

Reviews

A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research

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The relationship between research, researchers, and teachers is a complex one. It is normally acknowledged that teachers do not read research articles on a regular basis, only few carry out any research, and an even smaller number publish their findings. Not reading research is less of a problem if we assume that SLA research is mostly irrelevant for language teachers (Medgyes 2017). It is more of a concern if we assume that, just as general practitioners need to keep up with medical research, teachers should be aware of the latest developments in L2 acquisition (Paran 2017). In the latter case, however, we face the problem of lack of time and financial resources for access. When it comes to conducting research and then publishing it, the hurdles for ordinary non-native speaker English teachers (the majority in the profession) are almost insurmountable. As for teacher-research, not that many years ago, Ur (2013) emphasized that teachers are too busy preparing for and giving lessons and cannot research or publish because these activities are usually not perceived as part of their job. Throw into the mix the ambitious ministry directives for continuing professional development for recertification and the requirement (at least at tertiary level) to publish research-based articles (preferably, in journals indexed by prestigious abstract and citation databases such as Scopus), and you end up with serious research and academic writing anxiety.

Unquestionably, there is an emerging trend that focuses strongly on channelling research activity towards 'evidence-based second language pedagogy' (e.g. Sato and Loewen 2019) and makes a strenuous effort to promote the transfer of SLA findings to the classroom. There also seems to be a renewed impetus

for classroom practitioners to conduct systematic inquiry and, as a result, the body of teacher-research is growing. This is exactly what Medgyes (2017: 491) calls for when he urges the profession 'to accord more prominence to the "teacher-inquirer", who is a professional capable of analysing their work on their own and exchanging their knowledge and experience with fellow teachers.' In this vein, British Council projects in Chile, India, Nepal, and Peru have produced several freely downloadable publications and a wealth of online video materials (Smith, Connelly, and Rebolledo 2014; Smith 2015; Rebolledo, Smith, and Bullock 2016) on how the challenges associated with difficult circumstances and low resources can become the focus of an exploratory journey. At a later stage, these inquiries can lead to action research whose findings are just as credible in their given context as the hard-to-access, too-complex-to-understand research results presented by SLA academics. The present volume is the most recent expression of this trend.

The Introduction sets out the aims of the publication in clear terms: it is a practical guide written in an easy-to-understand manner providing direction for teachers who wish to conduct classroom research both for their own professional development and to study their students' progress. The authors underline that exploratory action research should not add to teachers' already existing burdens, but 'can in itself be an *effective way to address and cope with difficult circumstances*' (p. 4, original emphasis). In my opinion, the volume satisfies these criteria by not *talking about* exploratory action research, but providing all the required support to teachers to facilitate *carrying out* such research by offering a clear, step-by-step 'instructions for use' manual supplying a variety of tools that I will focus on in my review. In this sense, it is different from other volumes (guides) that have been widely used in pre-service and MA in Applied Linguistics courses (e.g. Wallace 1998; Burns 1999, 2010).

The book can be neatly divided into three units of three chapters each (with Chapter 10 containing extra

material and the answer key to the tasks set for the teachers progressing through the steps of exploratory action research). The first section (Chapters 1–3) discusses the foundations of the book, which are perceived as the teachers, their learners, and the teachers' experiences and capabilities, and elaborates on the concepts of teacher-research and Exploratory Action Research. Building on the Chilean Champion Teachers project, the book starts by encouraging readers to try out a self-diagnosis exercise that helps teachers identify their competencies with regard to exploratory action research (pp. 6–7), thereby introducing a simple, easy-to-manage research instrument 'by stealth' from the word go. The teacher stories in the following sections—describing both successful and less positive experiences—highlight the need to obtain more information (through self-reflection, by asking colleagues and students) in order to help us read and interpret the signs we see, hear, and feel. This process goes beyond reflection: it requires research in the sense of collecting a lot of good information (which is how the concept of data is introduced). It needs to be reiterated that real examples are used throughout the book; these are taken from the companion volume already referred to (Rebolledo et al. 2016) and provide narratives that are both appealing and stimulating in their own right. Not only do they help move the stages of exploratory action research forward, but these first-hand accounts also represent 'a new genre of reporting' (Burns 2014: 5), namely, story-telling that teachers can relate to.

