ELT Classroom Research Journal

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Our global readership will include teachers of English as a second language, TESOL teachers, linguists, educators and anyone with an interest in English language teaching research in global contexts.

This journal is a refereed publication that aims at providing free online access to our readership on advances and research into the classroom teaching of English to speakers of other languages.

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EDITORIAL TEAM

Foreword

This inaugural issue of the *ELT Classroom Research Journal* has been long-awaited by many classroom English language teachers, particularly those in "library-poor settings." The *Journal* aims to address the issue that Farrell (2016, 352) identifies as follows:

> from the teachers' perspective, what is missing from the literature are research reports that are accessible to teachers or reports about what language teachers themselves think about what they do: research *with* teachers, *by* teachers, and *for* teachers
>
> (emphasis in the original).

There are a few journals available that incorporate terms such as "Action Research" or "Teacher Research" in the title, but these rarely offer pragmatic investigations of the ELT classroom and so generally are of limited benefit to the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) community. The esteemed "gap in the literature" is the *raison-d'etre* of most scholarly journals, rather than addressing immediate issues in teaching and learning. Similarly, deep-drill statistical analysis and meta-analysis of previous studies have their place in the research scholarship, but are of limited interest to most classroom teachers.

A particular focus for the *Journal* is grounding in the classroom. There are plenty of journals open to scholars writing their studies *about* language learning, but few are ready to accept papers from language learning classroom teachers *focusing on* the issues teachers face *with their* learners. Teachers often lack research funding, time, and experience with scholarly research methodologies. Requirements for extensive literature reviews, formulaic writing models, and high desk rejection rates do not help teachers share their classroom understandings. Instead *ELTCRJ* offers a mentoring model for submissions, assisting teachers to move beyond poster displays to journal publication.

We are very pleased that this founding issue of our journal features articles from across the English as a Foreign Language map, including Cambodia, Egypt, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Tunisia. Special thanks go to Erzsébet Ágnes Békés and the team at MenTRnet for connecting us with teacher-researchers they mentor, some of whom have contributed to this issue. We look forward to future collaborations, and in the interest of encouraging teachers to mentor others in research, offer this brief introduction of that group here:

> MenTRnet (https://mentrnet.net/) is an international free-to-join community of practice/ network for mentors of teacher-research in the field of TESOL which has grown up organically since 2020 and now numbers 260+ members. MenTRnet organizes monthly online support group meetings, yearly introductory workshops and an annual 'Teachers Research!' conference in association with IATEFL Research SIG.

We hope you enjoy reading this first issue of *ELT Classroom Research Journal*, and invite you to consider sharing your own classroom investigations with our readers.

References

Farrell, T.S.C. (2016). Teacher-Researchers in action. *ELT Journal, 70*(3), 352-355. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccw034

The Call for Teachers' Classroom Action Research

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Abstract

The setting and nature of research appropriate for classroom teachers of English is described. Arguments in favor of teachers' research as a form of continuing professional development is reviewed, as well as rising demand from employers for publication. There is a need for a journal publishing English teachers' classroom research, particularly with an aim to mentoring teachers who hold limited research/publication experience and lack research resources. Mentorship of less-experienced researchers is needed both in research development and at the publication stages.

Keywords: classroom research; teacher research; action research; exploratory action research; participatory; ELT; classroom investigations

Introduction

All teachers research. Such a provocative statement can be substantiated by re-examining how we define "research" and considering more deeply what teachers do as part of their regular duties. As this theme of teachers' classroom research is the focus of the new *ELT Classroom Research Journal*, it seems appropriate to open the first issue with a discussion of what it is that follows. Particularly since a fair number of articles have been published suggesting that many teachers do not "engage" in research, either reading published research or conducting their own (Borg, 2009).

At the simplest level, before we dive deeply into the substance of this discussion, we might consider the elements of "research" under "Big R" and "little r" classifications. Such Big/little delineation, while an unscientific and perhaps false dichotomy, is often used in the education sphere to distinguish perspectives on a subject field, such as for study of culture, where "Big C" ("high culture," or visible artefacts and behaviors) is contrasted with "little c" ("common culture" or invisible/intangible underlying attributes of a society (see e.g., Kramsch, 2013; Herron et al., 2013; Munandar & Ulwiyah, 2012)), or similarly in creativity (see Beghetto & Sriraman, 2017; Merrotsy, 2013). For our purposes here, "Big R" research refers to the classic "scientific method" of investigation, along with scholarly publication of such studies according to the academic norms of the time. Contrast that with "little r" research (Walsh & Mann, 2015), which we will discuss further, but I can loosely describe as "investigations that fail to meet the contemporaneous standards of 'Big R' studies." It is also fair to note here that the standards for "Big R" vary by scientific fields: an article on Shakespearean sonnets will look nothing like a paper discussing recent findings in medicine or mathematics. The differences are more than superficial, but relate to the underlying investigations' methodologies and aims, along with the length and form of published reports. Furthermore, it would be appropriate to include reflective practice in its diverse forms under the umbrella of "little r" teacher research (Sowa, 2009; Walsh & Mann, 2015).

More than 20 years ago Dick Allwright "apologized" for his past work in teacher research, explaining that he had previously "unintentionally made classroom research so demanding that teachers would not be able to do it unless they had extra time and extra support" (2003, 116) and that "it was hopelessly impractical to expect such highly competent classroom teachers to become my sort of classroom researcher" (118). Similarly, advocates for teacher research can disagree on the expectations of what should be considered quality teacher research, or how to apply such standards (see, for example, Borg, 2016). The term "action research" and its many variants further complicates discussions.

Teacher Research, Classroom Research and Action Research

The fields of teacher and classroom research are wide-ranging: duration, location, methodology, and even number of students and classrooms engaged in the study. These parameters may range from a 20-minute session with a small-sized group of students to a several months project involving several instructors and possibly reaching beyond the campus. Furthermore, these fields of research (unsurprisingly) overlap: classroom research may often include outside researchers investigating the practices of one or many teachers, or various groups of learners in classrooms; teacher research may extend beyond a single classroom, including family members and life experiences. In any case, rather than exploring a "gap in the literature" as preferred by scholars, teacher-driven investigations typically start from "inquiry" (Freeman, 1998). Burns (1999) suggests teachers "'feel their way' into the research question" (p. 36). I'll suggest that most teacher-led research starts from a perceived "problem" in the classroom. Experimentation in a classroom can be as simple as gently exploring the effects of adding "stickers" or "gold stars" for participation, to a multi-class Suggestopedia-influenced classroom study involving a number of collaborating teachers (for the latter, see Dickey, 2003). A current approach gaining in popularity is Exploratory Action Research (see more below).

