strategies with student expectations – if a mismatch between the two exists, results will not be as positive as hoped for.

## Characteristics of action research

Whilst distinct in their focus and approach, the two projects I have discussed here highlight several key features of AR (see Borg 2017 for a fuller discussion) and I list these below with brief comments on each.

### Teacher driven

Daniela and John did their projects as part of the Cambridge English/English UK Action Research Award Scheme. They did, as part of this scheme, receive support from a tutor, but decisions about the focus of their projects were entirely theirs. The teacher-driven nature of AR is one of its key features and reflects the view that teachers are best placed to identify issues relevant to their work that they would like to understand better. Teachers' core role in decisions about AR projects not only maximises the immediate relevance of these projects, but also imbues the process with a high level of teacher ownership.

### Pedagogical

As noted earlier, teacher AR is a practical pedagogical activity. Both Daniela and John examined an issue of immediate relevance to their teaching by implementing new techniques in their classrooms and assessing the impacts of those techniques on students. In both cases the teachers engaged with existing literature of relevance and used this to inform their studies. The core part of the process, though, was what they actually *did* in the classroom. The learning, too, that emerged from their work was also primarily pedagogical in nature (e.g. practical advice on using movement activities or maintaining student attention) rather than theoretical. A concern for understanding students was another feature of both projects that gave them a strong pedagogical orientation. It is worth noting here that classroom inquiry by teachers has been criticised for not going beyond an instrumental concern for immediate practical problems (Crookes 1993) but this practical focus is inevitably one of AR's most attractive features to teachers.

### Reflexive

It is easy to overlook this seemingly obvious point, but it needs to be noted that AR is a reflexive process in the sense that teachers study their own work. Input from external sources can be useful, such as the manner in which John surveyed his colleagues at an early stage of his project, but AR will always be inward-looking. Teachers thus seek to understand aspects of their own work (including their students) rather than making others (as is often the case in conventional academic research) the focus of the study. In AR, then, a teacher is both a researcher and a participant.

### Formatively extended

AR needs time to unfold. Daniela's study took place at two sites over two and a half months while John worked with his class for 13 weeks. There are good practical reasons for making AR an extended activity, one of them being that teachers will be busy with their normal teaching duties and will not have large chunks of time to dedicate to projects. However, the process of AR itself benefits immensely when teachers have time to plan, implement, evaluate and reflect over time.

It is also important to emphasise the formative element of AR, as learning at each point of the process can feed into subsequent decisions. Thus, for example, Daniela chose the movement activities to focus on in Cycle 2 based on what she learned in Cycle 1, while John's decisions about when in his lessons inattention was most frequent were informed by input from colleagues early in the process and a baseline observation of his own teaching. Both elements – being extended and formative – are central to the process of AR.

### **Integrated**

Given that teachers normally continue teaching a full workload while they are doing AR, it is important to integrate projects as far as possible into teachers' routine activities. AR which requires teachers to make large-scale and radical changes to their work is likely to be both unfeasible (in terms of workload) and disruptive (to the students and the school). Rather, small-scale interventions which can be incorporated into normal classes are more likely to provide the basis for feasible projects. Daniela taught as she normally would, with the addition of movement activities from time to time. John continued to teach his exam preparation class in the same way, except that he introduced four techniques for increasing student attention. As far as possible, too, student contributions to AR should be integrated into lessons rather than taking up learning time or making demands on students' time out of class.

### **Systematic**

The systematic nature of AR was noted earlier and this characteristic is very clear from the articles produced by Daniela and John. They went through a methodical process of planning (which included identifying a focus and developing some specific questions to address), choosing and implementing classroom interventions, gathering information to evaluate these interventions (data collection), and processing this information (data analysis). *Systematic* does not imply that the process is either linear or rigid; AR is flexible, as teachers make formative decision about what to do next. However, decisions are always made in a thoughtful manner.

### **Reflective**

The final characteristic I will note here is that AR is a reflective process, in the sense that it makes teachers think deeply about their teaching, students and professional development. AR does, of course, generate results, but an equally important dimension of the work is the thinking that teachers go through as they deepen their understandings of their work and question aspects of it that were previously taken for granted (Borg 2016). Daniela, for example, understood through her project that how students reacted to movement activities was not determined only by the activity itself. Various other factors, both physical and social (such as relationships among students) also played an important role. John realised, too, that giving feedback was an aspect of his teaching that students did not find engaging and this motivated him to explore that further. His reflections also made him aware that how students reacted to pedagogical innovations (such as using mobile phones to learn vocabulary) was influenced by their expectations (for example, of what lessons should be like). Both teachers clearly benefited from reflecting on their experiences in the way that a narrow focus on the results of their inquiries would not have allowed.

## Conclusion

My goal here has been to illustrate the nature of AR with close reference to recent projects completed by two English language teachers, now published in this issue. I hope readers will find that they are not only interesting but also that they demonstrate, in a way that some readers may find inspiring, the value that such inquiry can have for teachers and students.

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# Engagement in movement activities among teenagers

Daniela Martines Stafford House Summer

## Introduction

As an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher of mainly young learners, I have come to appreciate the positive effect that allowing students to move around during an English lesson can have on a class. When a class of very young learners loses focus and becomes restless, one of the few ways to re-centre them is to get them moving. After spending my first two years of teaching dealing with mostly under-10-year-olds, and faced with the prospect of branching out into teenagers, I found myself wondering whether these benefits could be transferable to this older age group and, if so, how to transfer them.

While a plethora of resources exists for movement games and activities for teaching younger children, there is relatively little literature concerning teenagers (12- to 17-year-olds). In addition, I had noticed that while some movement activities I used with teenagers were welcomed, it was difficult to engage the students in others. The uncertainty of what would work, combined with the pressure to teach the syllabus and prepare students for tests, led me to neglect this area, despite my underlying conviction that movement is good for happy classes. These circumstances prompted me to ask two research questions: 1) how do young learners between 12 and 17 years old engage with the use of movement activities in the EFL classroom?, and 2) which types of activities do these students tend to enjoy?

## Literature

### The brain–body connection

Research has highlighted the connection between movement and brain function; students who engage in regular exercise tend to outperform their less active counterparts (Bredal 2000) and recent medical research has shown that aerobic exercise enhances neuron growth in some areas of the brain (Kuczala 2015). Biologically speaking, movement increases heart rate and oxygen flow to the brain and so mental alertness is heightened after even brief periods of movement, such as changing places with another student.

The psychologist Piaget argues that 'action ... is fundamental to cognitive development' (Cameron 2001:3) and, before the age of 11, it is motor and hands-on activities which provide an effective platform for learning. Movement may also be a means by which children 'construct their understanding of the world they live in ... through physical activity and experiencing things at first hand' (Moon 2005:7). A study carried out by the universities of Primorska and Ljubljana in

Slovenia outlines some of the effects of using the holistic education method of creative movement in primary schools. These include: calmness, 'better interpersonal relations and tolerance', the reduction of aggressive behaviour, 'a better work attitude, motivation, concentration, creativity, relaxation, self-image, goodwill and self-esteem' (Geršak 2012:7). Geršak also reminds us that 'bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is recognized as one of our multiple intelligences' (2012:1), but is often under-valued in schooling.

### The purposes of movement

In their book *The Kinesthetic Classroom* (2010), Lengel and Kuczala outline the 'six purposes of movement'. These include: 1) preparing the brain – certain movements may directly prepare the brain for learning; 2) providing brain breaks – ensuring oxygen flow to the brain and an opportunity to 'refocus' before returning to content; 3) supporting physical fitness by promoting the importance of physical, mental and emotional well-being; 4) developing class cohesion – 'offering an environment that promotes laughter and fun while engaging learners' (2010:9); 5) reviewing content – allowing time for the brain to 'process and consolidate new information' (2010:10), whilst potentially facilitating retention; and 6) teaching content – inviting students to learn new information implicitly by giving physical representation to academic concepts. In practice, this could involve taking a break in the lesson to do some stretching, building up mind maps around the classroom (Kuczala 2015), team games such as board races (New no date), or simple miming and Total Physical Response methods (Read 2007).

These potential benefits of physical activity in the classroom provide grounds for incorporating movement into lessons and for research into this area.

## The study

### Research questions

I posed two research questions (RQs): 1) how do young learners between 12 and 17 years old engage with the use of movement activities in the EFL classroom?, and 2) which types of activities do these students tend to enjoy? At the heart of these questions was my desire to deliver dynamic and motivating lessons in which students could have fun while they learned as 'emotional connection enhances the learning experience' (Kuczala 2015:Chapter 2, paragraph 5), and movement activities provide the opportunity 'to link positive emotions with learning' (Lengel and Kuczala 2010:19). For evidence of positive engagement (RQ1), I looked for a student's willingness to participate and interact according to the task instructions, a lack of inhibition and, in the first cycle, a sense of enjoyment. This is because some research has 'defined student engagement primarily by observable behaviours, such as participation and time on task' as well as by 'affective aspects' including 'feelings of belonging, enjoyment, and attachment' (Fredricks, McColskey, Meli, Montrosse, Mordica and Mooney 2011:1). The answer to the second research question may be of importance when planning lessons and selecting activities that will be intrinsically motivating to students, promoting the 'eagerness and interest to do and take part in [them] because an individual feels that they are attractive and pleasant' (Mahadi and Jafari 2012:232). While 'generalized,

task-independent factors' play a role in a student's engagement in an activity, so do 'situation-specific, task-dependent factors' (Dörnyei and Tseng 2009:118), and so the selection of appropriate activities may enhance an individual's specific task motivation.

