

Reflections on the Exploration Phase of an EAR Project on Teaching Speaking

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Abstract

This article offers a reflective account of the exploration phase completed for an Exploratory Action Research project on teaching speaking. It was completed over a 6-month period, with the help of a critical friend. The focus of this article is the thought process that the teacher-researcher went through while engaged in the exploration, as well as the way that collaboration with a critical friend pushed the exploration forward. The recount draws on the teacher's diary kept during the whole process as well as the transcripts of recorded meetings with a critical friend, and seeks to highlight the importance of in-depth exploration for teachers' professional growth.

Keywords: Exploratory Action Research; exploration; classroom-based research; teaching speaking; teacher-researchers; mentoring; teachers' professional development

Introduction

The exploration phase in Exploratory Action Research (EAR) is meant for helping teachers to pinpoint the issue to be solved in later stages of the research process (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). While undoubtedly an important step, in my experience, exploration can be rushed through by teacher-researchers. For example, while mentoring an EAR project by a colleague, I observed how quickly she went from exploring to looking for possible fixes to the issue (Mačėnaitė, 2024). Similarly, Mahorkar (2024) and Raju (2024) describe how they struggled to keep teachers on the exploration track before they would jump to solutions. There are several potential downsides to this. One is that teachers end up feeling frustrated thinking that they have already tried everything before truly considering the possible actions, as was the case with my mentee (Mačėnaitė, 2024). They also might formulate very broad goals for the action and reflection stage, which are difficult to work on in the long run, as in Mahorkar's (2024) account. Finally, Smith and Rebolledo (2018) note that without proper exploration, the actual roots of the problem remain unknown:

[...] sometimes, taking a decision too quickly and without exploring the situation further, can involve incorrect assumptions or simply assumptions which may be based on signs and intuition instead of reasons why this situation is happening, as can be explored through the collection of data. (p. 20)

In such cases, action and reflection end up being applied in a trial and error fashion, solely relying on intuition, and the level of their effectiveness is left to chance.

By extension, I believe there is value in unveiling how busy teacher-researchers actually experience the exploration phase in EAR, what is going through a teacher's mind, what

possible obstacles occur, and how they might be overcome. I hope that this account inspires teachers for in-depth exploration of their practices, and possibly helps teacher-research mentors to guide their mentees during this stage of research as well.

In order to provide all the necessary details for a truthful recounting of my experience, I have divided the article into three parts: first, I will describe my context and the classroom-based research project I engaged in; secondly, I will outline my exploratory journey and the thinking that accompanied it drawing on my diary entries and transcripts of recorded meetings with my critical friend; and, thirdly, I will share my reflections on the completed exploration phase and summarise the elements which supported it in my case.

Part 1. Context and the project

Context

Before diving into the story of my experience it is important to note that I was able to engage in a prolonged, data-driven exploration because my context allowed and facilitated it. I am an English teacher at a private primary school in Vilnius, Lithuania. The classes here are relatively small (10–18 children) and very well-equipped. My pupils are used to completing self-evaluation forms and questionnaires, because the school encourages learners' reflection on their progress as a means to develop independent learners. As a result, collecting data from my learners is usually quick and quite effective.

The teachers' community at the school is collaborative and supportive, albeit very busy with lesson preparations, evaluations, school events, meetings, etc. We are accustomed to being observed; however, it is usually done by the director of quality as opposed to teacher-colleagues and generally perceived as looking for flaws in teachers' work. This is a deeply engrained perception in my context, permeating through the layers of teacher education and their professional development into their practice, in spite of the emphasis in current research that the assessment of teachers' work should avoid being judgemental (Malderez, 2024; Hobson, 2016). Nevertheless, my colleagues and the director of quality do support me in my classroom-based research endeavours and carry out targeted observations for me when they can.

The school encourages teachers to keep learning, although it is mainly associated with attending conferences, workshops, and seminars, while there is little knowledge spread about classroom-based research. Thus, engaging in such projects mostly depends on a teacher's personal motivation and requires dedicating some extra time. However, the comparatively reasonable amount of teaching hours per week, a friendly atmosphere, and the appreciation for teachers' development by the school management are important factors enabling such engagement.