The specific nature and process of Action Research are beyond the parameters of this introductory paper, let's simply say that there are literally dozens of manuals and hundreds of scholarly papers describing action research and similar/related approaches in English language teaching, such as exploratory action research (Smith, 2015), collaborative action research (Burns, 1999), participative action research (Ordem, 2021), participative exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003), practitioner research (Allwright, 2003), and others. Common amongst these varieties of action research are a focus on creating and evaluating change through a cyclical approach based on a question (a "real-life issue"), a planned and executed intervention, analyzing the results of the intervention, and applying the analysis to future teaching. Both teacher research and classroom research can be conducted through the various action research designs.

Who and where.
Who is researching, where, is one of the critical elements when discussing teacher and classroom research. While the label "teacher" is often merely a term of convenience, including instructors, tutors, professors, and others, here I would emphasize a "teacherly" role and concern for in-class activities (including homework) and the impact of outside activities (such as viewing English movies) on in-class performance. Teacher research does not exclude the participation of additional researchers or the students (as in participatory studies), but points to the teacher as "chief researcher" who controls the focus of the study. We may display the distinctions between classroom research, teacher research, and classroom-based teacher research through a quadrants design, such as in Figures 1-3. In this discussion of "who" we are not including the subject(s) of investigation, i.e., students.

Figure 3 suggests that teachers' classroom research is *conducted by the teacher* about matters that impact *inside the classroom* (the "what"). This is not to suggest that external matters, such as a student's family issues, are not important, nor does it indicate that research by external researchers in a teacher's classroom are irrelevant – we simply narrow the scope to what a typical teacher could do within the bounds of their normal classroom without extensive outside support.
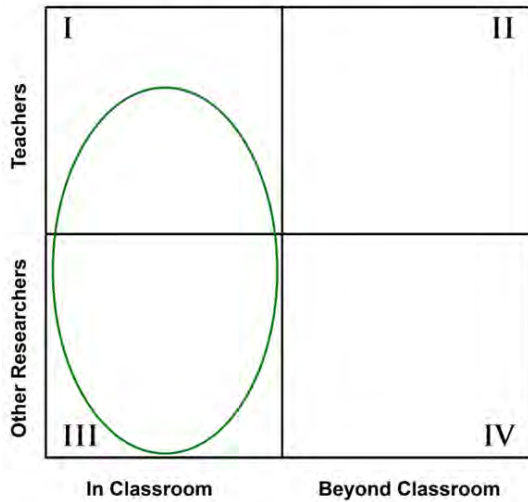
Figure 1.
Research paradigms – Classroom research
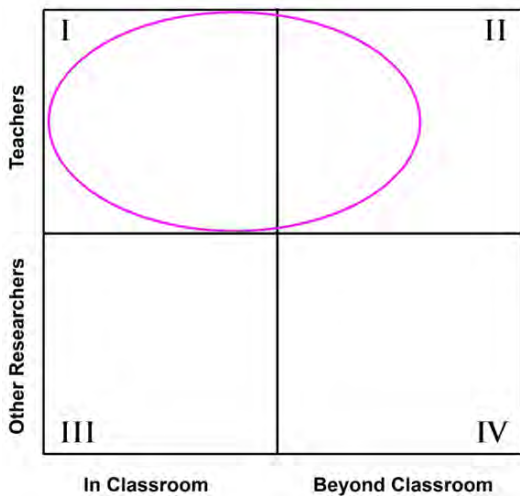
Figure 2.
Research paradigms – Teacher research

What and how.

What (perhaps "who" when the focus is language learners) is at the heart of any study, but can be central when differentiating between teacher research and classroom research. "What" is the research question, the problem under investigation. Teacher research might investigate mastery of language elements, but that would probably include data from beyond a typical classroom, and (arguably) addresses a concern that isn't specific to students of a particular classroom. More important for most teachers is the "how," deriving from the "what" – data collection and analysis. Teacher research tends to reflect teachers' limitations of

time, know-how, and resources in data collection and quantitative or deep qualitative analysis. Of course a teacher engaged with a scholar, such as through a joint research project or amaster's degree program, might be better prepared for intensive data manipulation. Classroom studies led by or strongly supported by expert researchers do not suffer such shortages. Action research schemes tend to encourage classroom teachers to take smaller steps in data, based on immediate classroom concerns.
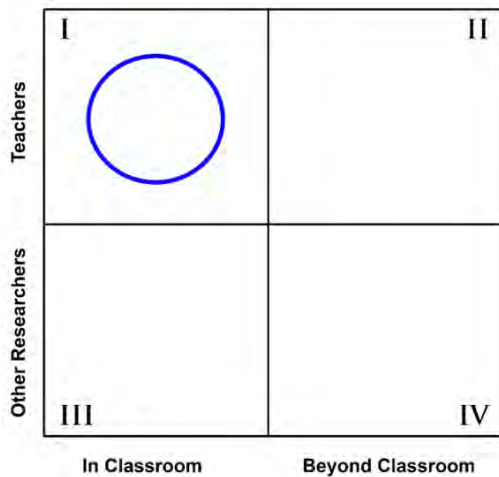
Figure 3.
Research Paradigms – Teachers' classroom research

Exploratory Action Research

The Exploratory Action Research design presented by Smith (2015) and others provides an even softer start for teachers' classroom research, as it allows for preliminary exploring ("inquiry") prior to formalizing a planned action research design. One of the underlying elements of exploratory action research, indeed, was to "de-academize or 'democratize' research" (Smith, 2015, p. 39). Smith argues that Exploratory AR can be characterized as a gradualist approach, useful for teacher-research in difficult circumstances, where teachers are encouraged to engage in research-based exploration of issues arising in their classrooms through processes that do not interfere with their everyday teaching. Student discussions of their learning challenges, such as stress, can be the launching point for action research plans. Literature surveys take place later, if at all, and teacher-researchers can rely on their past studies and collegial advice in the development of their methodology. Research mentors can be particularly helpful in this setting.

