

## Action Research: Empowering the Teachers

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### Abstract

*Action research (AR)* is a term used to describe the process of identifying a question or problem in the classroom, collecting data, and interpreting that data. This process is beneficial to teachers and students, since it is concerned with improving the immediate learning environment. AR is thus a practical tool which every EFL practitioner can use as a means of improving the teaching/learning environment, since it involves qualitative and subjective reflection on the learning process as perceived by the main participants – teachers and students. This paper suggests that EFL teachers are well-placed to perform AR in their classes, and offers suggestions on how this might be achieved.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Before describing Action Research (AR) in detail, two interesting stories are offered, since they contain important truths about the way in which AR approaches the EFL situation (apologies are offered to any statisticians reading this article):

1. An airplane takes off from Los Angeles, on the way to New York, where it is expected to arrive 5 hours later. However, after the first hour in the air, the captain makes an announcement: “Hello. This is your captain speaking. I’m afraid one of the four engines has broken down. We can still get to New York with three engines, but it will take us 7 hours. I apologize for the inconvenience.” After the second hour in the air, the captain makes another announcement: “This is your captain speaking. I’m afraid another engine has broken down. We can still get to New York with two engines, but it will take us 10 hours. I apologize for the inconvenience.” After the third hour in the air, the captain makes another announcement: “I’m afraid another engine has broken down. We can still get to New York with one engine, but it will take us 18 hours. I apologize for the inconvenience.” On board are two statisticians. One of them turns to the other and says “I hope the other engine doesn't break down, or we'll be up here for ever!”
2. A student of statistics is accompanying his statistics professor in his car. The student is puzzled, since the professor never stops for red lights, but drives speedily

through every intersection. When the student asks the professor about this, he replies: “Intersections have extremely high accident rates. Therefore I try to spend as little time in them as I can.”

The point about these two stories is not that the statisticians were wrong to make their assumptions, but that they were focusing on isolated factors, without looking at the overall situation. In the first story, we can see that the amount of time spent in the air was inversely proportional to the number of engines (figure 1, below), and that this time was increasing logarithmically as the number of engines decreased. On the basis of these facts, it would seem correct to infer that when the number of engines was further reduced, then the time in the air would approach infinity, so that the plane would never come down. Common sense, on the other hand, tells us that the plane would in fact crash, since there would be no means of propulsion. Thus, if we added the speed of the plane to the graph figure 1 would show us that the plane’s velocity was decreasing along with the number of engines, though the graph would still not allow us to consider factors such as flying height, wind speed, air temperature, ground conditions, and panic-produced human errors.

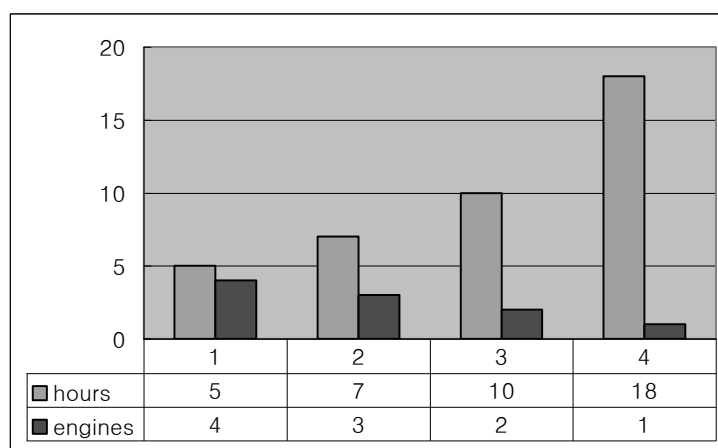


Figure 1: Story 1.

In the second story, the “facts” (i.e that intersections have high accident rates) are again viewed in an isolated fashion. After all, if the probability of having an accident is higher at intersections, then it would seem to make sense to drive through them as quickly as possible. However, common sense tells us once more that these particular “facts” represent a small part of the whole picture, and that the professor’s actions would in fact lead to a greater probability of having an accident. A more effective interpretation of the data would be to exercise extreme care and to proceed with caution at intersections.