Motivation

At the beginning of the school year 2024–2025, I started feeling like my professional growth has stalled and I was losing the spark in teaching. It was going to be my 4th year at the school and I had already acquired the strategies for classroom management, got used to the way the school is run and began feeling comfortable in that system, built bonds with my learners and colleagues, and had become very familiar with the content of my courses. Naturally, I was not learning as much as I had been during my first years at the school. The most problematic part of it was that despite my best efforts to adapt the lessons to the needs of

each group and to approach the material creatively with my learners, the courses became repetitive for me and I was no longer inspired to deliver them. It seemed like I was hitting the ceiling in my situation and, as a result, plateauing in my profession i.e. teaching was becoming routine (Milstein, 1990). Nevertheless, I was convinced that I could not have already reached the peak in my professional development. Thus, I started looking for professional growth opportunities in order to regain enthusiasm for teaching (Farrell, 2013).

Choosing the Topic

An area of my practice which I decided to focus on was the way I approached teaching speaking. It was first brought to my attention during a DELTA course feedback session, when my tutor noted that I seemed to be very comfortable with grammar and vocabulary topics, while teaching speaking was pushed a little aside. This sharp observation made me admit to myself that I was avoiding speaking activities in my lessons. Such inclination probably stems from my background in linguistics and my belief that focused and structured classes aid learning. In contrast, during speaking tasks it is much more difficult to manage the noise level, to maintain control of my learners' behaviour, their output, and their improvement. There are also indications that language teachers for whom English is an additional language, find teaching grammar to be a safer ground than teaching speaking (Medgyes, 2021; Selvi, 2024), and this could have played a role in my case too. Whatever the reason, the DELTA tutor's feedback was later echoed in conversations with some of my learners, whom I had been teaching for a couple of year – they observed that speaking was what they struggled with the most. As a result, I now had substantial grounds for looking into the way I teach speaking.

The Research Project

I had found classroom-based research to be the most effective way of professional development in the past, which is why I turned to it in this case, too. In order to really delve into my practice, I decided to spend the whole school year on this project. This was also appealing because I was curious about the effect of a long-term research project on my professional development. The overall goal which I had set for myself before starting the project was to transform my practice through thorough exploration and focused actions.

I believe that it is easy to abandon such self-initiated projects unless they have a clear structure and there is a sense of accountability. Therefore, I approached a fellow member of the MenTRnet community (<https://mentrnet.net/>), Ella, whom I had taken notice of in previous teacher-research conferences, and asked her to be my mentor during this year-long quest. Ella was very kind in accepting and suggested the role of a critical friend instead of a mentor. The suggestion was particularly fitting to my situation, because critical friendship in teacher professional development implies a supportive relationship, without any hint of subordination (Costa, 2008). This meant that I would be the one responsible for the organisation of my research project and would have a space to reflect on my progress through a constructive and thought-provoking dialogue with my critical friend (Kelley et al., 2022).

Ella and I agreed to meet once a month for the whole school year and to keep notes on our meetings through a shared google document. These monthly meetings became the timeline of my project and the document served as my main planning tool, where I shared and developed all of my ideas for research questions, methods, and data analysis, while Ella could leave her comments, if she so wished.

I have chosen the EAR methodology over any other type of Practitioner Research precisely because I granted myself so much time – sufficient to go through each phase of EAR without stress or pressure. I also liked the combination of exploration plus reflection and action, which I intuitively felt are the steps to be taken in order to transform the way I tend to approach teaching speaking. My research design was therefore based on the “staircase” structure of the EAR process as depicted in Smith and Rebolledo (2018, p. 25):