## Organisation

Action research (AR) is a cyclical process 'of consciously and deliberately: (a) planning; (b) taking action; (c) evaluating the action; (d) leading to further planning, and so on' (Coghlan and Brannick 2014:6). In my study, this developed over two cycles of research, the first of which informed the second. These were carried out in different schools, one a year-round private language school in Italy and the other a short-term summer school in the UK. The action taken in the first cycle spanned a period of two months in 2017, whereas the second took place over a 2-week period in the same year. Apart from a few small changes, which I will mention later, the intervention remained the same across contexts.

## Participants

In Cycle 1, two classes were involved in the study. These were a class of 13 12- to 14-year-old Italian students who were preparing for the *Cambridge English: Key* (now known as A2 Key) exam and studying English at an A2 level, and a class of nine 14- to 16-year-old B1 level learners, also all Italian speakers. In Cycle 2, the participants were intermediate level, multi-nationality learners including Russian, Hong Kong Chinese, Azeri, Ghanaian, Indonesian, Japanese, Saudi Arabian and Turkish. Two students in the second cycle lay outside the age parameters of the RQ as there was a 10- and an 11-year-old present in the class. However, their feedback has been included in the results for two reasons: a) I wanted to avoid them feeling excluded in class; and b) as the process of collecting feedback involved students sharing ideas together in English, I was unable to discount their feedback without discounting that of others. This group of students varied from 13 to 15 in number over the two weeks and not all the students remained for the full cycle of research; this was due to rolling enrolment.

## The intervention

The classes mentioned above took part in a number of movement activities during their lessons and were then asked to give feedback on them. In Cycle 1, 10 activities were selected and one was adapted and repeated, totalling 11 activities, each of which was trialled once only. One class participated in five of them, and another in six. In Cycle 2, the five activities which had demonstrated the highest levels of student engagement and had received the most positive feedback from students were re-tested and one activity was adapted and re-tested, equalling six activities in total. These six tasks were tested only once in Cycle 2.

The activities were selected to allow for a range of task types and included those used by trainers of adults (such as walk and talk), teachers of primary learners (copycats and Can I cross your river, Mr Crocodile?) and some EFL classics, such as the classroom survey or board race. It was hoped that the variety of activities would facilitate a response to my second research question about which types of activities students tend to enjoy. Table 1 outlines a list of the activities used in Cycles 1 and 2.

**Table 1: Movement activities for Cycles 1 and 2**

| <i>Name of activity</i>               | <i>Type of activity</i>               | <i>Description</i>   | <i>Source</i>  | <i>Repeated Cycle 2?</i> |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|--------------------------|
| Board race                            | Team competition                      | Students take it in turns to write answers to a question, new vocabulary or corrections of mistakes on the board. The fastest person wins a point for their team.  | Team games: 'board relay race' or 'true or false' (New no date) <a href="http://www.onestopenglish.com">www.onestopenglish.com</a>                     | No                       |
| Can I cross your river, Mr Crocodile? | Whole-class children's game           | A running game in which students ask permission to cross the crocodile's river. The crocodile gives permission to some students, saying 'only if you're ...', and has to try to catch the students who are crossing the river. | <i>500 Activities for the Primary Classroom</i> (Read 2007)  | Yes                      |
| Copycats                              | Children's pair work drama activity   | A miming game in which students mirror their partner's movements exactly.  | <i>500 Activities for the Primary Classroom</i> (Read 2007)  | Yes                      |
| Floating balloon                      | Team-building game                    | Students link arms in a circle and have to keep a balloon in the air without using their hands. It can be done as a competition between two or more teams and combined with language aims.                                     | <i>Training in Motion</i> (Kuczala 2015)   | Yes                      |
| Group webbing on the move             | Content review                        | Review topics are posted around the classroom and students work in groups to read others' ideas and write their own to make review posters.  | <i>Training in Motion</i> (Kuczala 2015)   | No                       |
| Classroom survey                      | Whole-class mingle                    | A mingle activity where students ask a list of questions to everyone in the class and record results.  | A class survey (Iturain 2007) <a href="http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/a-class-survey">www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/a-class-survey</a> | Yes                      |
| Role play                             | Pair work drama and speaking activity | A speaking exercise in which students are given certain information about their character and adopt this role in order to interact with other students.  | <i>Learning Teaching</i> (Scrivener 2005)  | No                       |
| Sentence completion relay             | Team competition                      | Students are given a question to answer or sentence to complete on a strip of paper. They must show the correct answer to the teacher before being given the next question.  | Team games: 'board relay race' or 'true or false' (New no date) <a href="http://www.onestopenglish.com">www.onestopenglish.com</a>                     | Yes                      |
| Simple exercise                       | Brain break                           | Stretching, walking on the spot, cross-lateral movements, star jumps, etc.   | <i>Training in Motion</i> (Kuczala 2015)   | No                       |
| Take and talk                         | Content review                        | A team activity in which the teacher prepares a quiz in advance. Students discuss answers and run to retrieve an object from the centre of the room before they can answer the question.                                       | <i>Training in Motion</i> (Kuczala 2015)   | No                       |
| Walk and talk                         | Brain break                           | Taking a walk with a partner to talk and reflect on lesson content.  | <i>Training in Motion</i> (Kuczala 2015)   | Yes                      |

## Data collection methods

### Observation

In order to measure the students' engagement in each activity, I used a 'structured' observation checklist (see the Appendix), which 'lends itself to a factual or a descriptive record' (Hopkins 2014:Chapter 7, 'Structured observation', paragraph 2). This consisted of two parts, measuring student engagement whilst an activity was happening and recording students' behaviour after the activity had taken place. The first part measured engagement in terms of participation, interaction, a lack of inhibition and (in Cycle 1 only) enjoyment, while the second part recorded behaviour including attention levels and whether students were using the language of the activity, wherever applicable. In this way, I wished to test whether movement tasks could facilitate focus, and if language was memorable and accessible to learners subsequently.

### Group and pair discussion

After completing an activity, students in both Cycles 1 and 2 were asked to give feedback in response to five open-ended questions and one closed one: 1) What did you like the most about the activity?; 2) What didn't you like about the activity?; 3) What could we change about the activity?; 4) How did you feel before the activity?; 5) How do you feel now?; and 6) Would you like to do this activity again? Questions 4 and 5 later became one question, 'How did the activity make you feel?', because of a perceived confusion over the distinction between the two questions. In Cycle 1, the small group discussions (usually groups of three) were monitored and answers written down by the teacher, whereas in Cycle 2, students answered the questions in pairs and wrote their responses on index cards. This second method enabled me to gather a greater quantity and variety of responses per activity. In both cases, the speaking and writing took place in English and so provided further opportunities for language practice.

### Teacher-pupil interviews

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of Cycle 1 with a student from each class. These students were chosen fairly randomly: one because she was always early for class and another through an online random name picker ([www.classtools.net/random-name-picker](http://www.classtools.net/random-name-picker)). During the interviews, I asked them to reflect on the different movement activities in which they had taken part, speak about their favourite and least favourite ones, and why this was the case. I also asked the students to share their general perception of moving around during class and how this made them feel, as well as if it was something they would like to continue to do with me or another teacher in the future. These questions are largely a repetition of the ones students answered in their previous discussions, but as Hopkins (2014:Chapter 8, 'Interviews', paragraph 2) notes, 'individual interviews are often very productive sources of information for a participant observer who wants to verify observations they have previously made'. Thus, these two interviews served to validate and extend results I had already gathered. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees, who gave their answers to the questions in Italian to allow for increased clarity of expression. Due to time restrictions and the availability of students, no interviews took place in the second cycle of research.

## Ethics

Before the beginning of each cycle, I had to ask for parents' or guardians' consent to include their children (or children in their care) in the study. In Italy, parents give permission at the beginning of the school year for their children to be photographed and included in school activities, although I presented and explained the 'project' to my students, nonetheless. In the summer school, the group leaders provided me with the consent I needed. Group leaders and students were asked to give their consent to having their (or the students in their care's) feedback included anonymously in the results, being recorded by digital camera and taking part in individual interviews with the teacher. In both cycles, the students or group leaders were given a permission slip and asked to tick which areas of the study they would be willing to participate in. They were then asked to sign and date the slip and these were kept for my records.

## Findings

I will now outline the findings of this study, drawing on the source of data described above.

### Cycle 1

#### *Findings from observation*

Using the observation checklist, I recorded participation, interaction, lack of inhibition and enjoyment across 11 activities. Participation was identified as a student's willingness to engage with the task according to the task instructions, whereas interaction was recognised as the co-operation, verbal or non-verbal, between two or more students. Lack of inhibition and enjoyment, on the other hand, were identified by physical or prosodic features such as open gestures, smiling and enthusiastic intonation. These are, however, subjective measurements as individuals may express themselves differently from one another or use these forms of expression to a greater or lesser degree.

The results are summarised in Figure 1. Out of a maximum of 13 students in one class and nine in the other, the results for the different categories of engagement observed were as follows: 1) participation – in six activities, all of the students were participating and in five, most (more than half, but fewer than all) of them were; 2) interaction – all students were interacting in eight of the activities, most of the students were interacting in two of them and only some students were interacting in one of the activities; 3) lack of inhibition – in nine of the activities, all students seemed uninhibited and most students were uninhibited in two activities; 4) enjoyment – eight of the activities appeared to be enjoyed by the whole class, two were enjoyed by most of the class and one by only about half the class.

