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**Improve your classroom practice through action research -
Become a researcher of your own instruction**
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Research has shown that teachers can initiate change for themselves through a process called action research. By systematically trying new ideas and recording the responses teachers and students can work together to improve classrooms. Action research involves a four step cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Carr and Kemmis, 1983; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Elliot, 1991; McNiff, 1993).   A cycle might be as short as one class or as long as several classes. In order to make changes in their practice a teacher or a group of teachers must go through many cycles of this process. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Action research is conducted in a series of cycles
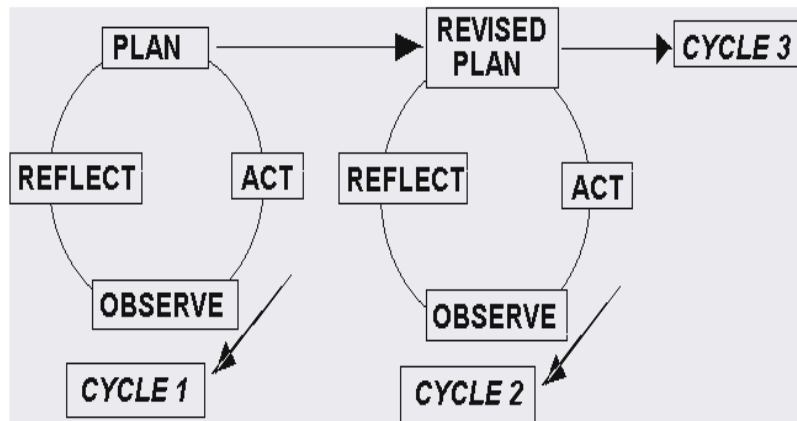
Action research is a mode of inquiry through which teachers learn to critically reflect on their own practice, more closely observe students and their school surroundings, become more conscious of their own beliefs and develop the ability to challenge them, relate what they are curious about to research written by others about similar or related topics, professionally share their educational ideas with other teachers, and transform selves, others and schools into more inclusive milieus. Action research acknowledges that change takes time, learning takes time and that change can best be brought about through the teamwork of varied specialists and practitioners (Bilash, 2001; Bilash, 2004).

In 2000 a group of heritage language (HL) instructors took a university course with me on improving their practice through action research. The group was divided into teams of three or four instructors with common interests in changing their practice. Each group identified a topic and developed a long term inquiry project around that topic. In each

HL action research project the participants engaged in three activities: a research review about the topic; regular weekly meetings that involved trying new ideas, sharing results and setting new goals based on more learning from one another as well as from new readings; and writing a final report that showed what they had learned after the 4-6 month project was completed. By that point in time each team had reported on about 10-20 cycles with notes from every meeting and reflections about every class they had instructed. Here are some of the results.

A New report card

German Vidal, Modesta Gonzales and Gloria Diaz explored the possibility of developing a new report card for HL schools. They had two goals. In the short term they hoped to help students to understand better what was evaluated in a Heritage Language class. Because the team members spoke different languages, they decided to create a report card that could be used in all HL schools. Thus, in the longer term their vision expanded to create a Universal Heritage Language Report Card that every teacher in the province could use.

The team began by sharing their concerns about report cards so that they were all 'on the same page'. Then they did a library search and each team member read an article and reported on it every second week. They took turns so that each person had two weeks to complete the reading and prepare a report for the others. One week two people shared their reading; the next week the other members shared what they had read. They read broadly to learn about the purpose of evaluation and recent trends in reporting. Then they examined report cards used in different public, catholic and heritage language schools and discussed what the best features of each were by comparing what they saw with what they had read. After several months of meetings they began to develop a format for their own report card and asked other members of the class to comment on it. With revisions from this feedback the team then agreed to take it to their heritage language schools for additional feedback, this time from the principal and other HL instructors. The feedback was not only positive, but again lead to more refinement. Soon after three or four drafts had been developed all team members were satisfied. The report card was even used in some schools that Spring. See Appendix A.

After keeping detailed notes of their weekly meetings (at least a dozen of them) team members were asked to review all of the notes in their binder and complete a final reflection about what was gained from this systematically conducted project. They reported that three important changes had resulted from their collective efforts:

1. As they began to read about evaluation they began to immediately notice more about the learning process of their students. They also found that they wrote better feedback on assignments which in turn resulted in better performance of the students.