Mentoring

Few classroom teachers outside the university setting are ready to conduct research and prepare it for formal presentation. For that matter many college and university instructors are overworked and lack the resources to conduct "scholarly" research, particularly those who have not taken research methodology courses and done research at the PhD level. Even worse, various discussions have suggested that not many classroom teachers at the pre-school through high school levels read scholarly publications often or at all (Borg, 2009; Gaál, 2001; Mehrani & Behzadnia, 2013), some have never written an academic paper since completing their college studies. It is therefore not surprising that few teachers feel prepared to publish their classroom investigations, or formalize their research.

Short reports in teacher newsletters and poster displays or talks at professional gatherings are important steps, and more published collections of reports of teacher research are becoming available (e.g., Banegas et al., 2020); Gnawali et al., 2021; Menglieva et. al., 2022; Rebolledo & Bullock, 2021; Rebolledo, Okoth, & Simiyu, 2023; Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016; Smith et al. 2014). The ultimate step in presenting research would be presenting in a more permanent and widely-accessible forum, such as a scholarly (or "teacherly") journal. Frankly, few SSCI- or Scopus-listed journals are willing to seriously consider manuscripts lacking solid methodological rigor and the approved scholarly tone of presentation. And while various research "methodology" mentoring opportunities may be available through local colleges, professional groups, or friendly colleagues; mentorship for writing to peer-reviewed journals appears far less common.

Mentorship (or "coaching") for journals can take place prior to submission or at time of submission. Journal editors, often inundated with submissions, are often forced to take a hard stance on "desk-rejections" – and in fact many journals take pride in their "rejection rate" (more politely referred to as "acceptance rate"). Rejection notices may be cryptic, with little reference to the submission, and few or no details concerning issues in the manuscript or research methodology. Such rejections do nothing to encourage research. The alternative approach is to treat each submission that fits within the general scope of the journal as a potential published study, one that needs guidance from the journal's editorial team so that the author-researcher can bring it to a form that can be included in the journal. While the most particular concern here is at initial review (desk review), coaching can also be critical at the time a conditional acceptance is offered following peer review (see Figure 2).
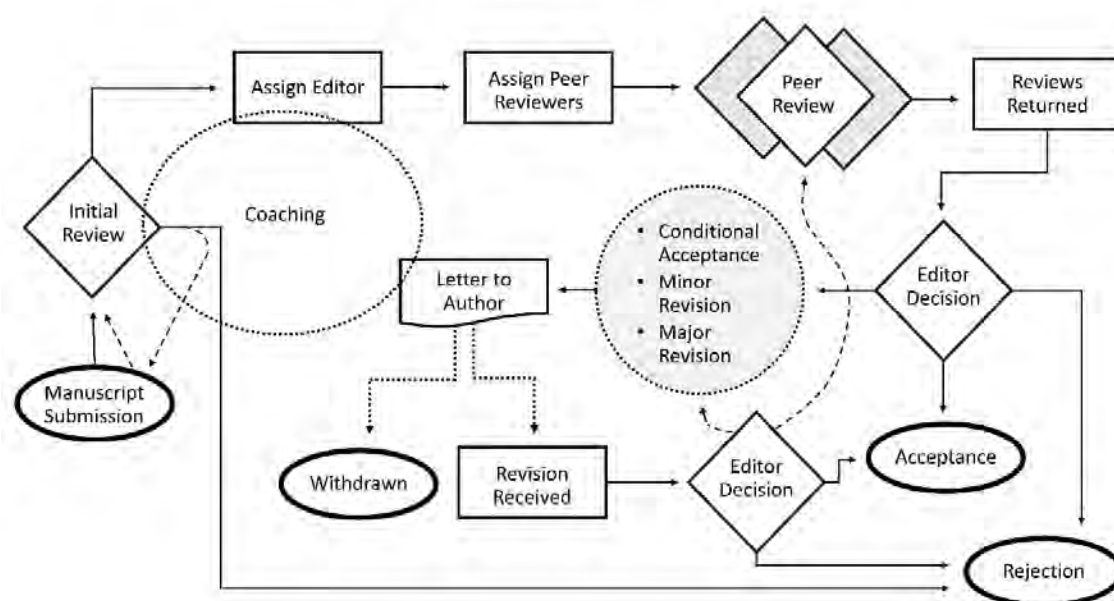
Figure 4
Mentoring (coaching) in the journal submission process

Some papers may be found to be "unpublishable" due to concerns for reliability, validity, data collection, or other methodological flaws. Is this the sole concern? It may be important to consider the other impacts of teacher research: is it replicable, does it inspire teachers to conduct similar investigations in their own classrooms, does it offer insights in the teacher-learner environment? Submissions that answer "Yes" to these deserve support from

journals, as they promote teacher engagement in research far beyond the individual researchers involved. Again, mentorship is needed both during the research process, to maximize the scholarship while reflecting the realities of a classroom teacher, and in the journal submission process.

Conclusion

Should classroom teachers be expected to do research? Research can be part of a planned portfolio of Continuing Professional Development, but more than that, some governments are demanding research publication as part of employment retention and promotion schemes for secondary school teachers. Philippines, Indonesia, and Nepal are cases in point. As discussed above, one aspect of this demand may be definitional: "Big R" research or "little r" research.

Hopefully all would agree that we seek inquisitive teachers who are concerned about the learning taking place in their classrooms, teachers who are eager to try new ways when their learners encounter challenges or when teachers feel that their own performance doesn't meet expectations. The specifics of who does what type research (method), where, when, and how is of far less importance than the practice of teacher inquiry. Teachers' classroom explorations may not always rise to the level of SSCI (Web of Science) journal publication, and workshop discussions and poster displays should be encouraged as one of many potential forms of publication. The *ELT Classroom Research Journal* provides an intermediate step for publication, one more frequent than occasional manuscript collections, more permanent than face-to-face presentations and posters. Research production is also dependent on the other forms of engagement in research: reading others' research, and discussing it (even if only within the reader's own mind). *ELT Classroom Research Journal* offers a regularly-published open-access source of professional readings for teachers, one that informs and inspires teachers to investigate and experiment in their classrooms.