These results pose an interesting question: is it possible for all students to have been interacting in eight of the activities if all students were participating in only six of them? This question may highlight that teacher observations are a fallible and sometimes subjective form of data collection, or that students were interacting in a way that was not relevant to the task at hand. During the classroom survey and the board race, I recorded that not all students were participating in the movement element, by choosing to remain seated, although they were interacting. This suggests that some activities do not require that all students move in order to be completed. In another activity, group webbing on the move, I refer to poor instruction giving and a perceived 'laziness'

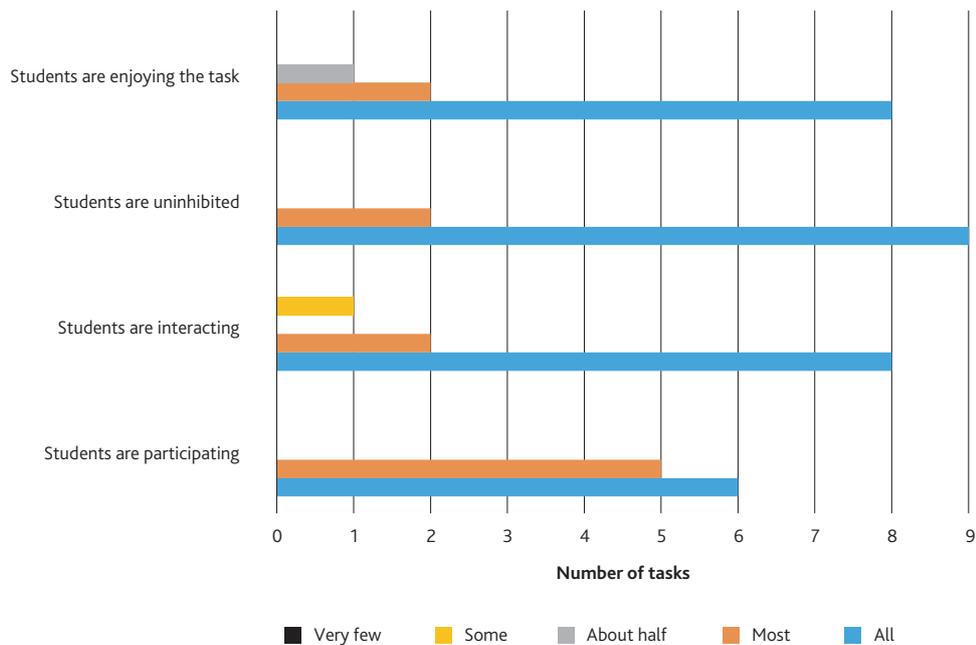


Figure 1: Student engagement during 11 movement tasks in Cycle 1

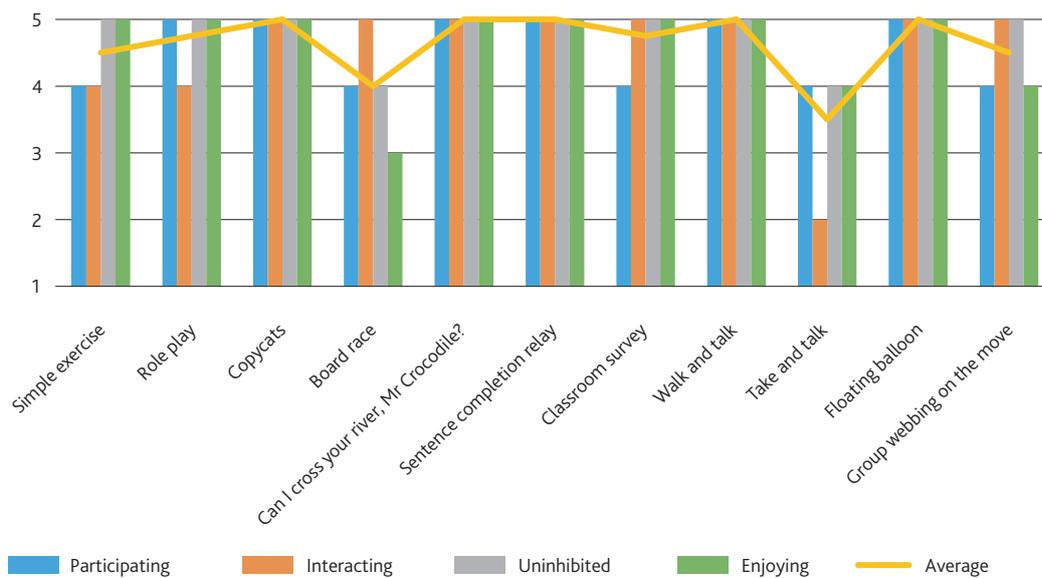


Figure 2: Student engagement during individual movement tasks in Cycle 1

of some students in my written observations, which suggests that they were interacting but that this was not conducive to carrying out the task, either because they had not understood the instructions or for other reasons. In other activities, such as the role play and take and talk, student participation was greater than interaction, which may have been due to task set-up. For example, the take and talk activity required movement but did not always require students to interact with one another. There was an odd number of students for the role play, which meant that, although all the students were participating, interaction in a group of three was more difficult than in a pair.

Figure 2 is a summary of student engagement, as seen in Figure 1, but shows the distribution of participation, interaction, lack of inhibition and enjoyment across the separate activities. These

values were calculated by assigning a number between one and five to each criterion of engagement, where one means that very few students were engaged and five means that all the students were engaged.

From these, we can see that, according to the observations, the most popular activities were copycats, Can I cross your river, Mr Crocodile?, walk and talk and floating balloon, whereas the least popular was take and talk, followed by the board race.

Following the activities, I recorded that all the students were focused after seven of them, most of the students were focused after two of them and this was impossible to measure (or not applicable) for two activities, due to it being the end of the lesson. Language use after an activity was not applicable for five of the activities, either because of the timing of the activity or its nature; for instance, the simple exercise activity did not require the use of any target language because its purpose was that of a brain break. Of the remaining six activities, all of the students used the target language in four of them and most of them used it in two; see Figure 3.

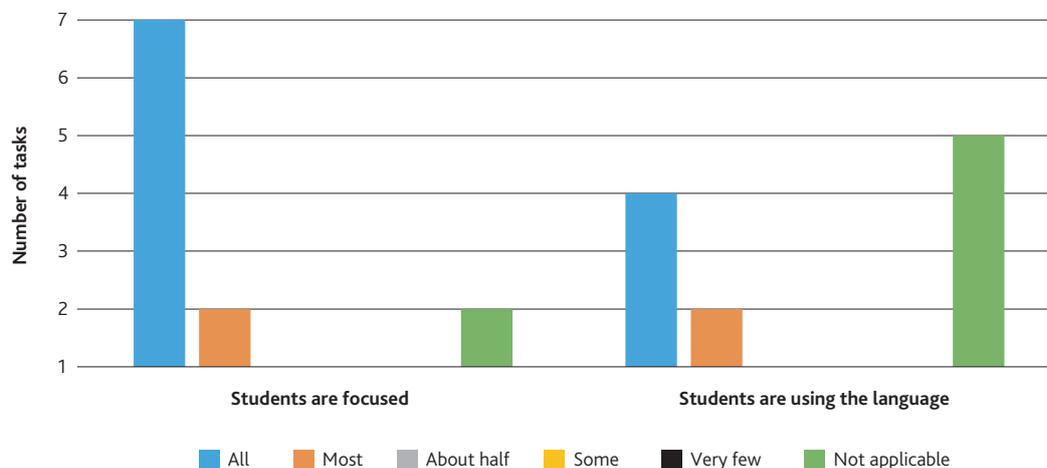


Figure 3: Student behaviour after tasks in Cycle 1

However, these results do not take the usual classroom atmosphere into account and there is no way of knowing if the students' good focus is a result of the movement or if it would have happened regardless. The same can be said of their use of the language practised in the activity. If the language of the activity was recycled, rather than new, it would have been more readily accessible for students to use in the following exercises. Therefore, while these findings are interesting, they cannot tell us much about the role of movement in the classroom.

### Student feedback

My observations suggested that students generally reacted positively to movement in the classroom. Now I will examine the feedback the students gave.

In answer to the question, 'would you like to do this activity again?', I recorded negative responses for only two activities, the classroom survey and group webbing on the move. For both of these activities, I had noticed that not all students had been participating during the activity. When asked what they liked most about the activity, students' responses fitted into five main categories, listed in Table 2. There were only two responses which lay outside these categories which, for this cycle, I labelled as 'miscellaneous'.

**Table 2: What students liked most about movement activities, Cycle 1**

| <i>Category</i>      | <i>Reasons</i>                                      |
|----------------------|---|
| Movement             | Running, leaving the classroom                      |
| Language             | Learning grammar while playing, studying new words  |
| Social interaction   | Spending time together, comparing ideas, group work |
| Emotional response   | Feeling relaxed, having fun                         |
| Specific to activity | Competition, the balloon                            |

When asked about what they disliked or any problems they encountered, in two instances students mentioned that they disliked having to move, but by far the most common issue was a lack of classroom space. A recurring comment was that students would have liked to have gone outside, but this was impossible because the school is in a block of flats and surrounded by a car park. Another complaint about some tasks was the need to write, either before or during, and it was the activities involving writing that students did not wish to repeat.

With regard to how the activities made the students feel, a range of responses was recorded. Before moving, students reported feeling tired, normal, nervous sometimes, amused, happy, sleepy and bored. After activities, students no longer felt bored, although they continued to feel sleepy, tired, and normal. We can add to these also hungry, excited, less stressed, relaxed, good, and happier.

