

A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research

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British Council, 2018

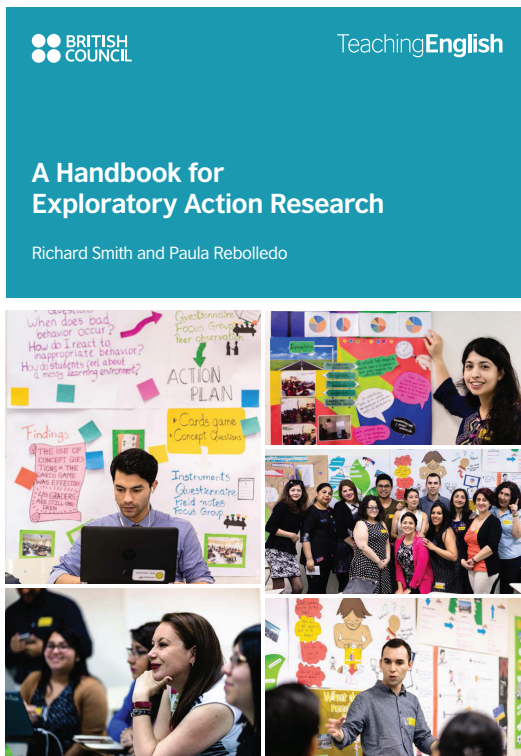
REVIEWED BY EMILY EDWARDS

A highly practical and user-friendly guide that aims to support teachers in conducting exploratory action research (EAR), this freely accessible PDF publication is an invaluable tool for teachers, teacher educators and managers who are interested in doing and supporting teacher research. The authors, Richard Smith and Paula Rebolledo, are renowned experts in teacher research, who demystify the research process, make EAR engaging and send the clear message that all teachers can explore their classrooms, even in challenging and time-poor contexts. The handbook takes teachers systematically through the process of engaging in EAR, and each step is accompanied by short practical activities, illustrations and photos, and real-life examples, which are taken from the Champion Teachers project conducted in Chile (see Rebolledo, Smith & Bullock, 2016).

The book is cleverly mapped out according to the questions a novice teacher-researcher might ask when they want to engage in EAR for the first time. It is divided into nine main chapters, followed by an appendix. Moving systematically through the book would provide a significant amount of support for a teacher conducting EAR, although in my experience, working with mentors or a peer discussion group would be invaluable in addition to a handbook – as the authors of this book also suggest. Chapter 1 introduces the foundations of EAR in terms of why research is valuable for teachers and how it could help in exploring, understanding and addressing challenging classroom situations. Chapters 2 to 9 are then structured around key questions that mirror the thought and action processes followed by a teacher conducting EAR. Chapter 2, ‘What is teacher-research?’ clearly explains that EAR stems from teaching practice and is based on practical needs rather than academic interests. Chapter 3, ‘What is EAR?’, then goes into more detail about what EAR involves, and why it is valuable.

EAR is a form of teacher research similar to action research (AR), which is now a popular professional development option for English language teachers. As the authors explain, the main difference is that EAR starts with exploration. Imagine a

teacher wants to encourage their students to speak more in class. With EAR, they would start by exploring – finding out why students are not speaking – and then reflect on the data collected before deciding how to proceed. After this first three-step exploratory cycle (plan to explore > explore > analyse and reflect), the next cycle of their research would follow the traditional four steps of AR (plan > act > observe > reflect) by introducing an activity or approach that might promote more speaking and observing what happens.



A particular highlight of the book is Chapter 4 ‘What shall I explore – and what are my questions?’ Narrowing down a research focus and designing research questions can be one of the hardest stages of teacher research, but it is also one of the most important, given that the research project is then designed around those questions. In this chapter, teachers are guided through thinking about problems they are experiencing, with useful categories provided to structure that thinking (‘exploring my perceptions’, ‘exploring others’ perceptions’, ‘exploring behaviour’), and helped with designing SMART questions (study-oriented, measurable, accurate, realistic and topic-focused). Chapter 5, ‘How can I explore?’

details ways of collecting data from various sources, such as using questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations to explore research questions. Another invaluable section in Chapter 6, ‘What do I find?’, takes the reader through how to ‘code’ qualitative data from interviews or focus groups in a simple yet effective way, which is another challenge novice teacher-researchers often face. Ways of presenting quantitative data (from closed-question surveys) are also discussed.

In Chapter 7, ‘What shall I change?’, the link between EAR and AR is clearly illustrated: at the end of an exploratory cycle, the teacher reflects on whether they need to change anything, and if so, what to change through a subsequent AR cycle. The authors point out that ideas for interventions can derive from many sources, including

students' suggestions, conversations with other teachers, conferences and published research. At this stage, I would suggest that ELICOS teachers diverge slightly from the non-academic focus of this book and consult reports of research conducted by other teachers (especially AR conducted in the ELICOS context, published in the *English Australia Journal*, and in *Research Notes* by Cambridge Assessment English), and by academic researchers in journals or books if accessible. While existing theories or ideas from the literature may not seem to apply or work in our own classroom contexts, they give us a tool for thinking that can then be adjusted, often quite substantially, to suit our own needs.

The last two chapters, 'What happens?' and 'Where do I go from here?', discuss ways of analysing the data collected to determine the effects of any interventions that were implemented in the AR cycle and different ways of sharing the research with others. This final step is incredibly important as even through a teacher's EAR project will be context-specific, there will always be many others who would benefit from knowing about it. Sharing a project's findings, as well as the challenges faced and any further questions that the research has opened up, is crucial in making EAR a sustainable practice within any educational context. The final 'Extra material' section includes a sample questionnaire and sample observation checklist, which provide very useful frameworks for data collection that teachers could easily adapt for their own research.

It certainly makes sense for teachers to get started with research through an exploratory cycle, as EAR promotes, especially for those who have not conducted research before or who are relatively new to English language teaching. While this book is 'particularly targeted at secondary and primary school teachers working in relatively difficult circumstances' (p. 3), the engaging format, clear structure and design of this handbook make it an attractive resource for ELICOS teachers. The example EAR projects will resonate with many working in ELICOS, with topics including how to arrange a classroom, how students respond to roleplay activities and using narrative genres (short stories, comics) to develop reading comprehension. Using this handbook, ELICOS teachers could work alone, or ideally in pairs or teams, to better understand their classrooms through EAR. Managers, coordinators or teacher educators could also encourage teams of teachers to use this guide and provide mentoring and support for them through regular meetings, workshops or discussion groups. This approach would be a direct implementation of what I suggest is needed in my article in this issue (Edwards, 2018) in order to foster cultures of inquiry and knowledge-building within ELICOS staffrooms.

REFERENCES

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