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Teacher's Interest in Cambodian ESL Students' Out-of-class Activities: Effects on Students' Motivation

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Abstract

This study examines the type of activities Cambodian ESL students engaged in outside the classroom, the length of time they spent on them, and the possible effects of teachers' interest in tracking these activities on the students' motivation. To fulfil these aims, five classes of male and female upper-intermediate ESL students ($N = 71$) at Australian Centre for Education (ACE), Phnom Penh, Cambodia, were asked to fill out an online questionnaire regarding the type and length of out-of-class language learning activities they were involved in at the outset of the course; to operationalize the teacher's interest, the students were asked to report to the class in the form of two-minute presentations what they did outside the classroom pertinent to each of the four language skills, and highlight one thing they had learned through this activity. During the whole course, the teacher consistently demonstrated interest by asking them questions concerning their activities. At the end of the course, the students completed a follow-up questionnaire examining whether the teacher's interest had affected the students' out-of-class activities. The results obtained revealed that the type of out-of-class activities did not change noticeably, but the length of time they spent on the activities did; students reported doing more of such activities at the end of the experiment. Furthermore, it was found that the teacher's interest did have a positive role in the students' motivation. The paper also includes conclusions and implications of the study.

Keywords: ESL students; motivation; out-of-class activities; teacher's interest

Introduction

This paper will look at the impact of a teacher's interest in the activities of students in English outside the classroom. It will start by looking at the literature on the motivation of students, inside the classroom and then outside the classroom. The research was carried out into the activities of students in an English language centre in Cambodia, outside the classroom and the impact upon their motivation to learn English when their teacher takes an interest in this out of classroom activity. After which there will be conclusion and, finally, any limitations and recommendations for further research.

Previous research has shown that demonstrations of teacher interest can have a significant impact on language learning. One study found that students who perceived their

teachers as interested in their learning had higher levels of motivation and a more positive attitude towards language learning (Amjah, 2014). Another study found that teacher interest had a positive impact on students' willingness to communicate in the target language and their use of learning strategies (Matuzas, 2022).

There are various ways language teachers can show this genuine interest in their students' learning. Dörnyei (2020, personal communication) suggests getting to know their students through informal conversations, asking about students' interests, and getting involved in out-of-class activities. Another way of demonstrating interest involves providing individualized feedback that shows students that their teacher is invested in their progress. Teachers can also create opportunities for students to showcase their learning and provide positive reinforcement for their efforts.

Moving to out-of-class activities, these play a vital role in fostering teacher-student relationships and student motivation. They provide opportunities for students to practice their language skills in real-world contexts, which can lead to increased motivation and confidence. One of the most significant benefits of teachers taking an interest in their students' out-of-class activities is that it can help students see the relevance and importance of language learning. When teachers ask about students' hobbies, interests, and activities, they create opportunities for students to see how language learning can be applied to their real lives and interests. For example, if a student is interested in cooking, a teacher can suggest watching cooking videos in the target language or discussing recipes in class. This can help students connect language learning with their passions and make it more meaningful and enjoyable for them (Mercer, Ryan, & Williams, 2012). Another benefit of teachers showing an interest in students' out-of-class activities is that it can help create a more personalized and engaging learning experience. When teachers know their students' interests and hobbies, they can tailor their lessons to include topics and materials that are relevant and interesting to their students. This can make the learning experience more engaging and enjoyable, which can lead to increased motivation and better learning outcomes (Norton & Toohey, 2004).

Regarding these benefits to students involved with the activities in English outside the classroom, Muñoz's (2020) systematic review into such activities identified significant beneficial effects upon the students' English development. The studies, mainly undertaken in Europe, involve the before school instruction, school learners, and/or young adults. The studies reviewed had students from Iceland, Belgium, Flanders, Sweden, Denmark, Mexico, Japan, Croatia, England (with French or Spanish as the foreign language), Netherlands, Poland or Spain. The studies in the review, cover different aspects of activity, places, culture, closeness of their first language to the English language. Despite these differences, what they all agree on, is that the development of English, by people involved in activity in English outside the language classroom, benefits from that activity.

So, literature has identified benefits for students, which they receive from taking part in activities in English outside the classroom. Moving on to an examination of the literature with regard to motivation, as far as motivation is concerned, Dörnyei (2001, p. 7) held that it "explains why people decide to do something, how hard they are going to pursue it and how long they are willing to sustain the activity" and goes on to say that answering these three questions is what theories of motivation have attempted, without being totally successful. Dörnyei (2001) referred to Gardner (1988), who defined the goal of learners of a language as being categorised in two ways: integrative and instrumental, as the most influential motivation researcher to date. The former, integrative, is related to the perception of the second language

and a wish to connect with or become the same as "valued members of the community" (ibid, p. 16), whilst for the latter the main link with learning a language is the possible benefits from doing it, like obtaining more fulfilling employment or more money.

A research study was undertaken, involving Cambodian students, using Gardner's integrative and instrumental motivations mentioned above, together with Takase's (2007, cited in Chumcharoensuk, 2013, p. 7) intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Chumcharoensuk (2013) undertook a comparison of Thai and Cambodian first year undergraduate students studying at suburban universities in each country. He found that the motivation to learn English for both sets of students were extrinsic-instrumental but Cambodian students were more so "due to some differences between each; historical background, tradition, culture, socio-economic status and growth, communication and ideals of each country." (p.16), though the reason for these differences making a difference or any further information about them is not given.

Most motivational research and theorising, like that referred to above involving Cambodian students, have concerned them in classrooms, so it is difficult to use those to apply to activities, like those the subject of this study, by students outside the classroom. One possible solution was provided by Williams and Burden (1997), see Table 1, who took components of motivation to create a framework featuring internal and external factors, each with some sub-components taken from themes then prevalent in educational psychology. This framework was used by the researchers for this study to generate questions to survey the students' motivation around their activity in English outside the classroom.

Using this model, the questionnaires were designed, by the researchers as they sought to discover whether the teachers' curiosity and interest, in their students' activities outside of class, would help them improve their language learning and, particularly, any impact upon their motivation.

Research Methodology

Participants

This research project was undertaken in Cambodia and explaining the educational context of teaching English will allow for better understanding of the research outcomes. Cambodia is a country of around 16 million people, situated between Thailand and Vietnam in South East Asia. Cambodia was a colony of France until 1953 and French was the main second language until most of the speakers of it were wiped out in a genocide between 1975-1979. A decade of Vietnamese rule ended after the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, and then the UN government set up to undertake a monitored election, which saw English become much more widely used. As a developing country, the involvement of a lot of NGOs which bring English, together with membership of organisations like ASEAN, the Mekong River Commission etc., whose dealings take place in English, have seen a growth in demand for people who can use the language. It is now the main foreign language taught in schools and the main alternative language option of Government websites (Gentner, 2015; Lin, 2020).