### *Interviews*

At the end of the first cycle, I conducted two interviews with a student from each class. For the sake of anonymity, I will refer to them as Maria and Laura. Maria's comments confirmed some of the findings I had already recorded, mainly that a key obstacle to enjoying an activity was the lack of classroom space and also that she had not enjoyed the classroom survey because it was difficult to stand up and write at the same time. The main reason she gave for positively engaging in an activity was the movement element itself, especially when requiring sudden bursts of speed. On the other hand, Laura could not identify any problems and said that all activities had been equally enjoyable for her. When asked what they thought more generally about movement in lessons, Maria stressed the importance of 'having fun' and 'switching off' a bit from the lesson before returning to work with increased concentration: 'It lets us switch off a bit from the lesson so that we can study better afterwards, because some people might get bored and stop concentrating and because it's fun.' For Laura, the highlights for her included the chance to 'relate to each other better' and to learn English 'in a different way'. When asked if she would like her teacher next year to use movement activities in her lessons she replied, 'I'd like it a lot so that we don't have our usual lessons but can use something new to interact with our classmates and, at the same time, learn in a nice way that can teach us a lot.'

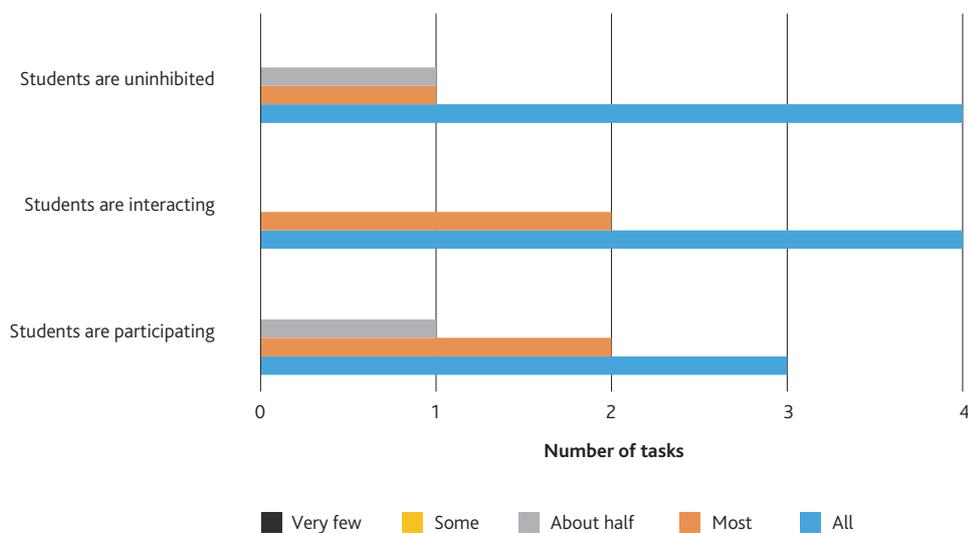
The student feedback shed light on what students themselves perceived the advantages of movement to be, and the interviews elaborated on this. Together with my observations, it provided me with a basis for planning the second cycle, in which I aimed to utilise the school premises to take movement out of the classroom and retrial the classroom survey without the writing. I had experienced some difficulties in recording students' feedback from the small group discussion because I could not always hear what all the students were saying and this highlighted the need to change the way I collected data in the next cycle.

## Cycle 2

In order to explore these findings further, a second cycle of research was carried out in a different context. This cycle of research was shorter, taking place over a 2-week period and including six of the 11 activities from Cycle 1. These were selected from among those which had been most positively received by students in Cycle 1. In addition, I included one activity (the classroom survey) which I felt would work better with some adaptation. The participants were of different nationalities and on an English language study holiday in London for a short time over the summer break.

### *Findings from observation*

Cycle 2 involved 22 students in total, but no more than 15 at one time, due to rolling enrolment. The criterion 'students are enjoying the activity' was removed from the observation checklist due to the difficulty of identifying and measuring enjoyment. Instead, the three remaining criteria – participation, interaction, and lack of inhibition – were taken as indicators of enjoyment. The results showed that, out of a total of six activities, 1) all students were participating in three of them, most of the students were participating in two and about half in one of them; 2) all the students were interacting in four activities and most students were in two; and 3) all students were uninhibited in four activities, in one activity most of the students were uninhibited, and about half the students were uninhibited in another. These results are summarised in Figure 4.



**Figure 4: Student engagement during six movement tasks in Cycle 2**

Similar to Cycle 1, students' interaction in activities is recorded as higher than their participation. Again, this is due to students interacting with each other during the tasks, but not always participating according to the instructions. In the case of walk and talk students interacted in conversation but, rather than walking and talking, they sat and talked. Considering the decrease in the number of activities, the distribution of results across the engagement criteria is more or less similar in Cycles 1 and 2. Overall, the results indicate that this age group engages positively in movement activities in the classroom.

The results regarding focus and use of language after a task had taken place demonstrate that while the students were not distracted by the movement, there is still little way of ascertaining whether their focus came as a result of the movement or not (see Figure 5). For the use of the target language after the activities, the results from Cycle 2 are not illuminating as only one of the activities involved practice of language that students may have produced following exercises.

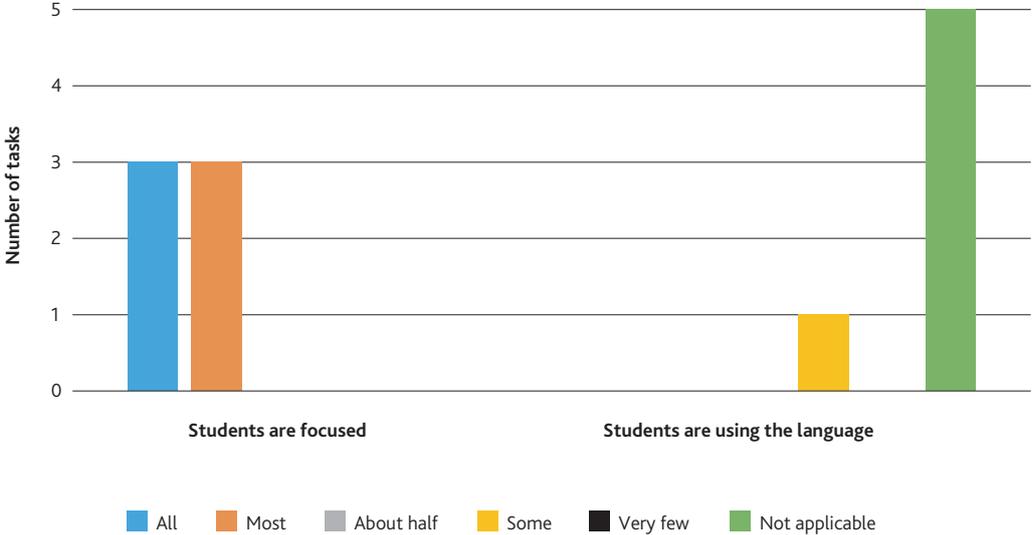


Figure 5: Student behaviour after movement tasks in Cycle 2

Figure 6 summarises student engagement across all six activities. Again, five is the maximum level of engagement (all students) and one is the minimum (very few students). From this, we can see that the most popular activity, in terms of observed student engagement over the two cycles, was the floating balloon, which scored maximum levels of engagement both times.

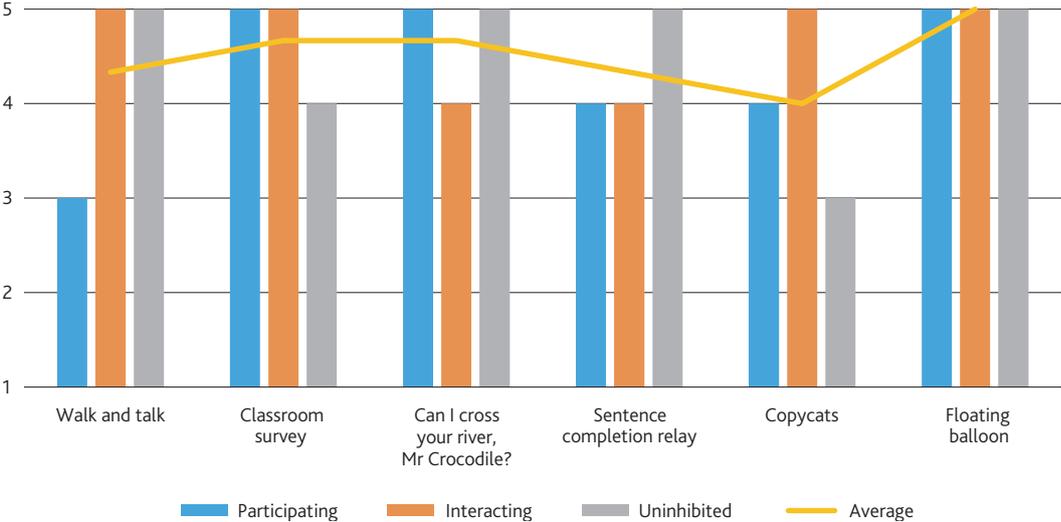


Figure 6: Student engagement during individual movement tasks in Cycle 2

### Student feedback

As a result of changing the method of collecting data (using index cards), I was able to gain a larger quantity of and wider variety of student feedback for this cycle. Of the six activities tested, only one pair of students said that they would not like to repeat one of the activities, copycats. All other responses were positive to the question 'would you like to do this activity again?'

The same categories from Cycle 1 emerged concerning reasons for liking an activity, as well as the perceived novelty of an activity (see Table 3). With the larger quantity of recorded feedback, certain remarks which had been recorded in Cycle 1 were mentioned with enough frequency to create sub-categories. These were: being outside the classroom (previously included in 'related to movement') and team work (from 'social interaction'). The category with by far the highest frequency of answers was emotional response.

