

Case Study: How We Learned and Grew Through Action Research!

Hello, friends! I want to tell you an amazing story about how our school team learned, made mistakes and found its way in the big project "NIS/Sshare". It was a real adventure, full of discoveries and important lessons. Our main goal is to make this project live its own life, so that it works **systematically, without constant control** and orders from above. And also - so that we can teach not only our school, but also other schools how to conduct research correctly and interestingly. Only in this way will we understand how firmly the project "NIS/Sshare" has gained a foothold!

How did it all start?

It all started in 2020, when our school, where more than 5,000 students study and more than 200 teachers work, decided to participate in the SHARE project competition. We didn't think back then that we would delve so deeply into research! Our school was chosen, and we began conducting **research in the 5th "X" grade**, working with them for three whole years. And you know what? The results were not long in coming! By the 7th "X" grade, we saw how **the quality of students' knowledge had become significantly higher**. Teachers noticed how the children began to "open up", and parents said that their children became interested in learning, their motivation grew, and, most importantly, they became **self-organized**!

While working on the research, teachers gained a better understanding of how everything works, became more interested in **joint lessons**, and paid special attention to **reflection**—that is, thinking about what worked and what didn't.

Our goals and challenges in the project "NIS/Sshare"

When in May 2024 we were offered to participate in the NIS/Sshare project from September 2024 to November 2025, we were incredibly happy! Why?

Firstly, over the course of 4 years, the SHARE project has changed our **worldview** not only in teaching but also in life. We have become different people! Yes, we make mistakes, and that is normal. Thanks to the project, we have learned to **work on mistakes, reflect and be each other's "critical friend"**. Together we have found solutions, doubted, listened to each other and turned to literature to learn from the experience of others.

Secondly, we understood that it was serious and would not be easy, because we had to work with colleagues from NIS schools, and we are teachers of an ordinary comprehensive school. But we consciously went for it, because **competition gives birth to development!** In May 2024, our core group presented a reflective report on the SHARE study, and out of 25 schools, we, along with 10 other Astana schools and 10 NIS branches, were chosen to participate in NIS/Sshare. We were in seventh heaven!

Overcoming Difficulties: School, Teachers and Students

Our school was different in that we had **two buildings**, not very close to each other. At the beginning of this school year, the second building became a separate school, and many teachers from our volunteer group stayed there. And I moved to the main building, where new students, parents and an almost unfamiliar group were waiting for me. I was worried that this could become a problem, but, to my great joy, I was wrong! Thanks to the support and understanding of **the school principal, administration and colleagues** from the main group, we were able to successfully carry out research work.

Our Team and Training

At the beginning of the school year, we formed our team: **the school principal and 4 teachers**. The project coordinator (that's me!) completed four main trainings in Astana, which were conducted by the company's trainers, as well as honorary professors of the University of Cambridge Colin McLaughlin and Catherine Evans.

Thanks to the effective plan of the trainers, our core group participated in online webinars and received support together with the research group of the NIS Ust-Kamenogorsk branch. Then the teachers of the core group disseminated the acquired knowledge in the school and began to apply it. All this was supervised by the school coordinator.

We distributed the roles in the team as follows:

- **Principal:** Responsible for strategic planning, resource management and overall coordination of change.
- **Coordinator:** Creates conditions for teachers to enjoy conducting action research.
- **Teachers:** Conduct research systematically, work collaboratively.

Our overall goal is **to conduct action research in practice, support teachers, improve learning and the classroom and school situation, and enhance teacher leadership.**

How did we research? Our focus

Conducting action research is a very effective method for understanding the capabilities of 7th grade students. There are 15 7th grade classes in our school, and last year the results for quality of education and motivation were low. We talked to the class teachers and identified the problems.

We formed a **group of volunteers**, held a seminar for them on systematic research and told them about action research. The class teachers suggested observing three students with low motivation: **Student A** (irritable, disobedient, average

knowledge, does not complete assignments), **Student Y** (understands the material, but requires supervision), **Student Z** (unstable, reluctant to attend classes).

In October, we designed a research plan **to increase students' interest and motivation in learning by improving their text comprehension skills.**

What have we learned? Results of surveys and focus groups

To identify the main problem, we conducted **a survey and focus groups** among students, parents and subject teachers.