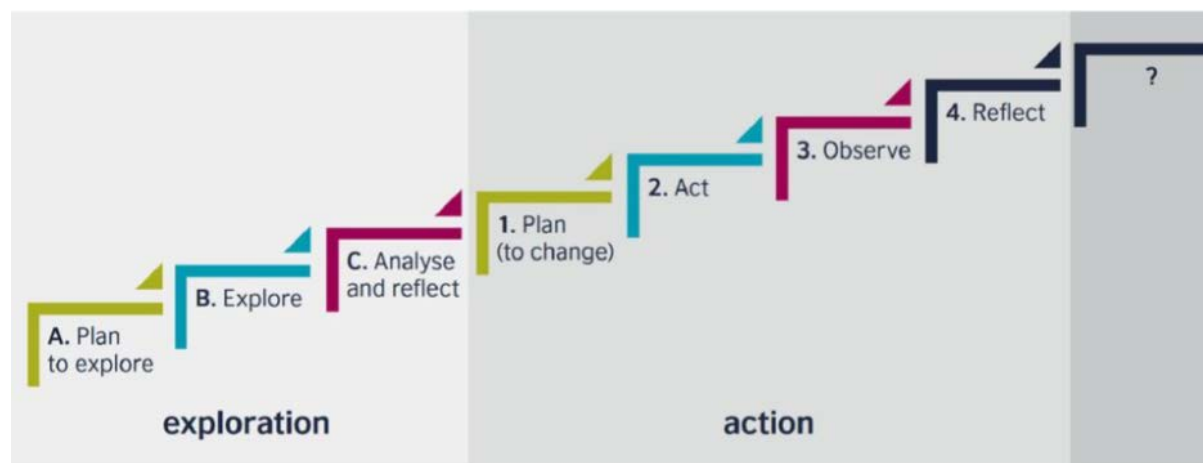


Figure 1.
Steps of Exploratory Action Research

At the moment of writing, I have completed the exploration phase and I am about to embark on the action phase. It took me 6 months (starting in September, 2024, ending in February, 2025), during which I had met with Ella 4 times (in September, October, November, and December 2024), to complete this stage, and to have the results which I could use as a springboard for action and reflection. The following part of this article will be dedicated to the detailed description of the exploration process together with the thinking that accompanied it.

Part 2. Exploration

Initial Research Questions

We kicked the exploration off during our first meeting with Ella, where we discussed the focus of my research, as well as the possible research questions and data collection methods. At this point all I knew was that I wanted to look into the way I teach speaking, because something about it was not working. After a conversation with Ella and a few days of reflections after that, I decided to first look into the techniques that I was already using to teach speaking and the speaking-related areas my learners actually needed to improve. Thus, I ended up with such research questions:

1. What are the areas that my learners need to improve in their speaking?
2. How do I teach speaking (divided into a few more specific questions):
 - 2.1. What are my go-to strategies for organising speaking activities?
 - 2.2. How do they go?
 - 2.3. Are learners engaged / bored?
 - 2.4. Do they speak to me / to each other?
 - 2.5. Is a lot of language generated / not so much?
 - 2.6. In an average lesson, how many speaking opportunities are there for learners?

Data Collection

I used a wide array of data collection tools in this stage. First, I wrote an entry in my reflection journal each time I included a speaking activity into my lessons. These reflections did not have a particular structure and were more like a stream of thoughts. Second, I had a quick evaluation checklist, which I used right after speaking activities to mark the aspects which I felt inhibited my learners' speaking (Appendix 1). Third, I invited observers to my lessons and asked them to take notes on the speaking activities, focusing on: who is speaking, the way the learners participate, and how much language is generated (Appendix 2). Lastly, after the observed speaking activities, I handed out questionnaires to my learners asking about their confidence level when speaking English and the reasons for it, hoping to find their actual areas of struggle when speaking.

Initial Findings

What I ended up with after roughly a month, was a huge amount of data and tentative answers to my research questions. For example, in response to the questionnaire some learners mentioned that they weren't very confident when speaking, because they didn't know or understand some words. Simultaneously, the checklist results revealed that my learners tended to speak Lithuanian or did not find words and ready-made chunks during speaking tasks. Thus, I concluded that my 3rd and 4th graders struggled with speaking because of vocabulary gaps. I had also discovered that speaking tasks in my lessons were teacher-led, since observations, such as the ones cited here were abundant in my diary: *"I hate how the group discussion is always me checking understanding"*; *"Most of the speaking is teacher-led"*; *"It always goes back to me, or mostly goes back to me."* These were then two possible areas to focus on further. We discussed it with my critical friend during our second meeting and by this time I saw possibilities for taking action, saying to Ella: *"now, I've collected a lot of data, <...> and I would like to <...> maybe try something out. So, basically, maybe starting a second phase in this Exploratory Action Research."* (Meeting 2, 17th October, 2024).

After this meeting, I wrote down possible action ideas in the google document: 1) plan speaking activities more purposefully; 2) search for more varied speaking activities where learners could engage with each other; 3) work to provide my learners with expressions to be used in conversations; 4) continue with the data analysis of my diary reflections and the learners' questionnaire replies.

