



Review of 'teaching in low resource classrooms: voices of experience' and 'a handbook for exploratory action research'

Mark Wyatt

To cite this article: Mark Wyatt (2019): Review of 'teaching in low resource classrooms: voices of experience' and 'a handbook for exploratory action research', Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, DOI: [10.1080/17501229.2019.1566913](https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2019.1566913)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2019.1566913>



Published online: 21 Jan 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Review of 'teaching in low resource classrooms: voices of experience' and 'a handbook for exploratory action research'

Teaching in low resource classrooms: voices of experience, edited by Richard Smith, Amol Padwad and Deborah Bullock, London, British Council, 2017, 68 p., ISBN 978-0-86355-884-9. <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/teaching-low-resource-classrooms-voices-experience>

A handbook for exploratory action research, by Richard Smith and Paula Rebolledo, London, British Council, 2018, 110 p., ISBN 978-0-86355-885-6. <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/a-handbook-exploratory-action-research>

Reading through these two volumes, both aimed at inspiring school teachers working in difficult circumstances to experience success in teaching and research, I am reminded of the words of Paulo Freire: 'What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves' (Horton and Freire 1990, 181). The aim of Richard Smith and the colleagues with whom he respectively co-edited and co-authored these splendid volumes (Amol Padwad, Deborah Bullock and Paula Rebolledo) is evidently to empower marginalised school teachers working in difficult circumstances, so that these teachers are then somehow able to become more fulfilled versions of themselves, capable, too, of sharing their stories, and, in the process, inspire others in similar circumstances. Such sharing has been facilitated in this case by the British Council publishing and disseminating these volumes for free, both electronically and, additionally, in the case of the handbook, in printed form.

These books have emerged from British Council-supported initiatives to help school teachers. They relate to two different contexts. '**A handbook for exploratory action research**' grew out of a 'Champion Teachers' project (Smith, Connelly, and Rebolledo 2014) designed to help secondary school English teachers in Chile, who were teaching classes of up to 40 students for up to 40 lessons per week. '**Teaching in low resource classrooms: voices of experience**', on the other hand, emerged from a five-day Hornby Regional School workshop (supported by the A. S. Hornby Educational Trust) with teachers and teacher educators from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan that was held in Kathmandu. I discuss this second volume first.

The Hornby Regional School workshop adopted what Smith and Padwad describe in their introduction to '**Teaching in low resource classrooms: voices of experience**' as an 'enhancement approach', as opposed to the 'deficit approach' they criticise. A deficit approach to teacher education can involve the imposition of alien pedagogy, which, since it has been previously developed in another, more privileged context, can seem unworkable in the context of the teachers undergoing teacher development. In contrast, the enhancement approach followed by Smith and Padwad is based on teacher educators first ascertaining what works, according to the teachers' own experience and from the teachers' own perspectives, and then building on that successful experience. Consistent with this approach, the five-day workshop devoted the first afternoon and second morning to sharing stories of success; stories were told in small groups, presented to other groups, refined through retelling with a peer, written up as homework, before some were presented by volunteers in plenary. These stories of success, edited carefully by Bullock, Smith and Padwad, constitute the first half of this volume. They are accompanied by photographs of the authors (who have been previously introduced), video links in some cases to these authors telling their stories, and questions for reflection.

The stories themselves, produced by 18 of the 34 teachers and teacher educators who attended the workshop, describe success in a variety of settings, including tertiary, secondary and primary, and on teacher education programmes as well as in different types of school. To provide a few examples of this diversity, Bhogendra Lamichchane set about addressing the attitudes and participation levels of 'elderly' in-service teachers nearing retirement who were not engaging with any enthusiasm in their course; Bornali Gogoi wanted to get all the 104 students in her Grade 8 class on-task; Fehmina Qaiser established a 'garage school' for street children who had been deprived of schooling. Some of the stories are really heart-warming, such as the last one. Reflecting on the success of helping over 120 students pass through her garage school, Fehmina recalls observing positive behavioural change: 'It was as if they were becoming aware of what education could do for them'. Resourcefulness also shines through in these stories. For example, faced with the challenge of teaching a new course at a new university with no orientation or materials, Bishnu Kumar Khadka mobilised his students in finding texts they could analyse. Their success in doing this and in subsequently presenting their findings made him 'giddy' with happiness. Other stories describe ways of introducing creativity, bringing the textbook to life, adopting activity-based and peer learning, and utilising technology. The questions for reflection invite readers to link the teachers' experiences of success with their own contexts. For example: 'Do your students have access to mobile phones, computers, the internet? How could you exploit this technology to help them learn outside the classroom?'