Results of a focus group with 7th grade "X" students:

- **Interests and favorite subjects:** Physics, algebra, geometry, chemistry.

Reasons - teachers' friendliness, answers to questions, listening skills.

Conclusion: students value friendly and supportive relationships.

- **Unfavorite subjects:** Kazakh language, Kazakh literature, geometry.

Reasons - teacher's strictness, lack of attention, unclear notes, lack of explanations.

Problems: negative influence of the teacher on the emotional and educational level; assignments do not match the students' level.

- **Working with text:** Favorite tasks - finding key words, identifying the author's ideas, creative tasks.

Difficulties - lack of vocabulary work, quiet voice of the teacher, fear of asking questions. **Conclusion: students need support when working with text, they are more interested in creative tasks.**

- **Students' suggestions:** Teachers should be friendly, be able to listen, give feedback, introduce vocabulary work, speak clearly and loudly, and give more creative tasks.

General conclusions and recommendations from the focus group with students:

- **Improving teacher relationships:** students expect support and goodwill.

- **Activating the learning process:** systematic vocabulary work, more interactive and creative tasks.

- **The role of the teacher:** active participation, attention to problems, timely support.

- **Technical improvements:** solving problems with visibility on the board and the audibility of the teacher's voice.

Barriers identified in the focus group with teachers:

- **Pupils do little self-study.**

- **Little use of various methods of working with text.**

- **Teachers rarely conduct formative assessment and give feedback.**

- **Little vocabulary work.**

- **Pupils' needs and views are ignored.**
- **Difficulties in humanities.**
- **Low motivation** and lack of confidence among pupils.

The overall conclusion from the survey:

- **Reading skills need to be developed.**
- **Students' confidence in school needs to be increased.**
- **Relationships between teachers and students need to be improved.**
- **A culture of respect and acceptance needs to be strengthened.**

School readiness for change and action plan

The school is provided with everything necessary for research. We have planned methodological meetings every second and fourth Thursday of the month at 18:00, provided a convenient schedule for the core group and the volunteer group. The core group helps teachers to reflect.

For an effective school development plan, **systemicity, cooperation, continuity, progressiveness and improvement** are important. We have conducted a SWOT analysis (it is presented separately).

Action plan based on the identified problems:

- **Implementation of reading strategies:** interactive analysis, group reading, reflective questions.
- **Improving school culture:** involving students in school life, programs such as "Pride of School".
- **Training for teachers:** methods of supporting students and developing their strengths.
- **Creating a feedback system:** so that students can freely communicate with teachers.

After the research work, we discussed the data with the volunteers and considered ways to solve the problems.

Our research question and its adjustment

The original research question was: "**How can we increase learners' motivation through text comprehension?"**

This question is important, but we realized that it needed to be more specific and measurable.

A good research question should be:

- **Relevant.**
- **Specific** (object, method, result).
- **Measurable.**

Analysis of our first question:

- **Strengths:** Text comprehension is an important skill, increasing motivation affects academic performance, the question is aimed at developing reading skills and interest.
- **Weaknesses:** "How to increase motivation?" is too general, there are no specific **motivation** indicators.

Therefore, we changed the question to: **"How does the use of text comprehension methods affect students' learning motivation when developing text processing skills?"**

This question is **specific** (object - students, method - text comprehension), allows us to explore the relationship between text comprehension and motivation, and is **measurable** (we can assess the quality of work with the text and the level of interest).

The purpose of the research and the theoretical basis of the methodology

The aim of our research was to increase students' interest in learning and their motivation for learning by improving their text comprehension skills.

We studied the literature on increasing interest in reading and conducting research. We held training seminars, talked about the correct organization of research and ethical requirements.

We relied on the works of such scientists as:

- **L.S. Vygotsky** (the theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development").
- **John Hattie** ("Visible Learning" about reading comprehension strategies).
- **Catherine Snow** ("Reading for Understanding" about the relationship between comprehension strategies and motivation).
- **Gordon J.** (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) (questionnaire "Reading Motivation Questionnaire").

The main stage of the research is “What did we do?”

To increase activity and interest in the lesson, we suggested that subject teachers use:

- **Interactive methods** (group work, questions and answers, discussions).
- **Visual aids** (pictures, diagrams).
- **Creative tasks** (writing a story, visualizing a text).