Feeling Lost and Demotivated

However, as the third meeting with Ella rolled in, I started it by saying: *"I have to say that I've done very, very little this month."* (Meeting 3, 26th November, 2024) This was echoed in my diary entry written just before the meeting: *"I'm not doing anything related to this lately."* In fact, I was really unmotivated to follow through with the action ideas that I had come up with and the sentiment really baffled me: *"Why the lack of engagement on my part?"* – I asked in my diary.

We spent the bulk of the third meeting with my critical friend analysing the situation that I was in. I kept repeating that *"I feel some change [in my practice]"*, *"I do feel like I've grown already"*, *"I realize something about my practice and it is bettering in some way"*, *"I noticed some change in my practice"* (here and below: Meeting 3, 26th November, 2024). While collecting the data over the previous months, as I was very eager, I had tried new activities,

read up on teaching speaking (namely: Murdoch, 2024; Gabbrielli, 2024; Sandstrom, 2024), reflected on the way I teach speaking, and worked to include more interaction patterns into my lessons, so, obviously, my practice had changed. But the lack of motivation to pursue the action and reflection steps came together with this change. I wondered *“did I get comfortable?”* Maybe *“this is enough for me”* and *“the desired results arrived”*, due to which I was *“less engaged, less <...> energetic about it <...> less willing to put an effort”* into any actions. After all, the action steps that I had planned, meant that I would need to continuously read and meticulously plan new activities, which I found exhausting, and, as I noted *“I am not doing it”*. It wasn’t making sense to me, why did I have to continue with such an effort, if I felt like my practice had already changed for the better? *“It seems like work, but I am not sure of why. Why am I doing it? Of course, expanding my repertoire and all, all of that. But it's work, and it's quite good already. And then this is like extra work.”*

However, at the same time, I was not content about where I had arrived. This was not how I expected the project to unfold. I told Ella that *“It should be more like a snowball effect”* through which I would *“better maybe one aspect of my teaching”* and thus grow as a teacher. Where I was at now, however, made me feel like the improvement was rather haphazard. I started feeling overwhelmed: *“it's like there's no end <...> I think there's no line where it will be just a perfect lesson”* – I said to my critical friend. This was an exhausting sensation, as if one will never be good enough. I also started doubting all aspects of my project, beginning with my data collection and ending with my initial notion that teaching speaking was something I needed to work on: *“maybe it wasn't a problem to begin with?”*. Nevertheless, I had clear reasons why I started the project, which helped to rebut this idea. A more convincing direction of thought was that even though there was more speaking in my lessons now and I was more conscious of how I conduct these activities, I still didn’t quite know what in earnest the problem was – why did my learners feel like they weren’t improving in their speaking? In other words, what I had done so far was like putting a plaster on the wound without finding the cause for it. I realised that I still didn’t know what aspects of my practice I needed to work on and I was asking my critical friend *“what could be next?”*

A Deep Dive

Replying to my question Ella reminded me that I had already done a lot and needed to take the positive outcomes into account. She encouraged me to go back and revisit the data to see if it tells me anything else than what I had already extracted in order to answer my initial research questions. My reply to the suggestion was: *“That's exactly the outsider's point of view that I needed because you know, I'm kind of swimming in [this]”*. As I had already spent hours analysing and reflecting on the data, my own approach at that point was that there was nothing more to learn from it. However, in the light of what I knew and how I felt by the third meeting, it made sense to revisit everything I had collected with a fresh pair of eyes. Thus, Ella’s supportive and insightful input here motivated me and helped me out of the apparent dead-end.

As a result, I returned to the analysis step of the exploration phase (Figure 1). First, I went through all the learners’ responses to the questionnaire, sorting them again, scanning them for key words, and setting up two lists: things that my learners found inhibited their speaking and things that they deemed helpful (Appendix 3). Next, I did the same with my diary. I read through it and listed all the different activities that I had used to teach speaking, including their brief evaluation – was it an effective activity and why / why not? I then collected key words from this evaluation and also ended up with two lists of criteria: what makes a successful and

an unsuccessful speaking activity for me. I was hoping to locate precisely the aspects of my practice I could fix in the action stage.