Table 1.
Williams and Burden's (1997) Framework of L2 Motivation

INTERNAL FACTORS	EXTERNAL FACTORS
Intrinsic interest of activity	Significant others
• arousal of curiosity	• parents
• optimal degree of challenge	• teachers
Perceived value of activity	• peers
• personal relevance	The nature of interaction with significant
• anticipated value of outcomes	others
• intrinsic value attributed to the	• mediated learning experiences
activity	• the nature and amount of feedback
Sense of agency	• rewards
• locus of causality	• the nature and amount of
• locus of control re: process and	appropriate praise
outcomes	• punishments, sanctions
• ability to set appropriate goals	The learning environment
Mastery	• comfort
• feelings of competence	• resources
• awareness of developing skills	• time of day, week, year
and mastery in a chosen area	• size of class and school
• self-efficacy	• class and school ethos
Self-concept	The broader context
• realistic awareness of personal	• wider family networks
strengths and weaknesses in skills	• the local education system
required	• conflicting interests
• personal definitions and judgements	• cultural norms
of success and failure	• societal expectations and attitudes
• self-worth concern	
• learned helplessness	
Attitudes	
• to language learning in general	
• to the target language	
• to the target language community	
and culture	
Other affective states	
• confidence	
• anxiety, fear	
Developmental age and stage	
Gender	

The research was carried out in a language centre and students receive their mainstream education elsewhere. According to the World Bank (2022), Cambodia had a GDP per capita of $1,543, which means that at a cost of more than $200 a term, for a four-term year the school attracts students from wealthier families. The students at the language centre include school and university students or employees and the ones involved in the work for this assignment were at an upper-intermediate level (C1 based on CEFR). Five classes at the centre were involved, two at the start of the upper-intermediate course and three finishing it. Successful students in the three classes would go on to study three terms in preparation for taking an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exam, one of the main internationally recognised English language exams, for example used by UK, Australian universities to determine whether students are good enough in English to enter the university. The classes were largely mixed male and female with a slight preponderance of males. More than 90 students were initially asked to take part in the experiment, but at the end of the study, data from 71 students who had completed both pre- and post-treatment questionnaires were used for analysis. All these students were recruited through availability sampling procedures.

The comparative mean for band scores at the IELTS exam is given below for students in Cambodia and the World in 2022 (IELTS.org. 2024). Whilst Cambodian students are behind the score of the world in the receptive skills, reading and listening (0.4), they are much closer in the productive skills, 0.2 for writing and 0.1 for speaking.

Table 2.
Mean band scores in the IELTS exam of students in Cambodia and the world in 2022 (IELTS.org 2024)

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Total
Cambodia	6.1	5.8	5.7	6.0	5.9
World	6.5	6.2	5.9	6.1	6.3

Instruments

Pre- and post-treatment questionnaires. The questionnaires used in this study were researcher-made questionnaires the items of which were informed by the literature previously mentioned on teachers' role and interest in students' learning and out-of-class activities students can do in English. There were different types of open-ended and closed-ended items in the questionnaire dealing with how long students spend time using/practicing a language skill outside the class and the types of activities they did. The difference between the pre-treatment and post-treatment questionnaires was that the latter also included items aimed at determining the extent to which the interest of the teacher in their out of class activity during the term impacted student learning and motivation (See Appendix A and B). Both of the questionnaires were meticulously analysed to make sure the items were clear and they were also given to two ELT experts to have them checked for validity. The experts' opinions regarding the wording of a few items were taken into consideration before the administration of the questionnaires. It is also worth mentioning that the questionnaires were delivered to the students in English as they are expected to comprehend and produce English at the upper-intermediate level of proficiency throughout their time in class.

Procedure

Ninety students from five classes at the centre in Phnom Penh, the capital and largest city in Cambodia were initially surveyed at the start of the term in April 2022 on their activities in English outside the classroom. The questionnaire, which had been constructed in Google forms, was sent to the students via a link in Google classroom, and the students were asked to fill out the questionnaires in no later than a week. The students' task during the term was to each give a short presentation, around two minutes long, on what they did outside the classroom in each of the four skills, reading, writing, speaking and listening, and to highlight one thing they had learnt from this activity. During the term the students gave a presentation to their peers, giving details of their activity in English outside of the class in each of the four skills, then ended by saying one thing they would recommend to their peers to do in English outside the class. Finally, a follow up survey asked the students for feedback on the teaching in the class together with what impact their teacher's interest in their activity outside the classroom had on them and their motivation to be active in English outside the classroom. In addition to these there were also questions about motivation, based upon the factors identified in Williams and Burden's (1997) framework of L2 motivation. Data was obtained from 71 students who completed the two surveys and that is what provides the base for the analysis which follows.

Data Analysis

To analyse the data obtained in this study, such measures as frequencies and percentages were used, and these measures were accompanied by different kinds of graphic representations such as pie charts and bar graphs. The following section gives a thorough treatment of how the data were analysed and what the results of the analyses were found to be.

Results and Discussion

Regarding the data elicited from the different parts of the pre- and post-instruction questionnaires, the following results were obtained. A paragraph with an overall view of the results.

Before the Commencement of the Instruction

The first survey obtained information about the activities of the students outside the classroom in English. This was broken down by skill, Reading, Listening, Speaking and then Writing. An analysis follows of the activities reported by students in each activity at the start of the research.

Reading

The respondents' answers to items germane to reading comprehension are shown in the pie chart in Figure 1.
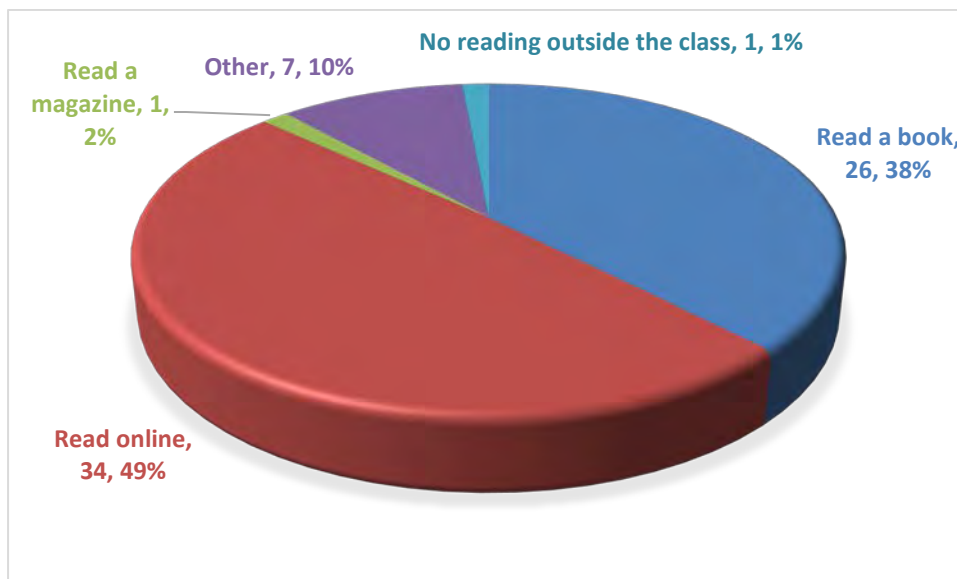
Figure 1.
Frequencies and Percentages of Out-of-the-class Reading Activities