The observing teachers were given an observation sheet to systematically track the students' actions, their motivation and participation. It was important to:

- **Clearly define the criteria.**
- **Observe each student (X, Y, Z).**

- Take notes with specific examples.
- Provide feedback after the lesson.

We visited lessons and after each lesson we held a **reflective dialogue** with teachers, gave recommendations and jointly planned preparation for the next lesson, creating tasks taking into account the individual characteristics of the students. Joint planning proved to be effective: we realized that the methods used developed reading comprehension skills, thinking skills and creativity.

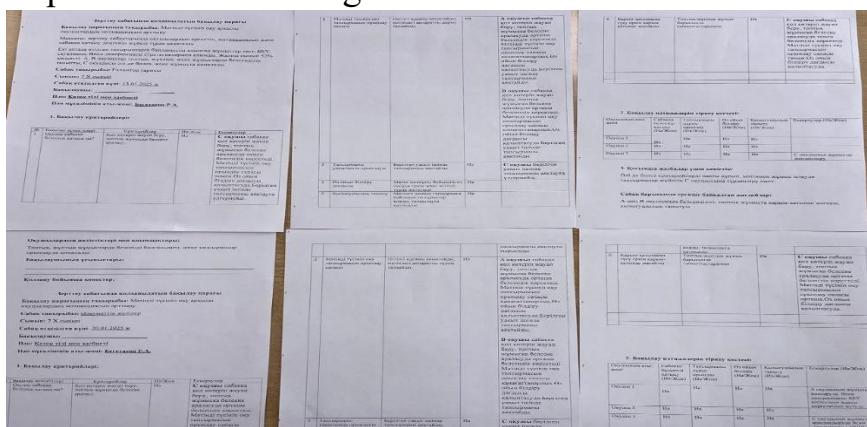
In order to increase motivation through conscious reading, we changed the research plan. We realized that it was necessary not only to measure, but also to **use methods that engage students**.

We based our work on the research conducted by Asalife Mekuria, Elias Woemego Bushisho, and Hailu Wubshet on the topic "The Impact of Teaching Reading Strategies on the Use of Reading Strategies and Critical Reading Ability of Students in English as a Foreign Language Reading Classes." This research project highlights the importance of effective reading strategies.

We used the following methods:

1. Experimental method (but then changed the approach):

- Initially, we divided the class into control and experimental groups, using different reading strategies. We measured the difference in motivation and comprehension of the text using a pre-test and post-test.
- **What we changed:** During the February offline session, we realized that dividing the class into control and experimental groups was too **scientific a method**, and we needed a **pedagogical one**. So we removed the control group and focused only on the experimental one.
- Now we work with one conscious reading strategy (e.g. SQ3R, "thick and thin questions", "Double diaries") for 2-3 weeks, record the changes and plan to implement other strategies.



2. Observation method:

- We observed students' behavior while reading: who shows interest, who asks questions, who uses conscious reading strategies.
- We recorded everything in an **observation log** and analyzed trends.

3. Interviews and reflection:

- After implementing the methods, we asked students open-ended questions: "What has changed in your attitude to reading?", "What strategies help you understand the text better?", "Was it interesting for you to read?".

4. Self-assessment and peer assessment:

- We created a checklist "How do I understand the text" for students' self-assessment. This helps them see their progress and increases motivation. For example: "I can explain the main idea of the text", "I can ask 3 deep questions about the text", "I can retell the text in my own words".

Student observations and findings

We conducted observations of three students (X, Y, Z) in different lessons to assess how text comprehension methods affected their motivation. Criteria included: active participation, quality of assignments, timeliness, ability to express opinions, interest, communication in the group.

Key observations:

- **Activity and participation:** Students X and Y are consistently active. Student Z is improving but still needs support.
- **Quality of tasks:** Students X and Y are doing well. Student Z is struggling but improving.
- **Timeliness:** Everyone tries to be on time, but Student Z sometimes lags behind.
- **Expression and interest:** Everyone is interested and able to express opinions.
- **Group communication:** Students X and Y interact well. Student Z is struggling.

Problems and recommendations:

- The main problem is Student Z's difficulties in understanding the text. We recommend **individualized tasks** for him.
- It is necessary to develop **observation criteria** for more accurate analysis.

