

Book review

A handbook for exploratory action research

Richard Smith and Paula Rebolledo, London, British Council, 2018, Pp. 115, ISBN 9780863558856

The aim of *A handbook for exploratory action research* is to introduce teachers to the personal and professional benefits of researching their own classrooms for continuing professional development and for students' improvement in learning a second language. In other words, the main purpose is to help teachers and their students achieve greater success in the classroom.

The book is written in a jargon-free, non-academic style to achieve a reader friendly form of presentation that will be appealing rather than off-putting. This characteristic makes primary and secondary school teachers or novice teachers in the action research field the target readership. The book proposes an approach that enables teachers to gain a better understanding of their classroom contexts and thus develop more appropriate ways of teaching. The title of the book is based on a programme that has already shown its worth in India and Nepal, which are also developing countries as Chile and Argentina. The aim of the programme is the promotion of intercultural understanding of teacher-researchers around the world and the building of a sense of a global ELT teacher-research community. The fact that the authors have different nationalities is also a clear intercultural example in this work.

The book is organised into an introduction, nine chapters and a section with extra materials. In the introduction the authors present the topic of the book creating a space for reflection and exploration in order to understand, analyse and solve difficult situations through exploratory action research. The idea is that teachers facing problems such as heavy teaching loads, large classes or lack of material resources can understand these situations better before taking action.



Chapter 1 considers the general characteristics of research and invites readers to reflect on a situation in the classroom and to identify signs of success, or lack of it, to understand it as a first step to doing research. The value of collecting information is that teachers gain new perspectives that can be useful to solve a problem or a puzzling situation.

Chapter 2 tries to demystify research and stresses the idea that research is not something only scientists do. Teachers themselves can carry out research in issues of importance for them in their own classroom. The whole process of research involves seven steps explained in detail in the following chapters and with real examples.

Chapter 3 looks in more detail what is involved when a teacher explores his or her own practice. In this section the authors develop the stages in the process of explanatory research which imply: clarifying your problem, interest or puzzle, and deciding on your specific questions; collecting the data that you need to answer the questions and, finally, analyzing and interpreting the data to answer the questions and better understand your situation.

Chapter 4 deals with the motivations for doing research and how to choose a particular topic. The extent to which each possible topic for research should be “Manageable”, “Urgent”, “Significant” and “Engaging”. Then, it explains step by step how to make research questions as smart as they can be. Next, to answer these exploratory questions Chapter 5 suggests the process of “triangulation”, that is the use of different methods to look for external sources of information. After obtaining the answers, Chapter 6 explains how to analyse and interpret qualitative and quantitative data collected from the teachers’ findings.

In Chapter 7, on the basis of the new understanding gained through exploration, we come to the action phase: how exploratory research can turn into action research if some kind of new action is needed. Chapter 8 focuses on observing and analyzing the effects of that new action introduced in the action research part of the project. Finally, Chapter 9 invites teachers to join wider communities such as IATEFL and TESOL and become active members of a global ELT teacher-research community. There is also a final chapter dedicated to extra materials. Teachers can find a sample questionnaire and an observation checklist together with an Answer Key for the many practical tasks.

The approach presented in the book is based on a programme that is currently in its fifth year in Chile. While particularly situated in Chile and appropriate to the Chilean experience, using concrete examples, the book appeals for novice teachers or teachers facing difficulties like large size classes, lack of preparation time, lack of resources, and students’ demotivation to learn English.

Reading real stories of teachers facing problems that we may have also coped with, or will have to cope with in the future is really valuable and helpful to novice teachers. It is a way of having a guide on how to find solutions since the handbook provides practical activities and reflective tasks with clear instructions. Consequently, *A handbook for exploratory action research* is designed to be used by *any* teacher, on their own, with a

colleague or colleagues, or within teacher associations. As the book is written by teachers who know that visuals support understanding, the use of colourful illustrations and photographs enhances its appeal and accessibility even further.

Personally, what really helps me empathise with the situations and teachers' experiences presented is the reflection on my own experience through the practical tasks proposed. The extra reading activities provided in each chapter present other situations experienced by teachers in order to illustrate theoretical aspects that make us reflect on our practice.

Research is of fundamental importance to our professional development. This can be clearly seen in the teachers' findings and how their actions have truly improved their teaching strategies. Doing research is more like an invitation to a journey of exploration and action, rather than an academic task. This would also be the beginning of a longer process of development and interaction with other teacher-researchers in a context of English as an international language. Implementing new ideas in the classroom enables us to develop our own creativity and our critical analysis to make adaptations if necessary.

To conclude, I highly recommend this book, because, as teachers, it is of paramount importance that we reflect on our own practices in order to improve them. The approach presented in the book was so successful that the Ministry of Education in Chile is planning to distribute this book to secondary teachers in Chile. I think this action would be fruitful: the more teachers can explore their own classrooms, the more changes for the benefits of the students would be implemented.

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