

BOOK REVIEW

The teacher-research journey: Voices from champion teacher-researchers of Uzbekistan

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For the past 15 years, we have seen the publication of a steady flow of Action Research (AR) and Exploratory Action Research (EAR) volumes that contain reports and accounts and even case studies of this branch of practitioner research (Dikilitaş et al., 2015; Rebolledo & Bullock, 2021; Smith et al., 2014;). AR, which is often conducted as classroom research or teacher-research, is a reflective, systematic approach where practitioners, in our case, English language teachers, identify a problem in their classroom, implement a solution, and continuously assess and refine their practices to improve outcomes (Smith, 2020). EAR builds on this by incorporating an initial exploratory phase, where teachers first investigate and understand the issue thoroughly before applying any interventions (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). This allows for a deeper understanding of the problem, leading to more informed and effective solutions, particularly when the root causes of a challenge are not immediately clear. Both methods promote continuous improvement through cycles of reflection and action.

Many of the AR and EAR books are open access, which means that they are freely downloadable in resource-poor contexts as well. This trend is a welcome response to the ever-expanding professional and academic needs of teachers across the board in fulfilling their teaching obligations and will continue to promote the adoption of new and innovative teaching approaches. Notably, as highlighted by Dikilitaş et al. (2019), Exploratory Action Research (EAR) has emerged as one of the preferred means of change and empowerment among teachers. Though relatively straightforward in its application, its outcome is far-reaching as it equips teachers to own the very process of exploration and (if deemed necessary and feasible) accomplish the action research part of their projects. As clearly described by Sarkar et al. (2017), through inquiry, educators do not only have a chance to better understand some of the pressing issues in their professional environments but they can also actively contribute to finding solutions to their classroom concerns.

In this context, *The teacher-research journey: Voices from champion teacher-researchers of Uzbekistan* is a definite milestone for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom practitioners in Uzbekistan, especially those interested in EAR. Coming from an international community of teacher-research mentors, the authors of this review (Abeer and Isaac) decided to explore the 222 pages of this volume together. Published by the Network of English Teacher Researchers in Uzbekistan (NETRUZ) - with support from the Hornby Trust and the British Council - we are to embark on a journey of discovery, as narrated by eleven Uzbekistani teacher-researchers and teacher-research mentors and we are inviting you to join us.

Written in an easy-to-follow format, this volume bears resemblance to two other significant volumes - *Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* (Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016) out of Chile, and *Champion Teachers Mexico II: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* (Rebolledo & Bullock, 2021). In a largely similar manner to these volumes, *Voices from champion teacher-researchers of Uzbekistan* also explores the challenges teachers encounter in their classes and follows the 'work plan' outlined in Smith (2015). This work plan provides a structured yet flexible framework that guides teachers through the process of identifying challenges, exploring potential solutions, and reflecting on their practice, thereby ensuring that the research remains grounded in the realities of the classroom. In short, these EAR studies have been conducted to help students overcome the challenges encountered, and resolve some of the issues: a process that enables classroom researchers to pursue their own professional development.

Published in 2022, the volume is divided into two major parts. Part One focuses on the mentoring journey of five NETRUZ teacher-research mentors, namely, Malika Mirvokhidova, Dilafuz Sarimsakova, Ella Maksakova, Feruza Erkulova and Nilufar Tillaeva. This section, narrated in the first person, is composed of reflections on their journey through this project, commenting on issues such as their approaches, successes, failures and how this experience shaped or improved their perspectives in terms of professional development. They all agree that research mentors play a critical role in the course of supporting, guiding and inspiring their mentees whilst still allowing the mentees to maintain their autonomy.

The second part comprises ten EAR project reports, four of which are authored by the mentors in Part One, except for Ella Maksakova. The other six are from their respective mentees, namely, Dildora Khallieva, Mukaddam Ibrakhimova, Kurshida Eshimova, Jamola Urunbaeva, Lazokat Dadabaeva, and Dildora Ashurova. These teacher-researchers come from different parts of Uzbekistan, thus highlighting geographic diversity. It also covers a variety of classroom settings, with the majority focusing on university students, followed by primary and secondary school children up to grade 11. Notably, only one teacher-researcher, Jamola Urunbaeva, focused on a mixed age group. This diverse range of settings and classroom types definitely allows readers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges in different educational contexts within Uzbekistan.