These stories illustrate that every situation in life contains a complexity of interdependent factors which, when viewed in isolation, can lead to misinterpretation and to false conclusions. Thus, in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research, current theory and practice is discovering that:

- the EFL classroom is not a predictable place (i.e. educational “truths” cannot be inferred from the examination of isolated factors);
- the EFL classroom is a unique place (the abundance of interdependent variables mean that research conditions cannot be replicated and that generalizations cannot be made from classroom research, since every learning situation is different);
- the learning process is not predictable (students learn what they want to learn, rather than what the teacher teaches)(Allwright, 1984);
- affect drives learning (student beliefs, perceptions, attitudes to learning, anxieties, confidence, motivation, and teacher-student relationships, are more important than cognition in the learning process)(Stern, 1983).

In view of these considerations, the prepositional, “scientific” mode of research that has dominated language learning since the days of behaviorism, is no longer appropriate as a means of describing and investigating social sciences (including education), and educators are turning to different research paradigms, one of which is Action Research.

AR is an educational tool. It describes the process of identifying a question or problem in the classroom, collecting data, and interpreting that data. It centers around the main participants in the learning process (the teachers and students) and investigates their perceived realities within that situation. AR can be used by individual EFL teachers as a means of investigating and understanding the local learning environment (their own classrooms), before telling other teachers and educators (reporting the findings) afterwards. This paper investigates AR from the point of view of Korean EFL teachers and offers suggestions on how AR projects might be set up by them.

## II. DESCRIPTION AND RATIONALE

Two basic types of research are currently employed in educational inquiry. These can be classified as measurement-based (quantitative) and descriptive (qualitative) (table 1).

Table 1: Types of research (adapted from Nunan, 1992, p. 4)

<b>Qualitative research:</b>	<b>Quantitative research:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• concerned with understanding human behavior from the researcher’s frame of reference;</li> <li>• naturalistic and uncontrolled observation;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• concerned with facts or causes of social behavior without regard to the subjective state of the individual;</li> <li>• obtrusive and controlled measurement;</li> <li>• objective;</li> </ul>

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- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| • subjective;                         | • removed from the data;               |
| • close to the data;                  | • verification-oriented, reductionist, |
| • discovery-oriented, exploratory,    | inferential, hypothetical, deductive;  |
| descriptive, inductive;               | • outcome oriented                     |
| • process oriented                    | • reliable: “hard”, replicable data    |
| • valid: “real”, “rich”, “deep” data  | • generalizable multiple case studies  |
| • ungeneralizable single case studies | • stable reality                       |
| • dynamic reality                     |  |
- 

As can be seen from table 1, AR is qualitative and descriptive. It seeks to understand the behaviour of teachers and students from their own points of view, and uses naturalistic, uncontrolled observation to do this. AR is subjective, discovery-oriented, process-oriented, and ungeneralizable. Rather than disregarding subjective factors, AR examines them, with a view to describing the learning environment as it is seen by the participants. This “real”, “rich” approach recognizes that the perceptions of the “players” (teachers and students) represents “truth” for them, and that these factors ultimately determine what happens inside and outside of the classroom. For example, if students show evidence of unrealistic expectations, or if the perceptions of the teacher and the students are shown to be significantly different, then subsequent learning will be adversely affected, whether or not these perceptions have any objective basis. AR therefore investigates and describes such factors, so that they can be acknowledged and modified.

The qualitative, subjective nature of AR has caused its internal/external validity/reliability to be questioned (table 2, below). However, such issues are only problematic when viewed from the propositional (“scientific”, isolationist, experimental, quantitative) perspective. Thus, the first question in table 2 asks whether an independent researcher would come to the same conclusion as the original researcher, upon reanalyzing the data (internal reliability). In response to this question, we need only restate that AR investigates problems as perceived by and as addressed by actors in those situations. In this context, individuals interpret data according to their own perceived realities, in order to find solutions which produce the required results. Once a working solution has been found for the researcher’s unique perception of his/her unique situation, then the purpose of the research has been satisfied, regardless of any differing conclusions which other observers might arrive at. In other words, AR offers the appropriate solution for the appropriate practitioner in the appropriate situation. It might appear that this approach is open to subjectively autocratic interpretations of objective facts. However, it is important to realise that the complex, dynamic nature of every classroom cannot be objectified, and that solutions cannot be imposed externally by a disassociated observer. What works for one teacher might not work for another, and what works for one group of students might not work for another group.