**Table 3: What students liked most about movement tasks in Cycle 2**

| Category                    | Reason   |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Movement                    | 'Walking and talking', 'I can move'  |
| Being outside the classroom | 'We did it in the garden'  |
| Language                    | 'Enhance English skill', 'it involves grammar'                                   |
| Social interaction          | 'Communicate with other people', 'know interesting information about each other' |
| Team work                   | 'Team work'  |
| Emotional response          | 'It's fun', 'it's very relaxing', 'it's interesting'                             |
| Specific to the activity    | 'I like copy others' movements', 'the balloon'                                   |
| Novelty                     | 'The activity was new and I never try it', 'it was unusual'                      |

However, in answer to the question, 'what didn't you like about the activity?' the feedback was quite different from the first cycle and is summarised in Table 4.

**Table 4: What students disliked about movement activities in Cycle 2**

| Category                 | Reasons  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Movement                 | 'Hate moving', 'I don't like walking, as it is boring'                       |
| Level of challenge       | 'Questions are very simple', 'it was easy'                                   |
| Organisation of activity | 'More people to join the activity', 'too few people'                         |
| Time for activity        | 'The time is limited', 'I want to play longer'                               |
| Technology               | 'Can't play Kahoot!'   |
| Specific to activity     | 'I need to change my shoes, however, teacher didn't tell me, so I can't run' |

Once again, some students expressed a dislike of movement, but comments related to the level of challenge, organisation and timing could highlight that it was harder for me to plan activities which were level-appropriate and group students suitably, because I had only known them a few days. In addition, short lessons of 60 minutes may have meant I was hasty in the execution of these tasks. In this cycle, we have the emergence of the category 'technology', with some students stating their preference for online games, such as Kahoot!, to more old-fashioned movement activities. Some of the students' suggested changes to the activities included having more time, using more language, having more interesting questions, playing in the sports centre, being able to use Google Translate, and writing on a computer instead of on paper. The last comment would involve substituting the movement activity for a different one that made use of technology.

Finally, students reported feeling happy, relaxed, interested, comfortable, excited, good, amazing, great, and okay during activities. They also said that the activities were fun and enjoyable, but in one instance, 'a bit boring'. The most common remarks related to feeling happy (14 times), to the activity being fun (11 times), and to feeling excited (nine times). This suggests that movement could provide a means of fostering an environment in which positive emotions can be linked with learning (Lengel and Kuczala 2010).

## Discussion

I will now consider how the findings presented above shed light on the two research questions I addressed in this AR project.

Firstly, how do 12- to 17-year-olds engage with the use of movement? As a result of observation, we can summarise that this age group engages in a positive way with the use of movement across a range of activity types, including those intended for adults and younger children. The least popular activity in Cycle 2 of research was the children's drama game copycats, especially in terms of inhibition. We might gather from this that the students perceived the game to be childish. However, none of their comments highlighted this and it had been one of the most popular from Cycle 1. It may be the case that engaging learners in a movement activity depends not so much on the activity itself but on the way it is managed and in what environment. The student feedback has outlined a number of factors that may limit their engagement in an activity. These are: inadequate space; an inappropriate level of challenge; an insufficient amount of time or too much of it; group sizes which are too big or too small; and the need to write. Relationships between students, and between students and the teacher, may also affect their willingness to participate and sense of inhibition, as demonstrated by the slightly lower levels of these two criteria recorded in Cycle 2. Then there are those students who are not motivated by movement at all or who would prefer to be doing an activity on a computer. Assuming that teachers are aiming to engage their students, where 'student engagement predicts subsequent achievement and success in school' (Fredricks et al 2011:2), these factors could be kept in mind when preparing the classroom for movement.

Secondly, while the findings do not identify a preferred activity type among teenagers, they do highlight aspects of a movement task which may make it more enjoyable for students. The following is a list of factors drawn from this study which affect enjoyment (in order of how often they were mentioned): 1) evoking an emotional reaction – students mentioned fun 11 times, interest seven times, relaxation four times and excitement twice; 2) movement; 3) providing an

opportunity for social interaction; 4) giving the chance to practise a particular language point; 5) involving team work; 6) novelty; and 7) being outside the classroom. While the first factor may seem out of the teacher's hands, it is essential because, after information related to survival, 'the second most important information to the brain is that which generates emotions' (Lengel and Kuczala 2010:9) and, where a student's emotional state is compromised, little learning can take place. Lengel and Kuczala advocate movement as a way of stimulating positive emotions through using movement activities to improve class cohesion and provide brain breaks.

The student feedback also links to the six purposes of movement, mentioned previously.

The importance of social interaction, providing an opportunity to compare and contrast ideas, to 'relate to each other better' and practise team work, relate to 'class cohesion', which helps with the 'building [of] relationships and a general concern for one another' and 'improving communication and listening skills' (Lengel and Kuczala 2010:9). Although she was the only student who mentioned this, Maria's comments from the interview outline the importance for her that an activity provides the chance for a brain break in order to refocus attention.

The importance of novelty may relate, as Kuczala (2015:Chapter 2, 'Eight brain principles you need to know', paragraph 2) suggests, to our brain's programming 'to notice novelty in the surrounding environment', where 'changing up the environment resets the innate scanning switch and allows for focused attention from your learners'.

Considering Geršak's (2012) research, some of the benefits of using movement with younger children also play a part in the teenage classroom. The top-five listed benefits from the Slovenian study were well-being, relaxation, positive relations, physical activity and creativity. Within these we can identify some of the categories generated from the student feedback: emotional response, social interaction, and movement. While we cannot expect to see the same spectrum of effects that kinaesthetic activities produce in younger children (being more holistic learners by nature), we can notice that some of those positive responses are still relevant. Finally, regarding students' focus after a movement task, we cannot conclude that their concentration was a result of moving, but we can venture to say that the activities were in no way distracting to them.

In brief, the results demonstrate that 12- to 17-year-olds generally engage with movement tasks in a positive way and that these often evoke an equally positive emotional reaction. Although there is not a certain type they prefer, teachers could try to incorporate movement activities which involve some sort of group work or sharing of ideas or those which aim to practise language in a new way. Where possible, changing the environment could be a benefit, especially if students have the chance to leave the classroom, and keeping writing to a minimum may also lead to more positive responses. The key to selecting and delivering meaningful movement activities to teenagers is to know your students and environment well, in order to present tasks at the correct level and organise the groups, space and timing appropriately.

## Limitations

As with any small-scale, teacher-led research, there were a number of limitations.

Firstly, we have the issue of different time scales, where Cycle 2 had to be restricted to only two weeks due to work constraints, whereas the first cycle developed over a period of two months.

This may have influenced students' reactions to giving feedback. The fact that students did not know each other or their teacher so well in Cycle 2 may also have impacted on the results gathered, and it should be remembered that two of the students in Cycle 2 lay outside the 12 to 17 age group. Perhaps the study would have benefited from repetition in order to reach a state of saturation in which no further categories were being generated; where an activity is only tested once with one class, we may not know if another class would respond in the same way. A final issue raised might be the quality of the student feedback; in Cycle 1, only the loudest students' answers were heard and recorded, and students may also have been fearful of exposing attitudes or ideas I believed to be incorrect (Hopkins 2014). In both Cycles 1 and 2, there was the question of language: to what extent were the students able to express themselves in English and to what extent was I able to interpret their feedback accurately?

In answer to these concerns, Cycle 2 consolidated and expanded on the first. General trends in engagement emerged through both cycles, with a little more inhibition recorded in the second, perhaps due to relationships having been established for a shorter period of time. The same categories were generated from student feedback in response to what they liked the most and sub-categories were created. This suggests that, despite the limitations, certain implications can be drawn. Concerning the number of activities, I preferred to test a wider range once only rather than a smaller range twice in Cycle 1; this enabled me to limit and adapt activities for the subsequent phase of research.

## Reflections

Doing AR has been an enriching experience for me. Including my students in the gathering of data, rather than relying solely on my own observations or those of my colleagues, has helped me to understand them more. I have also been heartened that classroom research is something any teacher can do, regardless of location or experience. As this research is relevant to and derived from a teacher's own context, it does not have to be complicated or a burden to implement; as Borg (2017:176) notes, 'teacher research will always involve some additional work for teachers ... but the goal should be to minimise this as much as possible'. Undertaking this study has encouraged me to ask more questions of myself and my practices: why do I do that and could I do it differently? Hopkins (2014:Chapter 2, 'Classroom research in action', paragraph 4) suggests that the attitude of a classroom researcher is that 'you do not have to be ill to get better'. I feel that, having completed this research, I now possess more of the tools I need to answer these questions.

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## Appendix: Self-observation checklist used during and immediately after a movement task

|  | <i>All of them</i> | <i>Most of them</i> | <i>About half of them</i> | <i>Some of them</i> | <i>Very few of them</i> |
|--|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>During the activity</b>   |                    |                     |                           |                     |                         |
| Students are participating.  |                    |                     |                           |                     |                         |
| Students are interacting.  |                    |                     |                           |                     |                         |
| Students are uninhibited.  |                    |                     |                           |                     |                         |
| Students are enjoying the task.*   |                    |                     |                           |                     |                         |
| <b>After the activity</b>  |                    |                     |                           |                     |                         |
| Students are focused.  |                    |                     |                           |                     |                         |
| Students are using the language practised in the activity (if applicable). |                    |                     |                           |                     |                         |

\*In Cycle 1 only

# Investigating student attention in an exam preparation class

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John Parker St Giles International

## Introduction

This project was motivated by a mismatch I often note between students' expressed interests and motivations (i.e. what they say they want to do or like doing) and their engagement in class.

I am lucky enough to work in a private language school where I have a measure of control over the material I use, and the time and resources to select, adapt and create material, but I have found that even when I identify the students' individual goals and interests, and produce material that I believe will be stimulating and relevant, students still seem disengaged from time to time, an attitude that is expressed by a number of behaviours that might be grouped together under the label of 'inattention'.