It could be noticed in following Figure 2 that around half of the students ($f= 34$, $p= 49\%$) reported reading online, a little more than one-third of them reading a book ($f= 26$, $p= 38\%$), seven students (10%) read other material (e.g., communicate with people on social media, reads bible, read medical books, do homework, read comic books, read novel, read webpages; read the contents on social media such as Facebook or Instagram; watch movies with English

subtitles). One student declared that he does not read at all outside the class. Regarding the average time they spend reading outside the class, the data were represented via another pie chart.
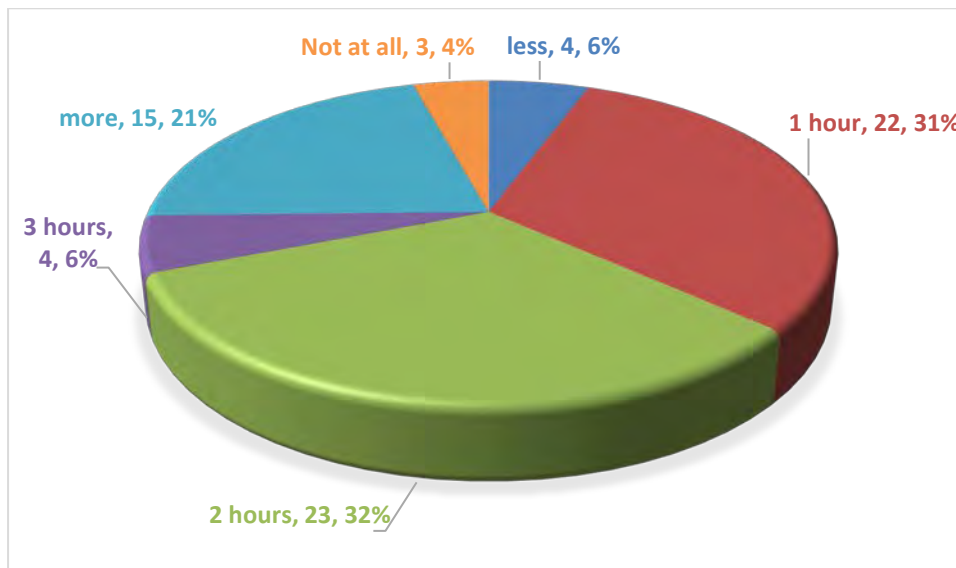
Figure 2
Frequencies and Percentages of Average Out-of-the-class Reading

About one third of the students (*f*= 23, *p*= 32%) reported spending two hours studying outside the class, and almost 22% of them, reportedly, read one hour a week, while 21% read more than 3 hours and only 6% read 3 hours a week on average. The same percentage (6%) read less than an hour, and 4% of the participants reported that they never read outside the class.

Table 3 (below) illustrates students' diverse attitudes and opinions concerning reading outside the scheduled lessons.

Table 3.
Students' Ideas about Reading Outside the Class

Idea	Frequency	Percentage
Improves reading	5	17.85%
Improves vocabulary	4	14.28%
Improves (communication) skills	4	14.28%
Increases knowledge	4	14.28%
Fun	3	10.71%
Relaxing	2	7.14%
Lovely	1	3.57%
Boring	1	3.57%
OK	1	3.57%
Should be done in a comfortable place	1	3.57%
Its aim is to read interesting topics	1	3.57%
Its aim is to help know about news and science	1	3.57%

Most students were of the idea that reading outside the class improves other language skills or components, but a few students attributed adjectives such as fun, relaxing, OK, lovely, and even boring to reading activities outside the class. A couple of the participants also commented on the best place to read or gave opinions about the aim of outside-the-class reading.

Listening

The listening activities the learners said they did outside the class are shown in the following clustered bar graph (Figure 3).
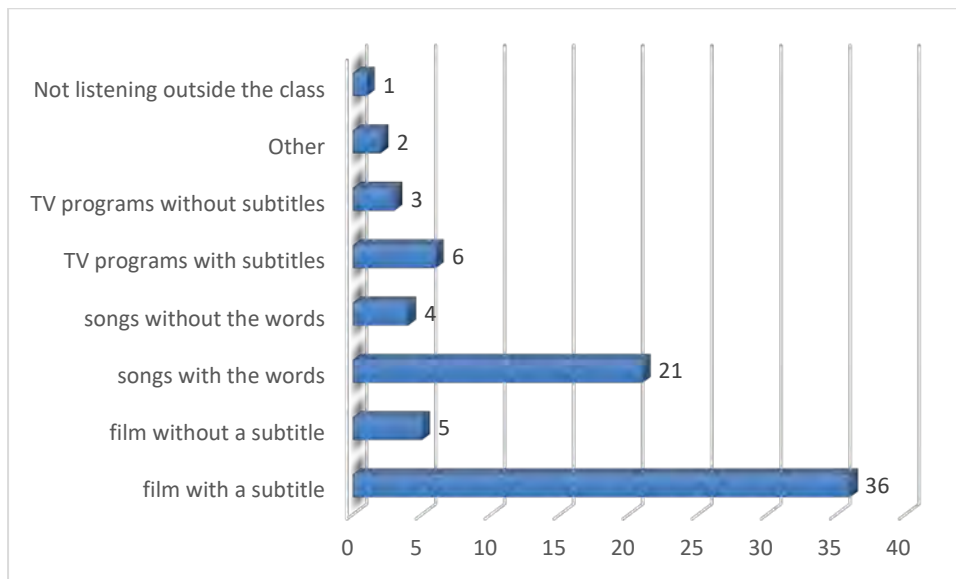
Figure 3.
Frequencies of out-of-the-class listening activities

As far as the opinions towards listening activities are concerned, of all the participants who took the pre-instruction questionnaire, 36 (46%) students watched films in English with subtitles, 21 (27%) listened to songs with the words, 6 (8%) watched TV programs with subtitles, 5 (6%) watched films without subtitles, 4 (5%) listened to songs without subtitles, 3 (4%) watched TV programs without subtitles, and of the 2 (3%) students in the "other" category, one said that she did all except the last one, and one said she watched Japanese movies with English subtitles. There was only one student (1%) who did not listen outside the class at all. The average time they listened to materials out-of-the-class in English is represented in the pie chart displayed in Figure 4.