2. This weekly practice enabled them to become more precise and concise about what they expected and what they saw in their students' work and performance. As the students were able to understand their own progress in the learning process, they became more motivated to learn and offered the team "very good feedback". As a result the team created categories and sub-categories for each area of the report card. " Our success with this project was with the students - most of the students are willing to come back to school for the next school year."
3. The parents' motivation also increased. Parents expressed their opinions about the new report card stating that they were very pleased to see the Parent's and Teacher's comments boxes. They said it was an excellent way to communicate between parents and teachers and of course this "source of communication benefits100% of the students in their learning process of a heritage language".

Using games in the HL classroom.

Another team of HL instructors-action researchers – Marta Vidal, Jenny Lorca, Francine Riccard and two other instructors - focused their attention on using games in the HL classroom. Like the other team, they began by finding out what research had to say about their issue or concern, in this case, about using games in language learning, particularly with young children. Through the weekly sharing of summaries of research readings about early childhood development (0-8 years) and the use of games, they learned that:

- Games are an important dimension of life and children need to learn games in order to participate in life
- Games can apply to any theme that is being taught
- Play is natural for children and they learn better through doing than sitting and listening to teachers
- Games help develop social and physical skills and teachers have to help and encourage that development
- Games encourage students to talk one another
- Games help develop problem solving skills
- Games give an opportunity for shy students to talk
- Games promote the use of language, including the HL
- Diverse learning environments are needed to serve all the multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983)
- Children learn through experience ad teachers must continue to organize and offer new experiences for them

Each week each member of the team also tried new games in their classroom. They prepared materials, shared them with one another and reported on their successes and the changes that they would like to make in the future. As the weeks passed their confidence grew and their creativity expanded. Their action research binders were also overflowing

as they created new versions of favorite games to match each theme (e.g. numbers, seasons, colours (primary and secondary) and modes of transportation) that they taught as evidence of their action research work. Favorite games varied by the age of the students but included memory games such as Go Fish, action games such as Simon Says, interactional card games, spelling games such as Hangman and relay races and vocabulary games like TV shows such as Win, Lose or Draw or board games such as Pictionary.

By the end of the five month course these teachers also reported many positive changes that had resulted from their collective action research inquiry:

"I love teaching and by learning to teach in more diverse and creative ways, I hope that students will benefit from it. The action research that we researched changed my way of teaching for the better."

"Games and plays are a very valuable source of teaching, they are a good way to break the monotony of teaching the "old-fashioned" method. Games allow students to become active in their learning and thereby increase their enthusiasm for school".

Other groups in the same course reported similar valuable benefits of their action research projects, although each had a different focus:

"Thinking towards the future, action research makes me aware of how little I know and how much I have to learn. I have to make sure that I change some of the themes, increase the materials that I have, create new ones, discard some of the materials I have used until now and at the same time try to maintain the plans and programs of my level, in other words, re-evaluate everything."

"I have had to make the effort to be aware of my own method of teaching. Trying to apply teaching methods to all the different levels of comprehension is not an easy task to accomplish. When you have a method of teaching, it is sometimes difficult to change. It means a lot of extra time, planning new materials and a whole lot of research to do."

"Learning about multiple intelligences helped every student learn according to their own way of learning and processing information".

"I have also found that talking to some colleagues helps you obtain new ideas and different ways of presenting your materials to classes."

"We found that theme-based curricula work very well for Heritage Language classes."

Become a researcher of your own instruction

Follow these five steps to get you started on your own action research project.

Step One: Choosing a topic to research and make changes in your classroom
Begin by creating a binder called "My Action Research Project 2010". Think about your classroom and what you usually do. Then identify something that you would like to change in your HL instruction. Maybe you have been to a professional development workshop and heard about some new ideas that you have not yet had an opportunity to try. Select one of them. For example, I would like to do more pair work in my classroom. Write a paragraph about WHY you would like to make this change and put it in the binder. Share your idea with other instructors, students, your principal, and your family for their views. Action research has both individual and team characteristics. See Appendix B for more guidance.

Step two is Cycle One: Preparing for Change
Learn more about the new idea. You may wish to re-read handouts from the professional development workshop. Or, you may do a google search on the computer in your HL and/or English to learn what has already been written about the topic. Make a copy of everything you find and put it in the binder with the date that you found it. Then make a summary of the notes of the article(s) so that you remember the key points and can share them with others who may be interested. Hopefully your search includes some new activities to try. See Appendix C for more detail.