In this project, I took 'motivation' to mean those factors that are pre-existing when the student enters the private language school classroom, which may involve previous educational experiences, personal ambitions, financial considerations, parental pressures, and so on. While teachers can benefit from an awareness of these factors, they will not be particularly amenable on language courses where students study for relatively short periods of time (i.e. weeks rather than a whole school year).

I took 'attention' to mean the energy and focus that each student brings to class each day; their willingness to work hard; and their engagement in any given moment. While this may be influenced by longer-term factors, I hoped to explore what positive actions could be taken to maintain this energy and focus, or more negatively, how damage to longer-term motivation could be avoided by minimising distractions, confusion or boredom.

My research question was, therefore, what effect would result from changes to the way activities were done, and the classroom environment in which they were done, in terms of the students' levels of attention?

## Background reading

The literature on attention in education, and in language education in particular, seems to divide into two groups. In second language acquisition, research on attention focuses on the question of whether students need to explicitly focus on language forms in order to learn them, or whether they notice the forms and learn them in the course of doing 'tasks'. For example, Skehan argues that language learning is not a 'simple, linear, cumulative process' (1996:58) but rather one that involves cycles of analysis, synthesis and complexification, and that 'this should be achieved by manipulating the focus of attention of the learners' (1996:51).

Skehan's work cites a 1994 paper by Schmidt, which aimed to more clearly define terms such as 'consciousness' and 'attention'. Schmidt defines attention as 'the subjective awareness of the objects of focal attention' (1994:16), and writes that 'it is widely argued in psychology that learning without attention to what is to be learned ... is impossible' (1994:17). Schmidt's paper led me to another 1994 paper by Tomlin and Villa, which provided a useful definition of attention as 'an integrated system with three separate yet interrelated networks; alertness, orientation and detection' (1994:183). Tomlin and Villa's description of alertness as 'an overall, general readiness to deal with incoming stimuli or data' (1994:190) seemed very close to my idea of what attention is. As can be seen in the findings section, I would also argue that this is how my colleagues see attention. In all of the papers discussed in this paragraph, attention is characterised as being a limited resource.

The other strand of research on attention in the classroom seems to relate to younger students with special learning differences. Thorne and Thomas (2009) provide an overview of attention from this perspective. They also refer to alertness as a component of active attention, along with selectivity, distractibility, duration of attention, preview and planning, self-monitoring, and the need for stimulation and movement. Again, they note that 'active attention is a multi-dimensional cognitive process' (2009:1). Thorne and Thomas's conception of alertness is having mental energy: 'if we are going to do something, or listen to someone, the first thing we need is to feel alert and aroused' (2009:2). Selectivity and distractibility refer to the ability to decide which of a 'multitude of stimuli' (2009:2) is important (selectivity) and filter out the things that might otherwise distract us (2009:3). Although the aim of this project was to develop some techniques to maintain the students' overall levels of alertness, a project of greater detail and longer duration might focus specifically on techniques to help students develop their selectivity and filtering abilities.

In their reports of investigations into attention and the use of motivational strategies, Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008:56) and Cummings Hlas, Neyers and Molitor (2017:2) all report that 'little research has been done on attention spans in second language classrooms'.

Cummings Hlas et al found that 'instructional practices like checking homework and lecturing seemed to increase the frequency of lapses' (2017:8), while Guilloteaux and Dörnyei reported that the inclusion of motivational techniques in classrooms in Korea had a positive impact on student motivation (2008:72). This suggested that it was indeed possible to use a variety of interventions in the classroom to overcome obstacles to attention and focus.

## Methodology

As stated in the introduction, I wanted to explore what classroom interventions and techniques might help to increase attention and reduce inattention. This focus generated a number of questions: firstly, how did I know when my students were and were not actually paying attention? Having identified a set of behaviours indicative of attention and inattention, how could I measure them in a way that would be fair to the students and not in itself cause disruption and distraction?

The first stage in the process was to identify markers of inattention that could be observed and measured. To this end, colleagues within the group of schools I work for were sent a short

questionnaire (see details in the next section) in which they were asked how they recognise attention and lack of attention. Their responses were organised into 'positive' behaviours that demonstrate attention, and 'negative' behaviours that demonstrate distraction or a lack of attention.

Lessons were then planned with the inclusion of classroom management strategies either to increase positive behaviours or manage negative behaviours. To measure the results, the class was observed, and when students displayed a number of inattention behaviours at one time, this was noted, along with the time. The decision to mark inattention with a number of behaviours was intended to target those students who truly were not engaged, as opposed to those who were merely checking the time, or actively using their mobile phones to record vocabulary or to input information into a study app.

A simple table was used to log incidences of more than one inattention behaviour at varying times throughout the lesson. This was informed by Guilloteaux and Dörnyei's investigation of the effects of motivational strategies on student motivation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in South Korea, in which observers used a table to track the effect of a variety of interventions (Guilloteaux and Dörnyei 2008:61–65). More advanced strategies such as the use of clickers or eyeball tracking have also been used to study student reactions during lessons, but such options are beyond the scope of a small-scale action research project such as this.

An initial trial of the table with another class, with observations set at fixed points (10-minute intervals), proved unsuccessful. I found that interrupting myself to make an observation both interrupted the flow of the lesson and distracted the students, who wanted to know what I was making a note of. I decided therefore to try to make discreet observations when possible during the morning lesson, noting the time and the activity in progress at the time of the observation.

The group that was chosen for this study was a closed group (i.e. all students started and finished the course together with no rolling enrolment) of students preparing for an exam that would give them an official level of C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001), for a period of 13 weeks. The maximum number of students in the class at any one time was 12. The students were aged between 19 and 25 at the time of the study, and comprised three female Swiss German speakers, one male and one female Swiss French speaker, one male and one female Italian speaker, one male Taiwanese speaker, and three male Korean speakers and one female Korean speaker. My lessons with the class took place in the morning, starting at 9 a.m. and finishing at 11.55 a.m., with a 25-minute break. The group was chosen on the basis that using a closed group would eliminate any distraction or change to the class dynamic caused by new students joining the class.

The first stage of the project was to determine what behaviours should be promoted and encouraged, and what behaviours should be minimised. Once a list of desirable and undesirable behaviours had been compiled, ideas on what to do to deal with them could be generated. Following on from this, particular 'problem times' during class needed to be discovered. Finally some interventions could be tested to see how effective they were.

To gather information for the first stage, colleagues were sent three questions via email, which were:

1. How do you know your students are paying attention in class – in other words, what student behaviours are for you indicative of 'attention'?

2. How do you know if students are not paying attention – i.e. what student behaviours are for you indicative of 'lack of attention'? What is it about their behaviour that tells you they are or are not paying attention?
3. Are there any particular strategies that you use during lessons to maintain student attention or to restore it when you feel it has dropped?

The email was addressed to 55 people in six schools in the group, four in the UK and two in the United States. A total of 18 responses were received, all except one from colleagues in my own school in central London, which represents a response rate of approximately 33%. The responses were categorised, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, and in Table 1.

## Findings

### A. Initial poll of attention and inattention behaviours

While eye contact was cited as a common marker of attention (see Figure 1), the responses received seemed to indicate that it was easier to spot a lack of eye contact (defined as 'staring into space', 'not looking at the board', 'lack of eye contact') than it was to use eye contact as a positive marker of attention. Many colleagues qualified their responses, saying that there may be cultural differences in making and maintaining eye contact with teachers. One colleague made the point that 'Things like eye contact only really apply to certain members of the class [who] would normally be comfortable looking me in the eye ... so I suppose this, and production [what students say or write] ... are dealt with on a case by case basis'. This partially informed my decision later in the study to identify inattention by looking at a range of behaviours rather than simply focusing on one, such as eye contact.

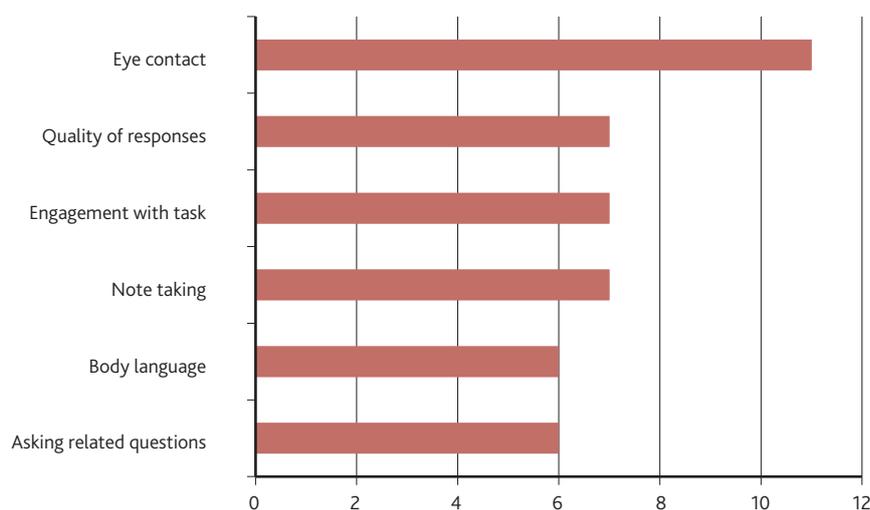


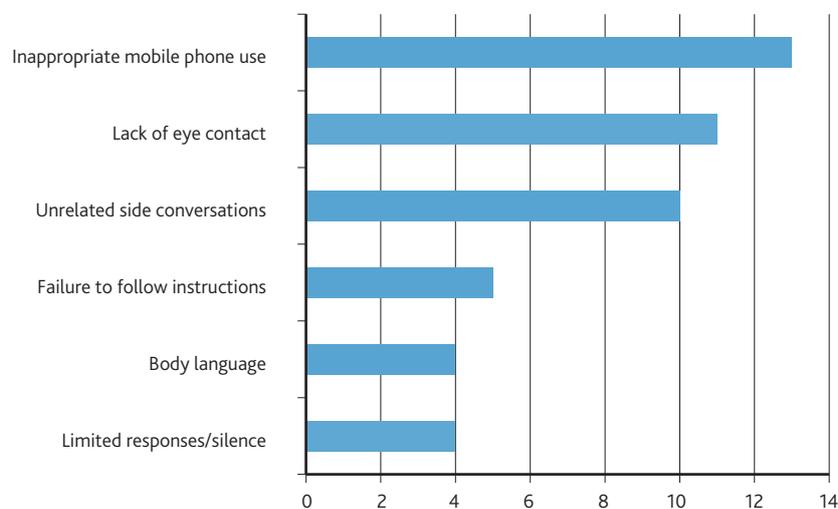
Figure 1: Indicators of attention, according to teachers (N=18)

How well the students engaged with the exercise and the quality of the responses they gave were also provided as examples of attentive behaviour. As one colleague put it: 'If students who can be generally relied on to produce in class are asking questions, and using their imagination with the language, this is a good indicator of attention. For those quieter students, if they are making notes

of vocabulary, and making an attempt to talk to their partner during communicative activities, I would consider this to be evidence of engagement in the lesson.'