At this point I experienced an aha! moment, as I realised that I had already had really successful speaking lessons which I wrote about in my diary. For instance, in the middle of September we had a lesson where my learners role-played interviews, which we also filmed. After the lesson I noted in my diary: *“They were very interested and they said many beautiful things. B. said that the lesson was very interesting. They spoke quite a lot.”* At the end of September, after a lesson meant for practicing phrases with present participles or infinitives, I wrote: *“This was a good task, they were engaged and spoke a lot.”* Looking at the lists of criteria for successful and unsuccessful activities that I had made and with Ella’s supportive comments ringing in my ears, I thought that these instances of good practice are precisely the moments I should look deeper into and learn from (Smith et al., 2021).

Then, as I wrote in my diary, *“instead of asking what is wrong and missing from my class, I thought, but what makes a successful speaking class?”* This led to the formulation of a new research question:

What are the criteria for a successful speaking activity?

The criteria obtained through diary analysis provided the bulk of the answer. I also added the criterion about having enough vocabulary to my list, based on the initial checklist-based evaluation results. Key words from learners’ questionnaires shadowed some of my criteria and provided a few more. In this way, I ended up with a set of criteria defining a successful speaking activity for both my learners and me.

Table 1.
Combined criteria related to successful speaking activities

My reflection and checklist evaluations	Learners’ questionnaires
1. Learners are engaged in the task	
2. A lot of language generated	
3. Learners speak EN	
4. Learners like / are interested in the content (texts, topics)	Activity is fun
5. Many learners participate	
6. Learners had the language for speaking	Know the language to use
	7. Feel prepared
	8. Collaborate with each other well
	9. Activity and instructions are clear
	10. Complete the activity in time

My next step was to understand what hides behind these criteria – what did I do in my successful lessons to meet them? This led to the following research question:

What are the elements of a successful speaking activity?

To answer it, I converted each criterion into a question, e.g. Why are learners engaged in the task? In some cases, I knew the answer myself, but for most of them I had to scan my diary

entries. I had 16 entries by then, in which I looked for the mention of these criteria and the classroom practices that were attached to it. The thematic analysis revealed a collection of elements, contributing to successful speaking activities in my lessons:

- Interesting topic / input / activity (games / problem solving) / learners can talk about themselves
- It is well planned
- Work in pairs / groups / with friends
- Instructions are clear (clearly explained / evident in the activity what to do)
- Learners know the language to be used / get enough help with the language
- Clear criteria for successful completion
- Example
- Enough time
- Time limit

Deep Exploration Outcomes

At this point, I could not have felt more empowered. The final list of elements emerged from exploring my practice and my learners' experiences, which meant that it was bottom-up and practice-led, reflecting the specific context of our classroom. My lessons have to be useful to my learners first and foremost and I am the person who is the most tuned into the shortcomings of my class. Therefore, having this list and knowing what particular techniques and elements I need to strive to incorporate into my practice in my specific context felt incredibly empowering and truly transformative. This sentiment is reflected in my diary entry, after I had turned the elements into an observation sheet (Appendix 4) and invited the director of quality to my classroom. Comparing the results from this observation and the earlier ones, I noted:

".. the list feels right to me. I tested it out, I asked L. to observe my speaking activity using these criteria. And her observation was much more fruitful than the ones I did in the beginning, which I actually ended up not using here because they don't tell me much, except that I speak a lot. They felt off point, I felt like they did not cover the reason or pointed out the main problem of the ineffectiveness of my speaking activities."

In contrast, this time I felt like the observation results were "laser sharp", as I told Ella during our 4th meeting (Meeting 4, 28th December, 2024). While the initial observation results, which I obtained in September, were mostly positive and descriptive, now I knew that the observer will have no other option but to mark the exact elements that my day-to-day speaking activities are missing. For example, one thing that the director of quality pointed out this time, was that there was no active listening task during the speaking activity, meaning that learners had no incentive to listen while the others were speaking and therefore got distracted and bored. I reflected in my diary that "Obviously, it's a planning issue." Thus, I concluded that the list of successful speaking activity elements which I had compiled was to the point: "I do feel like if my speaking lessons lean on those elements that I listed, they will become better."

By the time of writing, I have collected data from 4 observations and I have discovered further elements which I can include in my daily speaking activities. My long-term goal now is to ensure that these elements become a part of my routine, as I believe that in order to transform my practice I need to build new habits.