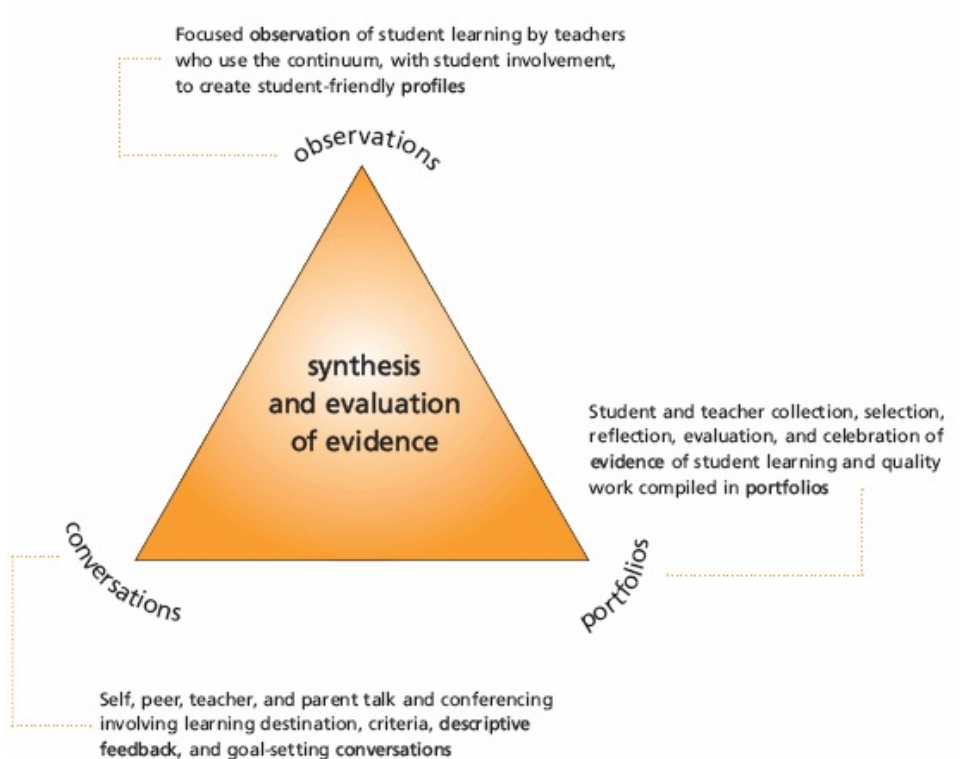**Step Three is Cycle Two: Change in the Classroom**
Try one of the activities in your next class. You may need to prepare materials in order to use the activity. Make a copy of the new activity and put it in your binder along with the date. After the class write several paragraphs about how the activity went. You might wish to answer the following questions. See Appendix D for further reference.
1. How do you feel as you did the new activity? Pride? Excitement? Nervousness?
2. How did the students respond to the new activity? Did they enjoy it? Was there some confusion over the instructions? (There often is when students are asked to do something that they have never been asked to do before, so don't let this get you down.) Did it accomplish the goal you had set?
3. Was the activity at the appropriate level for all students? How could it be made easier? More difficult? How could the activity be improved (for next time)?
4. What extra resources would make the activity clearer for all learners?

Step Four: Keep trying
Based on what you learned from your first try what would you like to do next week? You may wish to re-visit some of the google websites you found earlier, or perhaps talk to a colleague about how things went or for more suggestions. Continue to record your plans, actions, observations and reflections from week to week until you reach your goal. Be sure to record the evidence of success of your changes in your binders along with the dates of everything you write. Evidence can be gathered through observations, conversations and products in the portfolios of your students. See Figure 2 and
http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/tech/lict/let_me_try/assess.html#

Figure 2: Collect evidence of change and progress in students' performance through observations, conversations and products in the portfolios of your students.

Focused **observation** of student learning by teachers
who use the continuum, with student involvement,
to create student-friendly profiles

observations

synthesis
and evaluation
of evidence

Student and teacher collection, selection,
reflection, evaluation, and celebration of
evidence of student learning and quality
work compiled in **portfolios**

conversations

portfolios

Self, peer, teacher, and parent talk and conferencing
involving learning destination, criteria, **descriptive**
feedback, and goal-setting **conversations**

Step Five: Sharing with others
Now that you have completed many action research cycles and systematically recorded
the events, responses and evidence of change, it is time to reflect on the big picture. Look
back at the entire project after four to six months and write a summary about the concern
you identified in Step one and the reason you wanted to make change. Then list what you
learned from all of the books, articles and websites that you read as in step two. Finally,
think about all of the things you learned from doing steps three and four of your project,
as well as the collegial discussion you had throughout the process.

With all of your notes you now have enough data to show what research says about your
topic, what you did, why you did it and the impact that the changes you made had on
your students, other teachers, the school and maybe even the community. This is worth
sharing with others. Through such professional sharing all instructors improve their
practice and reach "a position of shared values and understanding through dialogue"
(McNiff, 1993, p. 8), one of the philosophical goals of action research. Use Appendix E
to help you.