Body language was seen by about half of the respondents as an indicator of attention. One teacher explained attentive body language as follows: 'They face towards the front of the class, have a concentrated look on their faces, usually they sit up straight.'

Colleagues who responded to the poll provided a long list of behaviours that indicated a lack of attention, but the behaviours shown in Figure 2 represent the six most commonly cited, with inappropriate mobile phone use occupying the top position. The school in which the study took place does have a mobile phone policy, but enforcing it is not straightforward; apart from the fact that the students are also paying customers, the teaching staff are trying to create a good rapport in classes which may comprise a range of ages, nationalities and motivations, and curtailing the use of a device that for many of our students is part of their everyday lives is problematic.



**Figure 2: Indicators of inattention, according to teachers (N=18)**

Lack of eye contact was considered to be the second most problematic indicator, although cultural factors or issues of shyness could explain this particular behaviour and on its own, it may not be indicative of inattention. Some teachers characterised lack of eye contact as 'staring into space' and suggested 'more or less not looking where they are expected to be looking is a warning sign'.

The third most frequently cited indicator of inattention was 'unrelated side conversations' characterised as 'asking neighbours about what they did last night, where they come from etc.'

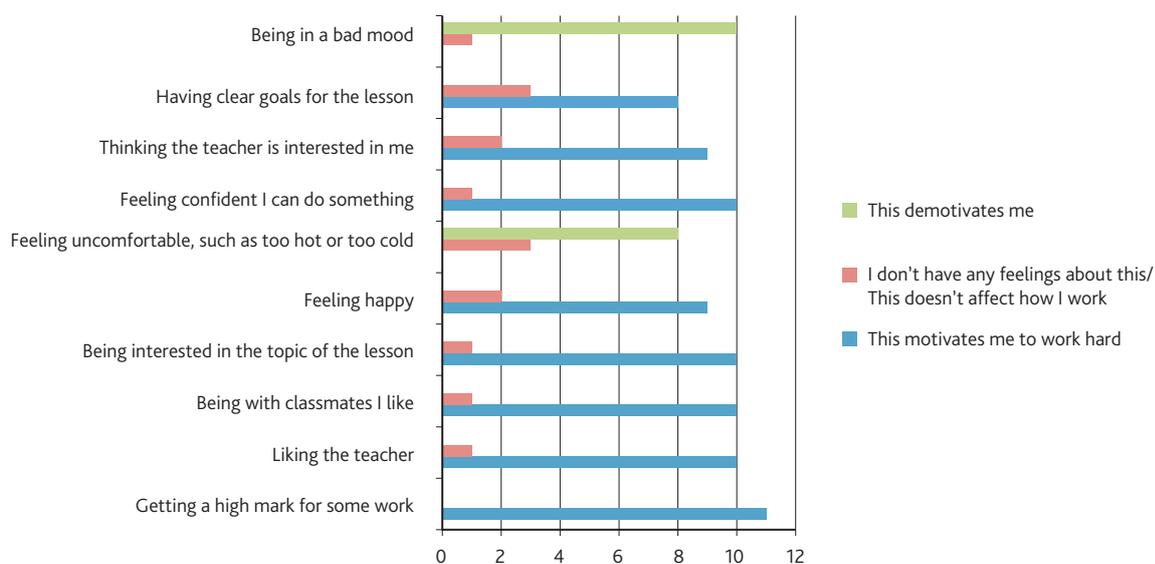
Teachers' responses to the first two questions in the email suggested that inattention was often signalled by more than one behaviour, such as negative body language coupled with a lack of eye contact. Again, this informed my decision to look at multiple indicators of attention and inattention when I observed my own students. This was done in order to distinguish genuine indicators of inattention from behaviours influenced by personal or cultural factors.

The third question in the email to colleagues asked them to explain how they maintained or regained student attention. Their responses are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Solutions for inattention proposed by colleagues**

| <i>Teacher-centred ideas</i>                                 | <i>Student-centred ideas</i>  | <i>Activity-centred ideas</i>  |
|--|---|--|
| Teacher nomination   | Varying interaction patterns  | Balancing receptive/productive skills  |
| Closer monitoring  | Peer nomination   | More kinaesthetic activities   |
| Changing pitch of voice                                      | Making students accountable for feedback by asking them what their partner said | Personalised content   |
| Looking at students until they put their phone away          | Peer teaching, have students recap what we've just learned                      | Drama-style activities   |
| Asking student to repeat back what the teacher has just said | Eliciting from students why they think they are doing the activity              | Choral drilling of pronunciation   |
| Praising the most attentive students                         | Allowing students to finish tasks in their own time                             | Games, especially gamifying feedback   |
| Changing the layout of the classroom                         | Allowing students a 'distraction' break   | Class outings  |
| Putting bags to one side of the room (exam conditions)       |   | Study skills: showing students how unreliable translator apps can be           |
|  |   | Study skills: encouraging students to use English–English learner dictionaries |
|  |   | Establishing a routine   |

During this preliminary phase of the study I also asked the students in the target group what motivates and demotivates them. A questionnaire, taken from Williams, Mercer and Ryan (2015:108) was administered to gather information. Although this questionnaire uses the term 'motivation', the questions that it asks focus on affective factors present in the classroom in the moment of learning rather than on long-term plans. I would argue the responses are relevant to understanding student attention in class. The findings are shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: Student feedback on what affects how hard they are willing to work in class**

## B. Interventions

### 1. A 'control' lesson

Before exploring some ways in which inattention could be reduced in the classroom, the number of attention and inattention behaviours occurring in a 'normal' span of class time were tracked.

The idea behind this 'control' lesson (which took place between 9 a.m. and 12 p.m.) was to see if there were any specific moments where the students' attention was lost, or whether there were specific activities that were sapping the students' attention.

The results are shown in Table 2. It can be seen that attention does wane over the course of the morning. This is perhaps to be expected, but it is, arguably, a valuable reminder in and of itself, that teachers cannot expect 100% focus from their students, because when break times and lunch approach, caffeine needs topping up and stomachs start rumbling. However, there is one classroom activity in which student attention is consistently lost and that is in the feedback that is done after completing exercises in class. As discussed in the background reading section, this was something that Cummings Hlas et al (2017) found in their investigation of attention in the language classroom.

The shaded boxes in Table 2 show incidences where students displayed more than one inattention behaviour. The times are not set intervals, but rather reflect moments when I was able to monitor the class unobtrusively and note behaviours (all times a.m.).

**Table 2: Inattention behaviours with no interventions in place**

|            | 09.18         | 09.31 | 09.38      | 09.43 | 09.51    | 10.07 | 10.18              | 10.24 | 10.35        | 11.33    | 11.37        | 11.50    |               |
|------------|---------------|-------|------------|-------|----------|-------|--------------------|-------|--------------|----------|--------------|----------|---------------|
| Student Ri |               |       |            |       |          |       |                    |       |              |          |              |          |               |
| Student Fe |               |       |            |       |          |       |                    |       |              |          |              |          |               |
| Student Ge |               |       |            |       |          |       |                    |       |              |          |              |          |               |
| Student El |               |       |            |       |          |       |                    |       |              |          |              |          |               |
| Student Co |               |       |            |       |          |       |                    |       |              |          |              |          |               |
| Student Jh |               |       |            |       |          |       |                    |       |              |          |              |          |               |
| Student Se |               |       |            |       |          |       |                    |       |              |          |              |          |               |
| Student Cl |               |       |            |       |          |       |                    |       |              |          |              |          |               |
|            | Speaking task |       | Vocab task |       | Feedback |       | Brainstorming task |       | Grammar task | Feedback | Reading task | Feedback | Speaking task |

### 2. Changing interaction patterns

As feedback had been identified as a time when students' attention tended to lapse more frequently, changes to interaction patterns during feedback activities was chosen as the first intervention to test in class. The technique of 'buzz groups', as outlined in Scrivener's handbook for teachers (2011:64), was used. Students were initially grouped in threes, checking one activity from homework done the previous night, and one student was sent from each group to each of the other groups to pass on their information, until all activities had been checked. The results are shown in Table 3 (all times a.m.).