As it could be seen in Figure 4, 4% of the students did not spend time listening to materials in English, 8% of them spent more than 3 hours a week, and 14% spent less than an hour a week for listening to out-of-the class materials. Among those who spend more than 3 hours a week, most said that they listened to music, and a few participants said they watched movies and YouTube videos, and/or listened to online materials such as podcasts.

Speaking

With regard to the out-of-the-class speaking activities the students participated in, the following results were obtained (as displayed in Figure 5).
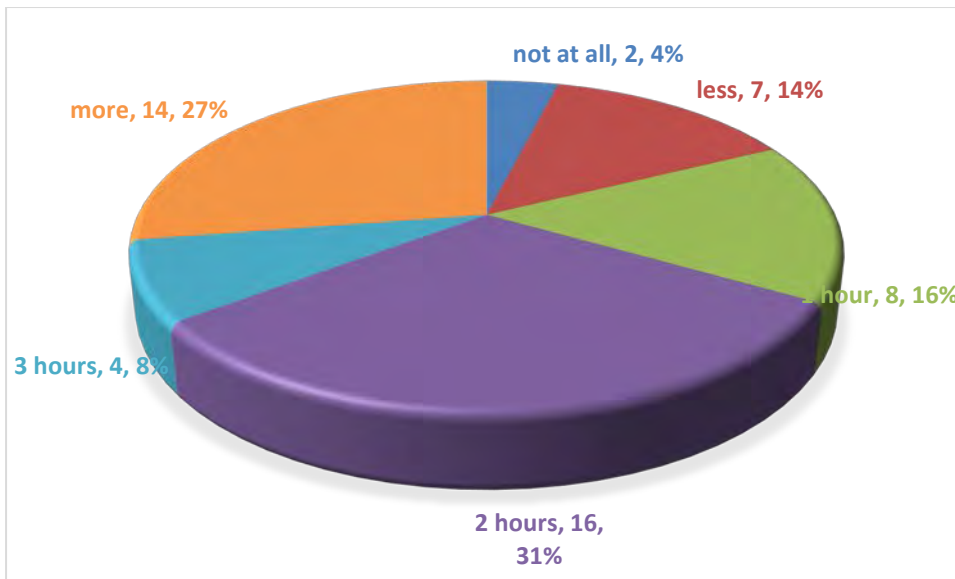
Figure 4.
Frequencies and Percentages of Average Out-of-the-class Listening Time
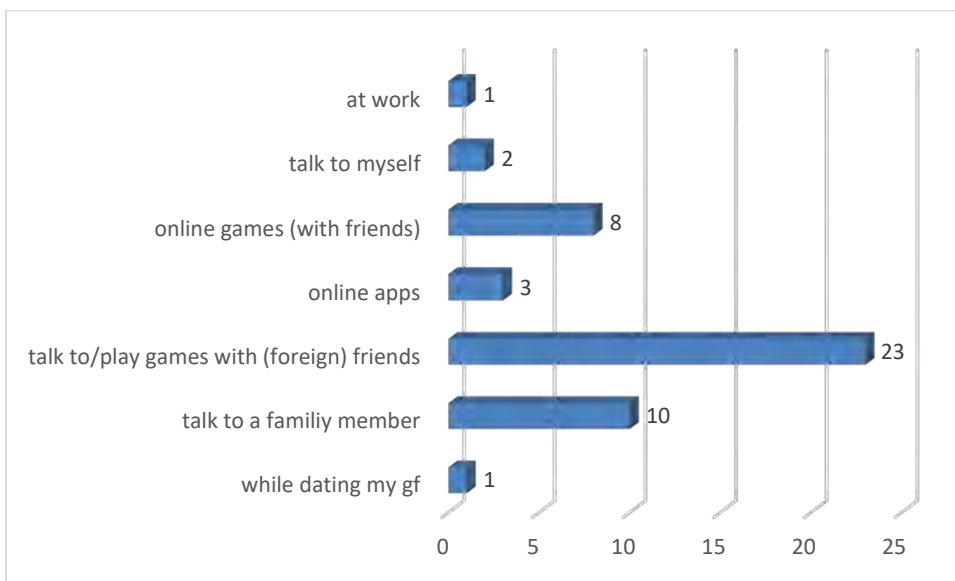
Figure 5.
Frequencies of Out-of-the-class Speaking Activities

One of the respondents reported using English when he went on a date with his girlfriend, and one other participant said she used English at work. Two other students claimed they practiced English by talking to themselves. The speaking activities with the highest frequencies, however, were speaking while playing online games with friends (f = 8, p = 17%), talking to a sister/family member (f = 10, p = 21%), and talking to or playing games with (foreign) friends (f = 23, p = 50%). Regarding the average time they spent speaking English during a week, the following results were obtained (Figure 6).
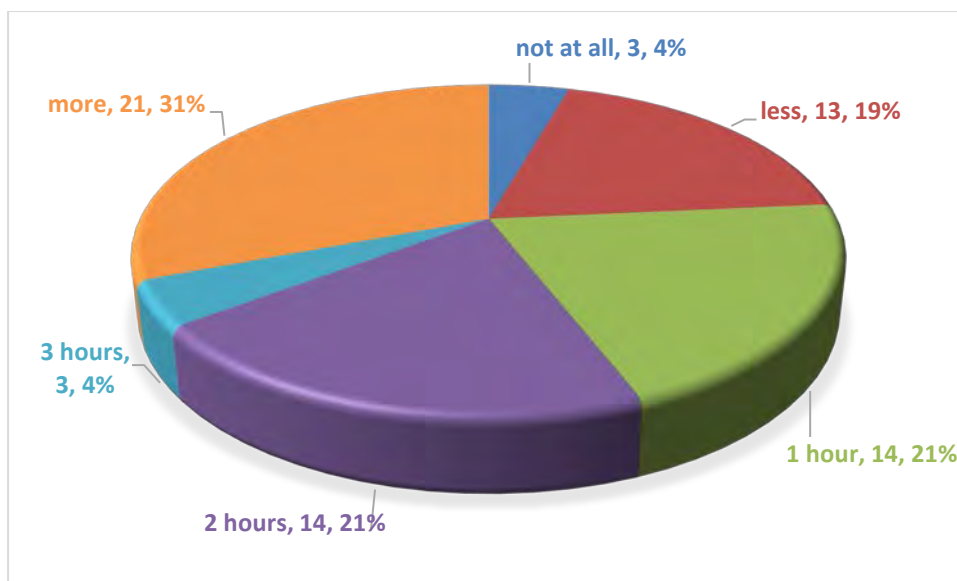
Figure 6.
Frequencies and Percentages of Average Out-of-the-class Speaking Time