Have I convinced you to undertake an action research project yet? I hope so. Use the
previous steps and sheets in the appendices to help you begin and progress. And

remember that you can contact me at any time for help or advice: olenka.bilash@ualberta.ca Good luck!

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APPENDIX A
Universal Heritage Language report Card

APPENDIX B
STEP ONE: Choosing a topic to research and make changes in my classroom

1.Describe your typical weekly lesson

Time	Focus and sample activities	Self-assessment – how satisfied are you with what you do?

2. Identify the overallstrengths in your classroom (of students and self)

3. Identify the overall weaknesses or areas needing strengthening in your classroom (of students and self)

4. Identfy the areas that you would like to try to change and why

5. Discuss the idea with your students. What was their input? If you did not discuss it with them, why not?

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6. Discuss the idea with other instructors in your school. What was their input? If you did not discuss it with them, why not?

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STEP TWO IS CYCLE ONE: PREPARING FOR CHANGE

1. **PLAN** – the first step in making a small change (describe the action-change that you would like to make and why you think it is appropriate)

Date:

2. **ACTION** - the second step in making the small change is to learn more about the change. Do an internet search using GOOGLE to find some articles and information about the topic in your language or English.

Date: **What did I read (title, authors, source, title, publisher)** **What did I learn:**   **Complete one of these boxes for each article you read or website you visit.**

3. **OBSERVE** – the third step in making the small change is to assess the effects or impact of the change (What have you learned that makes you want to try something new in your classroom? How much time will you need to prepare the change?)

Date:

4.**REFLECTION** – the fourth step in making the small change is to think about what was successful and what the next small change might be. It is helpful to write down many possibilities before you choose the one that you will do when you repeat these four steps again. (Are you ready to begin a change in the classroom? Do you need to seek

special permission for anything? Is there an element of risk in the new idea – do students need special footwear, equipment or clothing? How do you feel? Is there anything you are nervous about?)

Date:

APPENDIX D
STEP THREE IS CYCLE TWO: CHANGE IN THE CLASSROOM

1. **PLAN** –Describe the action-change that you would like to make and why you think it is appropriate

Date:

2. **ACTION** - Describe the action-change you made; Did you do anything that you had not planned to do?

Date:

3. **OBSERVE** –What were the effects or impact of the change? How did the lesson go? What did you find difficult and why? How did students react? As you expected? What did you notice about the lesson with the change in it? What seemed better? Worse? Record evidence of student responses or improvements: *observations* in changes in their behaviour or engagement; *conversations* with them in which they reveal or you overhear them making positive (or negative) comments about the changes (or improvements) in their language ability (e.g. using more of the HL or improved accuracy or vocabulary or taking more risks); collect samples of their *products* or projects and gather them in a portfolio for each student before and after the project begins so that you can compare the impact that the change has had. Be sure to have students write the date on their work.

Date:

4. **REFLECTION** –What was successful and what might the next small change be? It is helpful to write down many possibilities before you choose the one that you will do when you repeat these four steps again. Describe possible future actions and why you think they might be appropriate.

Date:

Complete one of the above sheets for each cycle. This may be completed weekly or every second week, depending on your time.   Once you have completed at least eight to ten cycles you may wish to reflect on the overall process.

APPENDIX E
STEP FIVE IS WHAT YOU LEARNED AND WHAT YOU HAVE TO SHARE
WITH OTHERS

Final reflection: What did you learn from being involved in this entire project over the four to six months?

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Summarizing your project for sharing with others: Why should other teachers know about the change you made and what you learned?

Your original concern (or issue)

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What others wrote about the same concern or issue

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What did you think you had to change and why?

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How did you make each change and why? How long did it take to reach your goal? What did you do and what impact did each step of the change have? What impact did the entire change have on you and others?

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How do you know the change was successful ? Do you have samples of students' work from before and after the action research began? Collect evidence of the impact that the change had on students' learning, your teaching, parents' involvement, other teachers, the administration or the community. You can record three types of evidence:

1. Observations: changes that you see (are they good? Do they need improvements? Why?)

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2. Conversations: responses students or staff give you about changes being made. These can be spontaneously generated or in answer to questions you ask in writing or orally. (what did the conversations tell you? How did you act upon what you learn from these conversations or feedback? Why?)

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3. Products (e.g. assignments, sample writing, tests) or projects in students' portfolios:

Date all students work and see the types of changes or improvements your initiative has made.

Final reflection: Why should other teachers know about the change you made and what you learned? How can you encourage them to try some of the things you did?

This sheet can now help you organize your ideas so that you can share them with colleagues in your own HL or in other HL communities.