Topics explored by the teacher-researchers showcase diverse, though frequent, challenges in the EFL world ranging from classroom management to teaching methodologies. Specifically, for this volume, the teachers' concerns chiefly centred on researching the rationale behind students' lack of motivation in class, ways to deal with disruptive students and the effect of choice of activities and instructions on the performance of students.

Each chapter, laid out in a report format, focuses on a specific teacher-researcher and their research journey. Written in a personal and reflective tone - a major point of diversion from the two volumes from Chile and Mexico, which are narrated in the third person voice - it succeeds in allowing readers to connect with the experiences of the teacher-researchers. The reports begin with an introduction in which objectives, contexts, and motivations for engaging in EAR are discussed, followed by a literature review. The research and methodology section outlines approaches to exploring classroom needs, data collection and analysis tools, and outcomes. The findings and discussion section then presents interpretation of the collected data. This is followed by a reflection phase, dedicated to processing the research findings, lessons learned, and possible next steps. Finally, the conclusion section briefly summarises key aspects, often concluding with a motivational remark or action plan from the teacher-researcher.

Consistent with the two volumes from Chile and Mexico, the researchers preferred questionnaires, interviews and observations as their favourite tools of data collection for student-centred surveys. It's also noteworthy that the classroom practitioners looked into their own classroom practices through self-reflection. Opting to include the voices of key stakeholders - students and teachers - is a clear indication that they aimed at doing research for and with the students. Finally, the much-needed third voice - teacher colleagues whose duty was to offer constructive feedback - was also included in each piece of research. Such triangulation when, for example, investigating the reluctance of students to engage, is definitely more productive than relying on a single method or source of data. Although self-reflection allowed the researchers to self-diagnose, we feel that those insights from their peers played a critical role of validating or putting their reflections and findings into perspective. As a result, it can be claimed that peer observations not only improve the quality of classroom experience for students, but also encourage meaningful professional development for the teacher.

The volume provides practical solutions to the topics explored, which can be easily adapted by teachers both within Uzbekistan and in similar educational contexts elsewhere. Beyond classroom application, these solutions also offer valuable insights for academic coordinators and directors of studies, guiding effective decision-making in curriculum development and test design across various educational settings. It further reflects the persistence of these educators in helping their students become autonomous learners and in ensuring that lesson aims are achieved. Rather than passively accepting their challenges as unchangeable realities, the research mentors and teacher-researchers actively engaged with them as circumstances requiring further investigation and exploration, seeking innovative solutions to improve their teaching practices and leading to potential improvements in their teaching practices and student outcomes. That engagement in itself is a clear demonstration that the NETRUZ teachers didn't need to be academic research experts to participate in Exploratory Action Research. By sharing their stories and reflecting on their classroom practices, they contribute meaningfully to educational research and professional development, demonstrating that valuable insights can emerge from direct interactions with students and the learning process.

In conclusion, this volume offers valuable insights for anyone involved in an EFL classroom, as it addresses many of the common challenges faced by educators. While the issues discussed may not be new, what sets this book apart is its fresh perspective and the practical, context-specific solutions it offers. The challenges and methods presented resonate with educators who work with the age groups mentioned, reflecting real-life classroom dynamics and providing strategies that feel relevant and applicable. The strength of this volume lies in its ability to connect research with practice, offering solutions that teachers can implement

directly to address the inevitable challenges they face. Rather than merely listing problems, the book emphasises adaptive methods that can be tailored to the diverse realities of different classrooms, making it a relatable and practical resource for EFL educators.

End Note

NETRUZ – Network of English Teacher Researchers in Uzbekistan

<https://netruz-project.blogspot.com/>

The book was published by the Network of English Teacher Researchers in Uzbekistan (NETRUZ). Founded and domiciled in Uzbekistan, NETRUZ is an organisation whose main mandate is to provide a platform for fostering professional development and research within the country's English teaching community. The organisation is both dynamic and collaborative in its approach as it brings together English educators from various backgrounds and institutions.

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