**Table 3: Inattention behaviours with a change to interaction patterns during feedback**

|            | 09.00 | 09.30 | 09.45 | 10.00 | 10.10 | 10.15 | 11.19 |
|------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Student Ge |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Student Fe |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Student Se |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Student Co |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Student Yj |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Student El |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Student Ri |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Student Dw |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Student Ja |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Student Jh |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Student Cl |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Student Jb |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |

It can be seen from the results that there was a drop in the number of inattention behaviours in the period observed, during which the buzz groups were used. The novelty of the interaction, along with the movement seemed to be helpful in making sure that students were not distracted. It also led to a drop in those moments of dead time in which students reach for their mobile phones. Eliminating these moments of inactivity or passivity seemed to be important in maintaining attention in the classroom. This suggests that in considering the timings of each activity, teachers need to ensure that students are not only engaged by the relevance and intrinsic interest of the task, but also are kept occupied.

### 3. Integrating mobile phones into classroom tasks

For the next intervention, inappropriate mobile phone use was selected as the problem to be dealt with. As mentioned in the discussion of results of the email poll, 'negative' measures such as banning or restricting the use of mobile phones may have prejudiced the positive atmosphere in the classroom. It was decided therefore to try to co-opt mobile phones, in order to get the students to see them as language learning tools. This intervention focused on the use of an exercise taken from Meddings and Thornbury's *Teaching Unplugged* (2009:70), which I had used successfully with other classes and which I felt was useful for a *Cambridge English: Advanced* (now known as C1 Advanced) class.

In this activity, students were asked to complete spider diagrams, like the one in Figure 4, using their mobile phones to check online dictionaries, collocations websites and online thesauruses.

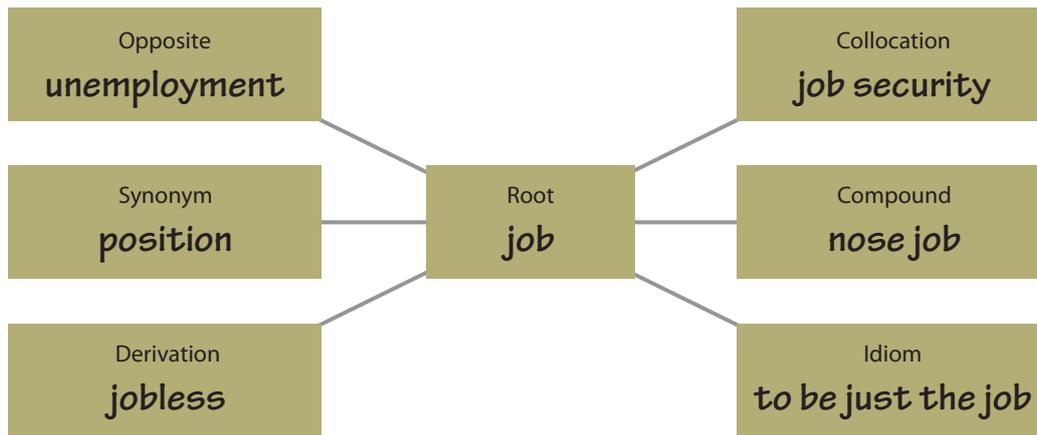


Figure 4: 'Connections and directions' (Meddings and Thornbury 2009:70)

The results are shown in Table 4 (all times a.m.). It can be seen that feedback is still an issue. It can also be seen that using mobile phones did not in itself reduce inattention behaviours. There might be sound pedagogical uses for mobile phones in class, but the students' reaction to the task suggested that being asked to look up words themselves did not fit with their expectations of what the lessons would be. Two questions for further investigation arise from this. Firstly, on average, how much learner training is required to encourage the students to find meanings for themselves? Secondly, to what extent do students consider their mobile phones to be their private domains and therefore not want to use them for study purposes?

Table 4: Markers of inattention with students using mobile phones during vocabulary tasks

|            | 09.30    | 09.55              | 10.05         | 10.12      | 10.23    | 10.34          | 11.05 | 11.25      | 11.53 |
|------------|----------|--------------------|---------------|------------|----------|----------------|-------|------------|-------|
| Student Yj |          |                    |               |            |          |                |       |            |       |
| Student Se |          |                    |               |            |          |                |       |            |       |
| Student Jh |          |                    |               |            |          |                |       |            |       |
| Student Fe | ■        |                    |               |            |          |                |       |            |       |
| Student Ri |          |                    | ■             |            |          |                |       | ■          | ■     |
| Student Dw | ■        |                    |               |            |          |                |       | ■          | ■     |
| Student El |          |                    |               |            |          |                |       |            |       |
| Student Ge | ■        |                    |               |            |          |                |       | ■          |       |
| Student Co |          |                    | ■             | ■          | ■        |                |       |            |       |
| Student Cl | ■        |                    |               |            |          |                |       |            |       |
| Student Jb |          |                    | ■             | ■          | ■        |                |       |            |       |
|            | Feedback | Practice test task | Speaking task | Vocab task | Feedback | Listening task |       | Vocab task |       |

#### 4. Use of background noise in class

For the next intervention, a colleague recommended using a website called *Coffitivity* (coffitivity.com) to produce a low level of background noise – a low hum of recorded conversation. The plan was to use this during speaking tasks, to minimise awkward silences and to encourage students to maintain their conversations by creating a relaxed atmosphere. It was used during a running dictation activity where the students were collecting sentences from around the room and then putting them back together in the correct order to reconstruct a complete text.

Although some research shows that music played in the background has no effect on students' levels of attention (for example, Sigman 2005:21), I was curious to see if something more akin to white noise would have any effect.

The results are shown in Table 5 (all times a.m.). There is a drop in inattention behaviours over the control observation. The students were asked for feedback after using the website, and while some felt that it had helped, one or two said that it had been a distraction. The use of the website was also discussed with the colleague who had recommended using it, who reported that after a period of consistent use, his students had also said that it had become a distraction. One conclusion that strongly suggests itself is that this intervention can be useful when used judiciously, but once the novelty wears off, it can become an annoyance for some.

**Table 5: Markers of inattention with the use of soft background noise**

|            | 09.44    | 09.51              | 10.06    | 10.13             | 10.37 |
|------------|----------|--------------------|----------|-------------------|-------|
| Student Jb |          |                    |          |                   |       |
| Student Ja |          |                    |          |                   |       |
| Student Se |          |                    |          |                   |       |
| Student Cl |          |                    |          |                   |       |
| Student Yj |          |                    |          |                   |       |
| Student Ri |          |                    |          |                   |       |
| Student Dw |          |                    |          |                   |       |
| Student Fe |          |                    |          |                   |       |
| Student Co |          |                    |          |                   |       |
| Student El |          |                    |          |                   |       |
| Student Ge |          |                    |          |                   |       |
| Student Jh |          |                    |          |                   |       |
|            | Feedback | Practice test task | Feedback | Running dictation |       |

### 5. Boarding instructions to reduce teacher talk time

The final intervention was to board instructions for each activity to reduce unnecessary teacher talking time (TTT), and to avoid creating passivity and disengagement through students not clearly understanding what they were supposed to do.

Prior to the lesson, instructions were written in bullet points on interactive whiteboard slides for each activity, and were checked through the use of instruction check questions.

The results of this intervention are shown in Table 6 below (all times a.m.). They show that while there was some reduction in inattention behaviours, lapses were still occurring during feedback, underlining previous findings in this area.

**Table 6: Markers of inattention with boarding of instructions to reduce unnecessary TTT**

|            | 09.15      | 09.25    | 09.40         | 09.56    | 10.03      | 10.24          | 10.30    | 11.25      | 11.39 |
|------------|------------|----------|---------------|----------|------------|----------------|----------|------------|-------|
| Student Cl |            |          |               |          |            |                |          |            |       |
| Student Yj |            |          |               |          |            |                |          |            |       |
| Student Jh |            |          |               |          |            |                |          |            |       |
| Student Co |            |          |               |          |            |                |          |            |       |
| Student Ge |            |          |               |          |            |                |          |            |       |
| Student El |            |          |               |          |            |                |          |            |       |
| Student Dw |            |          |               |          |            |                |          |            |       |
| Student Fe |            |          |               |          |            |                |          |            |       |
| Student Ri |            |          |               |          |            |                |          |            |       |
| Student Se |            |          |               |          |            |                |          |            |       |
| Student Ja |            |          |               |          |            |                |          |            |       |
|            | Vocab task | Feedback | Speaking task | Feedback | Vocab task | Listening task | Feedback | Vocab task |       |

## Conclusions

These interventions show that students' attention tends to lapse in the more mechanical, instructional parts of the lesson, as reported by Cummings Hlas et al (2017). Future investigations might focus more on the interaction of attention and feedback in the classroom. They also show that any intervention, if overused, ceases to be useful and becomes a source of irritation. Having said that, an appeal to multiple senses, and the judicious use of movement in the classroom, can maintain flagging attention. Finally, in planning lessons, attention needs to be paid to the whole lesson: not just the activity, but the outcome and the feedback on the results, and the same attention to variety and interest that is paid to classroom activities needs to be paid to how those activities are administered.

This project made me realise how much of the teacher training I had undertaken was focused on the teaching of the language – on lesson content and on approaches to teaching, and how much, for me, there is still to learn about classroom management. The challenge for those teaching classes with open enrolment is to try to minimise any clash between classroom management techniques and the students' expectations – as seen with the mobile phone intervention. Also, in terms of learner training, is little and often the best approach? What this project underlined for me was the need to keep a log or journal over an extended period of time, which would allow me to better identify successes and failures in terms of activities and classroom management techniques. It seems to me that developing the suite of attention-maintaining techniques that I had hoped to do at the beginning of the project will take longer than I had first envisioned, and while it is possible to make a difference to student attention, there is no instant fix.

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