Table 2: Problems of AR relating to reliability and validity (Nunan 1992, p. 17)

Type	Key Question
• Internal reliability	• Would an independent researcher, on reanalyzing the data, come to the same conclusion?
• External reliability	• Would an independent researcher, on replicating the study, come to the same conclusion?
• Internal validity	• Is the research design such that we can confidently claim that the outcomes are a result of the experimental treatment?
• External validity	• Is the research design such that we can generalize beyond the subjects under investigation to a wider population?

The second question in table 2 (above) refers to the possibility of replicating the study. This again, is a propositional question, since AR is concerned only with unique problems in unique learning environments. When we consider variables such as schools, principals, teachers, students, age, gender, proficiency level, fluency level, confidence, motivation, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, anxiety, learning preferences, family backgrounds, peer-pressure, fear of failing, etc., then we can see that every class is different, and that conditions cannot be replicated. An independent researcher, on replicating the study, would of necessity come to different conclusions.

The assumption underlying question 3 (table 2) is causal, i.e. that research should identify cause and effect. However, complexity theory (Waldrop, 1992) shows that the search for causal relationships is pointless: Van Lier (1996) suggests that: "it is useful to regard the classroom as a complex adaptive system" (1996, p. 38) in which "details are all that matters" (Gould, 1993) and that "it is fruitless to search for causal relations" (Van Lier, 1996, p. 38). (Finch, 2001a, p. 105).

The educational context, with the classroom at its center, is viewed as a complex system in which events do not occur in linear causal fashion, but in which a multitude of forces interact in complex, self-organizing ways, and create changes and patterns that are part predictable, part unpredictable. Such changes must be analyzed from the bottom up. (Van Lier 1996, p. 148)

Thus, AR does not seek for causal relationships, but attempts simply to describe the interaction of local variables and to predict the global emergence of learning trends. Rather than claiming that results are dependent on research, therefore, AR investigates the participants and their perceptions, in order to positively influence them, often through raised awareness (on the part of the participants) of the existence and nature of the variables.

Finally, the 4<sup>th</sup> question (table 2) deals with external validity. Once more, this is not an issue for AR, since its purpose is to affect the immediate learning situation. If the results are of interest to other practitioners, then this can be seen as a bonus side-effect. However, Action researchers are saying no more (and no less) than “This is the issue which I investigated. This is how I collected and interpreted the data. This is how I fed my interpretation back into the learning environment. These are the changes I subsequently observed.”

Hence, AR is different from other research in a number of ways:

- i. it is carried out by the practitioner (classroom teachers);
- ii. it can be collaborative or individual;
- iii. it is situational (identification and solution of problems in a specific context);
- iv. it can be aimed at changing things (improving the current state of affairs). (Nunan, 1992, p. 17)

The seemingly ordinary process of identifying a problem in the local classroom, and of attempting to find a solution for that problem, is in itself an act of research, and needs to be carried out systematically in order for reliable results to emerge. Such research is immediately valid, in that it impacts on the local situation. Given the complex, dynamic nature of every language class, and the subjective nature of the inquiry, the “results” of such research cannot be used to infer conclusions about other similar classes. This fact, however, does not detract from the fact that AR activities do indeed qualify as research by:

- i. addressing questions of interest to other practitioners;
- ii. generating data;
- iii. containing analysis and interpretation;
- iv. yielding insights that may be researched in further studies.