The second half of this book provides seven stories of teacher-inquiry produced collaboratively by 24 of the teachers and teacher educators taking part in the same Hornby Regional School workshop (including some we have already met). During the workshop, this teacher-inquiry project was set up in the following way: Participants were asked to identify major issues they were facing in their teaching and note their answers on individual pieces of paper, an activity which led to a regrouping of participants according to shared concerns. These concerns, which, as Smith and Padwad note in their introduction, tended to be centred on relatively under-researched topics such as 'managing multiple classes in one room without partitions', were rephrased as questions with the help of the workshop facilitators. One of these questions was: 'How can I mark homework in a class of 100 students?' Questions were displayed on posters for fellow workshop participants to read and decide whether or not they could answer them in any way, as knowledgeable informants; if they could, this was signalled through post-it notes. Next was an interviewing activity, with the knowledgeable informants in the room interviewed as a kind of very practical hands-on substitute for a search of the literature. Subsequently, after discussing what they had learned, the workshop participants returned to their schools, enacted and evaluated their new ideas and developed their collaborative reports. The chapters they produced reflect the structure described above, with the main headings being: 'The problem we faced'; 'What we did' (in terms of formulating questions and discussing them); 'What we tried'; and 'Reflections'. There are reports of innovative practices within these chapters, while the reflections demonstrate the kind of impact engaging in this kind of teacher-inquiry can have. For example, according to one of the workshop participants, Hassan Mehmood: 'Seeking solutions infused motivation in me to experiment and practise new things in my classroom. These have worked wonders as far as my students' learning is concerned'. For another workshop participant, Zainab Rao, engaging in the research brought a renewed sense of hope.

Helping teachers to engage in teacher-inquiry is the focus of the second volume under review: '**A handbook for exploratory action research**'. This 'practical user-friendly guide', as it is accurately described by the authors, takes readers through the stages of conducting teacher research in a methodologically highly principled way, from careful exploration of puzzles or issues in a language classroom, to building a deeper understanding of these issues, to formulating actions, and then to observing and reflecting on these actions for further understanding. In illustrating this process, the authors, Smith and Rebolledo, are able to draw on years of experience working with Chilean 'Champion Teachers' (Smith, Connelly, and Rebolledo 2014), whose stories are central to this volume, running through it like a thread. In Chapter 2, for example, we meet Loreno Muñoz, puzzling over her students' listening practices, investigating the issue through a survey and classroom observation,

analysing data and then forming some conclusions. We gain an appreciation of the whole story. In Chapter 8, this story is referred to again, the authors specifically highlighting what can be learned from the research methodology Lorenzo had employed.

Drawing on the experiences and voices of real teachers is one of the strengths of this volume. Other strengths include its 'jargon-free, non-academic style', as Smith and Rebolledo themselves highlight in their introduction. This book is intended for primary and secondary school teachers working in groups or individually, in or outside teacher education, with or without mentors, and it is essential that it should be accessible and user-friendly. For teachers using the handbook with less support from peers or mentors, the helpful tasks, starting with a self-diagnosis exercise, which is returned to at the end, and answer keys, are likely to be very useful. It is also attractively illustrated, and seeing the artefacts produced by teacher-researchers and their students and their real-life stories accompanied by photographs is only likely to inspire. As with the other volume reviewed here, the authors never forget who their target audience is. There may be other ways to conduct teacher-research, using other frameworks, such as action research or exploratory practice, but exploratory action research is clearly an approach that can reap rewards for teachers and their students in numerous under-resourced contexts around the world, and the authors of this volume are to be congratulated for showing so clearly how.

I would thus strongly recommend both these volumes to teachers, teacher educators and curriculum managers working in diverse contexts. **'Teaching in low resource classrooms: voices of experience'** contains highly principled and very practical ideas for basing in-service language teacher education in challenging contexts on an 'enhancement approach'. **'A handbook for exploratory action research'** provides an invaluable toolkit for then helping such teachers to become teacher-researchers.

References

- Horton, M., and P. Freire. 1990. *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*. Edited by B. Bell, J. Gaventa and J. Peters. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Smith, R., T. Connelly, and P. Rebolledo. 2014. "Teacher-research as CPD: A Project with Chilean Secondary School Teachers." In *Innovations in Continuing Professional Development for ELT*, edited by D. Hayes, 111–128. London: British Council. <https://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/continuing-professional-development/cpd-teacher-trainers/innovations-continuing-professional-development-english-language-teachers>.

Mark Wyatt

 dr.markwyatt@gmail.com  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8647-8280>

© 2019 Mark Wyatt

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2019.1566913>