Additional comments:

- Students do better **in group assignments**.
- Using methods such as **the Venn diagram** and the **KWKL (Know, Want to Know, Learned)** table has a positive effect on Student A.
- Using the **POPS formula** helps identify Student Z's difficulties.

Conclusions from observations:

- The methods used have a **positive effect** on motivation and understanding of the text for the majority.
- It is necessary **to pay special attention** to students with difficulties and develop individual strategies.
- It is necessary to continue analysis **to improve teaching methods**.

What we learned about...

Using action research

We learned that action research is not just a theory, but a powerful tool for **improving our daily work**. It allows us not only to identify problems, but also to immediately seek solutions, test their effectiveness, and adjust our actions. It is a continuous cycle of learning and improvement. We saw how systematic observation and analysis help us **deeply understand the needs of our students**.

Working with others

Teamwork is the key to success! We learned to be "critical friends", to discuss problems openly, give each other feedback and look for solutions together. Teachers became more interested in joint lessons, sharing experiences. Support from

the school management and colleagues from other schools (NIS Ust-Kamenogorsk) was invaluable. We realized that **teamwork** makes us stronger and allows us to overcome difficulties more easily.

Leadership in this field

As a project coordinator, I realized that **leadership is not only about giving orders, but also about creating conditions**. My task was not just to supervise, but to inspire teachers, to create an atmosphere where they would be interested and comfortable conducting research. This means being a mentor, supporting initiatives, helping to solve emerging difficulties and, of course, learning myself. **Understanding and support from the principal and school administration** were essential for successful leadership.

Necessary conditions in the school and how we created them

For successful action research, the following are necessary:

- **Material, technical and information resources:** Our school is provided with these.
- **Time for methodological meetings:** We created a convenient schedule (every second and fourth Thursday of the month at 18:00).
- **Culture of support and reflection:** We created an atmosphere where teachers are not afraid to make mistakes, where they are helped to reflect and find solutions. The core group actively supported the teachers in this.
- **Openness to change:** The school management was open to our suggestions and supported them.
- **SWOT analysis:** We used it to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, which helped us plan our actions.

Barriers we encountered:

- **Initial uncertainty and fear of making mistakes among teachers.**
- **Resistance to change (although not strong).**
- **Lack of time** among teachers due to heavy workload.
- **Transfer of students and teachers to another building** (but we successfully overcame this!).

Contributing factors:

- **Support from the administration** and the director.
- **Effective trainings from experts.**
- **Cohesion of the core group** and its willingness to share knowledge.
- **Visible results** in students (improved quality of knowledge, motivation).
- **An example of successful work** in the "SHARE" project.

What would I do differently next time?

The most important lesson I learned was:

- **Don't be afraid to adjust the research plan as we go.** When we realized that dividing the class into control and experimental groups was not quite what we needed in an educational research project, we boldly changed our approach. Next time, I would **focus on more pedagogical, rather than strictly scientific**, action research methods from the start.
- Pay more attention to the **individual needs of each student** from the start, not just those who are struggling, but also those who are strong, so that we can develop them further.
- **Involve parents more** in the research process, using them as partners, because they see changes in their children at home.
- **Systematize data collection** in a way that is as simple and understandable for teachers as possible, but still effective. Sometimes too many forms can be intimidating.
- Spend more time conducting **joint reflective sessions** with teachers, so that they not only fill out diaries, but also deeply discuss their observations and findings.

Conclusions and the future

At the end of the school year, we analyzed the results, compared them with the initial data, and assessed changes in motivation.

The effectiveness of action research:

- **Improved quality of education:** We obtained concrete data to improve teaching.
- **Individualized teaching methods:** We identified the characteristics of each student and were able to individualize the process.
- **Professional development of teachers:** Teachers grow by examining their practice and implementing effective methods.
- **Formulation of a school development strategy:** The results of the research are a valuable source of information for the school development plan.

Key Takeaway: Action research can improve the educational process, deepen the connection between students and teachers, and develop schools strategically. We know this is just the beginning, and our research is ongoing! In the future, we hope that these methods will help us develop strategies to improve the social, emotional, and academic development of our students.

I hope you found this story interesting and useful! Do you conduct similar studies at your school? What do you think about it?