### **III. HOW TO USE ACTION RESEARCH**

An important aspect of AR is that it is carried out by the practitioner, who, in the case of EFL studies, is the classroom teacher. AR is thus a means of empowering the teacher by helping him/her to positively affect his/her own situation (and that of the students). Elementary, secondary and tertiary teachers therefore need to believe in themselves as agents of change, and should become actively involved in examining and reporting upon their classrooms. While not wishing to generalize beyond the scope of those classrooms, it is important to recognise that teachers experience the complex, dynamic EFL learning environment firsthand, and that their research can provide invaluable information for others in the same field: i) teachers in similar situations; ii) researchers in Korea who are not based in

the EFL classroom; iii) researchers in other types of institutions; and iv) TESOL/ELT researchers in other countries.

Despite its subjective and qualitative nature, AR does not give “carte blanche” to teachers to make conclusions about their classrooms based on subjective and intuitive impressions. Such factors are acknowledged as important by AR, but must be supported by rigorous research methods, as with any serious system of inquiry. A number of stages therefore need to be followed and documented:

- i. *Planning* action to improve what is already happening;
- ii. *Acting* to implement the plan;
- iii. *Observing* the effects of action in the context in which it occurs;
- iv. *Reflecting* on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent action and so on, through a succession of cycles. (Adapted from Kemmis & McTaggart 1988, p. 7)

Stage ii (above) can be further broken down as follows:

- a. Select your setting (learning situation)
- b. Identify what you wish to evaluate (narrow your focus as much as possible).
- c. Select or design your data collection procedures.
- d. Collect the data.
- e. Describe the data collected.
- f. Analyze these findings with reference to your original purpose(s). (Adapted from Nunan, 1992, p. 4)

### 1. Action Research instruments

Given the qualitative and unsupervised nature of AR, it is important to note that the isolated use of a single research instrument can produce misleading results if undue weight is given to its “findings”. Instead, it is advisable to use a number of these instruments in parallel when investigating a classroom problem. In this way, results can be compared and “triangulated” with greater confidence in their joint implications. Having made this point, a number of descriptive types of research instruments are available for the *Acting to implement the plan* steps (a to f, above).

- |                                    |                  |
|------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Self- and peer-assessment forms | 5. Interviews    |
| 2. Questionnaires                  | 6. Teacher-diary |
| 3. Observation                     | 7. Learner-diary |
| 4. Checklists/inventories          |                  |

### **1) Self-assessment forms**

Learners can benefit greatly from keeping an ongoing record of their learning and of their thoughts about the program of instruction. Teachers can then adjust the program according to this information (formative AR). An example of a self-assessment instrument appears in appendix A.

### **2) Questionnaires**

Questionnaires can be a very user-friendly means of investigating the classroom, providing data which is easily quantifiable. However, it is good to remember that the type of closed responses to which questionnaires typically lend themselves (yes/no, true/false, agree/disagree) give information only about the questions asked, and can therefore be misleading. It is important to pay attention to the design of the questions, to ensure that the “problem” is comprehensively investigated. Another danger inherent to questionnaires is that students sometimes respond with answers which they feel the teacher would like to see, especially if the questionnaire is administered only once. Finally, the teacher needs to consider the language level of the students carefully, since a questionnaire written in the L2 can easily become a test of comprehension rather than of research. An example of an AR questionnaire appears in appendix B. In this instrument, adapted from Fraser (1996), the perceptions of the learners regarding the learning environment is examined.

### **3) Observation**

Observation can be an effective means of identifying and reflecting on the classroom, and can take a number of forms. A traditional method of classroom observation is to invite a colleague to “sit in” and make notes, after which both practitioners can debrief. Another method is to set up a video camera in the classroom, and to let it run. The initial novelty factor for the learners (and the teacher) soon dissipates, and the video can be watched at the teacher’s convenience. As with language tapes, an advantage of this method is that the video can be watched any number of times, and the teacher can pause on significant sections. Such a practice can highlight aspects of the lesson and of the teacher’s practice of which he/she was unaware, and is therefore to be recommended for its own sake, in addition to the more ostensible purpose of investigating a known problem.

### **4) Checklists/inventories**

Checklists provide simple and effective ways of looking at an aspect of the classroom, and can be combined with the observation methods of the previous paragraph. Thus, when the colleague is visiting the class, or when the teacher is watching the video of the class, it can be helpful to have a checklist of items. Below (table 3) is a checklist of teacher-classroom-language, checking for overused classroom-language.