Part 3. Final reflections

When I look back on my exploration journey, it seems to have been exhausting but worthwhile. It was by no means a straightforward one – instead it was more like an upward moving cycle, resembling the spiralling process of action research (Burns, 2010). My initial research questions only served me for data collection, and it seemed that I got nowhere by answering them. I believe that having just started the exploration, I was still not in a position to formulate what I needed to look into. I had to go through a lot of data to actually pinpoint the issue. By the 4th meeting with Ella, when I told her about my new research questions, I felt like I had climbed over a high mountain, or have emerged from really deep woods. Even though I was 4 months into my exploration and was again at the place where I had just formulated the research questions, this time I was immensely more informed and more knowledgeable about what I wanted to know and what was happening in my lessons during the speaking activities. This knowing was deeply empowering.

In retrospect, I can also see that there were certain elements which were particularly helpful for me to stay on the process of exploration and to make the most of it:

1. Having time – the fact that I was not restricted by time and could spend as many weeks as I felt fit for exploration was a true blessing, as otherwise it would have been too stressful. Having time for data analysis was also crucial.
2. The critical friend – Ella's presence provided me with a sense of accountability to have something to show for our meetings, and thus to plan my tasks accordingly. In addition, her input, support, and the fact that I could run my ideas past a person, who is knowledgeable about and experienced with classroom-based research and reflection, helped to sustain and advance my exploration.
3. Keeping the reflection diary – the diary proved to be the most useful tool of the ones that I had employed for data collection. I was very content that I kept it diligently throughout the whole exploration and that I did not restrict myself with a particular system of writing as a lot has emerged from the stream of thoughts.
4. Collecting feedback from my learners – it proved to be a valuable addition to my diary reflections. First, it helped to confirm some aspects which I found from my own observations and reflections, i.e., helped triangulate my findings (Burns, 2010). Second, I could add important points to the list of elements based on the learners' answers. As the lessons need to be helpful for the learners, first and foremost, I find that getting their perspective can be incredibly revealing.

Overall, what the experience has taught me was the usefulness of an in-depth exploration before taking action. For one, I learnt to appreciate my good practices and the benefits of looking closely at such instances. In addition, through conversations with my colleagues and a close inspection of the initial data, I could locate aspects of my practice which I initially thought to be irrelevant, or considered to be working well during my lessons. This, in turn, has created ground for a much more targeted problem solving in the later phase of EAR.

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The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

There is no financial interest to report.

I hereby certify that the submission is my own original work and is not under review at any other publication.

Appendix 1: An extract from the evaluation checklist.

Date	09-17	09-20	09-26	09-30	10-03	10-08	10-08	10-09	10-10	10-14	10-15	10-16	
Grade	IV	IV	III	IV	III	III	III	IV	III	III	III	III	
Didn't have ideas	+												1
Didn't find words				+		+		+	+	+	+		6
Didn't find correct expression		Some	some						+	+	+		5
Lacked grammar (couldn't make a sentence)								+		+	+		3

Appendix 2: Extract from the initial observation.

Brief description of activity	Who is speaking	How are learners participating	Amount of language generated / length of the speaking activity?	My reflection
Lesson introduction	Teacher	Listen	Short, up to 1 min.	
Word revision	Learners, teacher corrects and calls on learners	Raise their hand and wait to be called upon, then say one word each.	Up to 3 min	
Learners talk about the clothes they wear using the lesson vocabulary.	Teacher asks questions, learners answer	Most learners answer yes / no, some say a sentence	Around 5 min.	

Appendix 3: List of elements affecting learners' confidence when speaking positively and negatively, based on key words from their questionnaires.

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They know the language (forms / words); • Are prepared to do the task; • Completes in time; • Completes without mistakes (they know the language); • Work well with partners; • It is clear what to do in the activity; • It is fun. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of time; • Don't understand well what do in the activity; • Need and don't get enough help with the language to be used in the activity; • Class management is off (noisy classroom).

Appendix 4: Extract from the second observation.

A short description of activity	Speaking in a circle with the teacher
Are the kids interested?	Some are interested, others are not
Are there any issues with planning? If so, what?	Some could be writing, noting down what the others are saying (lack of active listening)
Are the kids working in groups / pairs?	+
Are the instructions of the activity clear to the kids?	+
Aren't the kids lacking help with the language?	Teacher helps when kids need it
Are the success criteria for activity completion clear?	+
Was there an example?	+
Did the kids have enough time to successfully complete the activity?	+
Was there a time limit?	
Was the activity successful?	