The section on demystifying research in Chapter 2 provides further encouragement to budding teacher-researchers: research does not necessarily involve lots of reading and neither does it require writing a paper. However, it requires questions, a systematic collection of data, an analysis of the data, and answers to the research questions. Chapter 3 underlines the importance of the exploratory phase of research and why teachers need to resist the urge to act quickly and apply an intervention before understanding the underlying causes of what they find puzzling or challenging. The exploratory phase can be followed by action (as the staircase diagram on p. 25 represents), whereby exploratory research is followed by action research, leading teacher-researchers upwards one step at a time.

Chapters 4–6 look at how to design appropriate questions and explore the issue by collecting and combining information from different sources (the authors do not shy away from using key research concepts such as 'triangulation'). Due attention is given to narrowing down the research focus by using a checklist to decide if the topic we wish to explore

is manageable, urgent, significant, and engaging. Adding to the wealth of useful instruments, a tool helps us to decide if our questions are SMART (study-oriented, measurable, accurate, realistic, and topic-focused). A further section describes the sources of information, including academic research, under the title 'Other people's written ideas on the topic'. Importantly, proving that exploratory action research need not imply an undue burden on teachers when they are clarifying or narrowing down their topics, most of the sources of information are deeply rooted in teachers' everyday practice, from their own written reflections through to reflective writing by students, and to lesson plans. Focus group discussions (inviting students, other teachers, and parents) are deemed to be a valuable source of information, often leading to a higher degree of engagement from these stakeholders. By this stage the teacher-researcher might feel that they have far too many options available to them, so the handbook presents a useful checklist for data collection as well as a simple template for setting up a realistic timeline. Chapter 6 helps readers grasp the concept of how data combined with analysis lead to findings, and provides a beginner's guide to coding for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data. Simple bar, line, and pie charts draw attention to the power of visual representation, leading up to the succeeding chapters that describe the way the results might encourage teachers to take the next step and start action research.

Chapters 7–9 provide the tools to help decide what change teachers may wish to achieve, since this will define the action itself. The teaching ideas translated into classroom changes may come from our students, conversations with other teachers, training manuals, conferences, academic research, etc. The pieces of advice provided in Chapter 7 are both sensible and helpful, especially the one highlighting that an action perceived as bringing about negative effects might have to be stopped before it has run its full course. The authors emphasize that reflection on why the decision to stop was taken is crucial and can lead to modified action and another try. Interpreting the data collected during and after the implementation of the change is similar to how the information gathered in the exploratory phase took place; the process may generate recommendations—a step that leads on to how we can share our findings.

Since sharing one's research findings is commonly associated with publishing, it is important to consider the variety of the bottom-up options offered by the book as to how the results can be publicized/disseminated. Starting from short presentations given to colleagues, through to regional workshops

and (international) conferences, every stage assumes a more polished presentation given to growing audiences. One of the suggested methods, namely giving a poster presentation, is not only a simple but also a delightfully creative tool. The oral presentation that describes what is displayed in the poster can lead rather smoothly to a written report that can be later shared 'in a blog, a newsletter, or even in a Facebook group or on your own webpage' (p. 86). This is already a step towards joining wider communities such as IATEFL, TESOL, and the Teachers Research! Facebook group. Chapter 9 then brings the book full circle: it asks the readers to fill out the same competencies table that they had filled in months before so that they can see the improvement and the opportunities for further development.

The handbook, which can be covered individually but probably works better when used with colleagues, champion teachers, or mentors, is a crucial asset for teachers in many parts of the world where the norm is large classes and low-resource environments. It provides both the rationale and the stepping stones to teacher-research, broken down to chunk-sized, easy-to-follow tasks with meticulously clear and foolproof instructions in a user-friendly, yet precise language. It is far from prescriptive and focuses on teachers' creativity and reflective capacity, encouraging them to build on what is available: their own strengths, their students' potential engagement, and their colleagues' camaraderie. As for the validity and generalizability of this kind of teacher-research, one could argue that the hundreds of teachers who have taken part in the workshops introducing them to exploratory action research may have come up with findings that are more easily transferable to similar contexts than the SLA research results that can be hard to access and digest. This is not to say that exploratory action research is a panacea. However, the approach, which is presented in a well-structured and truly bottom-up manner in this volume, can provide an opportunity for large sections of the language teaching community to set out on a journey that is not only valuable, but pleasurable as well.

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