Table 3: Checklist of teacher-classroom-language (frequency of phrases)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
<b>OK.</b>																		
<b>Right then.</b>																		
<b>Good job.</b>																		
<b>Well done.</b>																		
<b>Listen to me.</b>																		
<b>Look at me.</b>																		
<b>Stop what you're doing.</b>																		

### 5) Interviews

Recording interviews with students and with other teachers can provide interesting data regarding their perceptions of classroom variables. However, responses to the more open-ended questions that are typical of interview sessions can prove difficult to itemize when it comes to interpretation. It is necessary, therefore, to take great care in devising interview questions, to ensure that the interviewees keep to the topic and that there is little “unwanted” discourse. As with questionnaires, the language level of the students also needs to be taken into account, so that students feel comfortable in responding, and so that they can express themselves fully. The sample list of interview questions in table 4 (below) shows that it is important to narrow the focus, and to minimize the number of questions, though it can be good to have a “warm-up” question in order to “break the ice”. This particular interview is again examining student perceptions, and takes a group format, with three or four students talking (in English or in Korean according to their preference) to an independent interviewer. The actual interviews can be viewed at: [www.finchpark.com/videos/research/index](http://www.finchpark.com/videos/research/index).

Table 4: Post-course interview (Finch, 2005).

Post-Course Interview. Groups of 3 or 4 students. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you for taking part in this research.</li> <li>• The interviewer will ask you the questions on this sheet.</li> <li>• Answer naturally, comfortably and in your own time.</li> <li>• The interviewer is interested in your honest opinions.</li> <li>• Don't be afraid to say what you think.</li> <li>• This is not a test. There are no correct or incorrect answers.</li> <li>• You can speak in Korean or in English.</li> </ul>	
Q 1:	How do you feel about learning English? (Easy/difficult? Interesting/boring? Useful/waste of time? Etc.)

Q 2:	How do you feel about the textbook used in your English lessons? (Easy/difficult? Interesting/boring? Useful/waste of time? Etc.)
Q 3:	How do you feel about the non-textbook activities that you did this semester? (Easy/difficult? Interesting/boring? Useful/waste of time? Etc.)
Q 4:	Is there anything you want to say about the English lessons you had this semester?
Thank you again for taking part in this research.	

### 6) Teacher-diary

Information provided by ongoing teaching-diaries is not restricted by multiple choice questions or by checklists. Instead, the observations are free, spontaneous and authentic, providing an interesting and direct perspective on classroom practices. As with other types of AR research, teacher-diaries can often highlight issues that were previously unseen, and can facilitate resolution of those issues, simply by encouraging awareness of the factors involved.

### 7) Learner-diary

Learner diaries are also useful means of observing and promoting the learning process. These can be successfully triangulated with other observational instruments. While it is the purpose of AR to derive data from learner-journals, the process of writing a journal about the classroom (and associated topics) can often have the result of heightening student awareness of the learning process, thus having a beneficial effect on that process (Finch 2001b).

## 2 Sample issues

As already mentioned, AR can prove to be an effective “ground-floor” means of investigating EFL classroom problems. It can also bring to light previously unrecognized matters. The following are some representative questions that might be asked when considering the EFL classroom:

1. How much time do I spend talking in the classroom?
2. How do I correct errors?
3. How much feedback do I give to the learners?
4. How do I provide this feedback?
5. How much time do I allow for my learners to interact with each other?
6. How much of my lessons do I spend in teacher-fronted activities?
7. How can I improve my classroom management skills?
8. How much attention do I give to individual learners?
9. How do certain tasks promote collaborative work?
10. Do learners carry out the same task in different ways?
11. How difficult do some learners find certain types of test?

12. Do certain classroom materials work better than others?
13. Why are some learners better motivated in some classes than in others? (Adapted from Rea-Dickins & Germaine 1992, pp. 65, 69)

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Action research is not an attempt to "scientifically" analyze, dissect and dehumanize learning. Instead, it sees the practitioners of learning (teachers and students) as the most important players in the process. Action research starts with the teacher and student, and is first of all a reflection on the learning process according to these people. Even if teachers do nothing more than keep a teaching diary, and reflect on the ideas that appear in that diary, this is a form of action research, and it will positively affect the learning environment.

AR results are valid and reliable, in that they describe the immediate learning environment. Such a description is necessarily subjective, but in view of the fact that the events of the classroom are controlled by subjective participants, AR seeks to positively affect these perceptions by giving them meaning and value.

An important characteristic of AR is that it can be done by the teaching practitioner, and that it empowers the people who are at the heart of the teaching/learning process. EFL teachers can therefore feel confident in their AR efforts, and should publish their results, since these will be of interest to other teachers and professionals in other institutions.

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The brief bibliography which follows contains sources of AR literature. An excellent annotated AR bibliography can be found online at <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/al-biblio.html> (Accessed September 10, 2004).

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Appendix A: Final presentation, self-assessment (Finch & Sampson, 2003, p. 242)

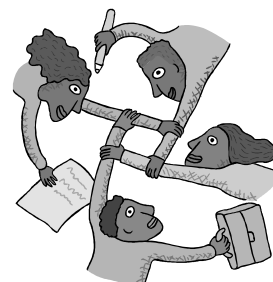
Name;		Date:	
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① = Never    ② = Rarely    ③ = Sometimes    ④ = Often    ⑤ = As much as possible

<b>When planning and preparing the final presentation</b>		①	②	③	④	⑤
1	I tried to use English for communication.					
2	I listened carefully to my group members.					
3	I contributed ideas to the group.					
4	I helped to decide the goals for the presentation.					
5	I helped to design and make the materials for the presentation.					

6	I helped to make handouts.					
7	I cooperated with my group members.					
8	I asked the teacher for help when necessary.					
9	I tried to learn some new language.					
10	I did some preparation at home.					
11	I did extra work that I wanted to do.					
12	I practiced the presentation lesson with my group.					
13	I thought about my learning goals and achievements.					
14	I thought about my confidence and motivation.					
15	I thought about my reasons for learning English.					
<b>When performing this presentation</b>						
16	I used relevant vocabulary (range).					
17	I communicated without hesitations or errors (ease of speech).					
18	I was confident and cheerful (attitude).					
19	I spoke clearly, with good volume, and intonation (delivery).					
20	I interacted with other presenters and the audience (interaction).					
<b>Total/100</b>						

1. **Check (✓)** the boxes that match the responses.
2. **Add** the numbers **to make a total.**
3. **Think** about your learning:
  - What are your learning goals? How can you achieve them?
  - What are your learning needs?
  - What are your future study plans?



Appendix B: Class Learning Environment (Finch, 2001, p. 79)

① = We agree strongly. ② = We agree. ③ = We have no opinion.  
 ④ = We disagree. ⑤ = We disagree strongly.

	<b>How is the learning environment in class?</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1</b>	This class is well organized.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>2</b>	Information for this class is easily available on the home page.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>3</b>	This class is student-centred.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>4</b>	Students are responsible for much of the assessment in this class.(self-assessment, peer-assessment, portfolios, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
<b>5</b>	Students put a lot of energy into the class.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>6</b>	Students get to know each other very well.	1	2	3	4	5

7	Students often talk about English class.	1	2	3	4	5
8	Students daydream in class.	1	2	3	4	5
9	Students decide what to study in class.	1	2	3	4	5
10	Students always want to leave early in this class.	1	2	3	4	5
11	Students pay attention to the teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
12	Students do a lot of study outside of class.	1	2	3	4	5
13	The teacher takes a personal interest in every student.	1	2	3	4	5
14	The teacher spends time talking with the students individually.	1	2	3	4	5
15	The teacher spends time talking with the students in groups.	1	2	3	4	5
16	The teacher is like a friend.	1	2	3	4	5
17	The teacher tries to help the students.	1	2	3	4	5
18	Many friendships have been made in this class.	1	2	3	4	5
19	The class is often noisy.	1	2	3	4	5
20	The atmosphere in the room is friendly.	1	2	3	4	5

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