A little less than one-third of the students (31%) said they speak English more than three hours a week outside the class. Around 21% of them speak English two hours a week and the exact same percentage of students speak English one hour on average. Less than one-fifth of them (19%) spent less than an hour speaking English outside the class, and 4% believed they speak English three hours a week. The same number of students (4%) reported that they never used English outside the class.

Writing

When it comes to writing, the students wrote a variety of items, as shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4.
Writing Activities Outside the Class

Writing Activities		Frequency	Percentage
Chatting on social media		61	76%
Writing emails/posts on social media		6	7.5%
Writing other materials	Song lyrics	2	2.5%
	Stories	1	1.25%
	Writing assignments for university	3	3.75%
	Comments on other people's videos	1	1.25%
	Writing something on social media to make new friends	1	1.25%
	Writing about myself	3	3.75%
I don't write anything		2	2.5%

In the table above, chatting on social media accounted for a large proportion of the students' writing activity outside the class (76%), and other writing activities were far less frequently practiced (e.g., writing emails/posts on social media, 7.5%; writing university assignments, 3.75%; writing about themselves, 3.75%). Research has been undertaken into student activity on social media – see Li (2017) or Arif (2019) but most, like here, has been about the amount of activity undertaken by students. An area that may be fruitful for further research would be the impact of that activity in English, on social media, particularly on the

kind of English learnt, e.g. formality etc. The average time they spent in a week writing in English outside the classroom could be seen in the pie chart that follows (Figure 7).
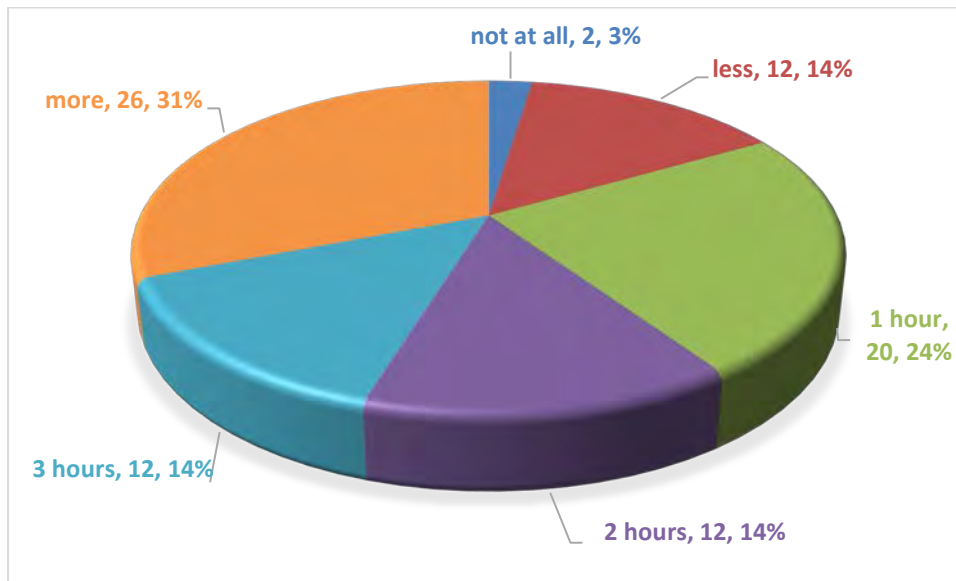
Figure 7.
Frequencies and Percentages of Average Out-of-the-class Writing Time

With respect to the time they spent writing in English outside the classroom, about one-third (31%) reported writing more than three hours a week in English, around one-fourth of them (24%) wrote an hour a week, 14% wrote two hours, another 14% wrote three hours, and another 14% wrote less than an hour a week on average. A very small percentage of them (3%) did not write anything outside the classroom.

After the Instruction

The questionnaire the students completed at the end of the period of instruction was much less focussed on their activity outside the classroom. Attempts were also made to get feedback information about the student's views on the teaching over the term, as well as their motivation regarding activities outside the classroom in English. As reported earlier these questions on motivation were based upon Williams and Burdern's (1997) Framework of L2 Motivation (see Table 1).

The first question in the post-instruction questionnaire was whether the students were pleased their teacher (the first author of this research) was interested in what they did in English outside school, and almost everyone answered in the affirmative (f = 58, p = 95%), as it is shown in the doughnut chart below (Figure 8).

They were also asked whether the interest from the teacher, in what they did in English outside school, had helped motivate them to continue doing things in English outside school, and once again, the majority of the students opined that it had, as illustrated in the doughnut chart in Figure 9.
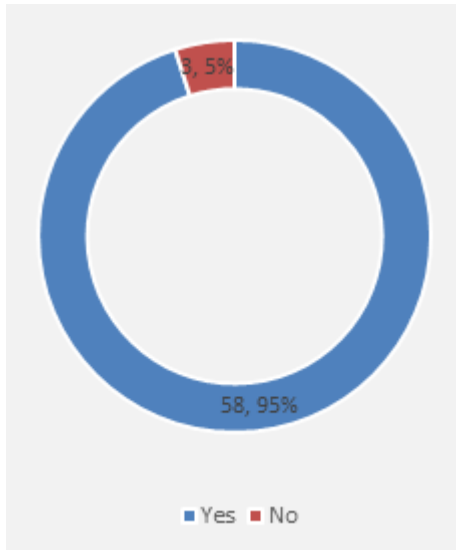
Figure 8.
Students' Contentedness with the Teachers' Interest in their Out-of-class Activities
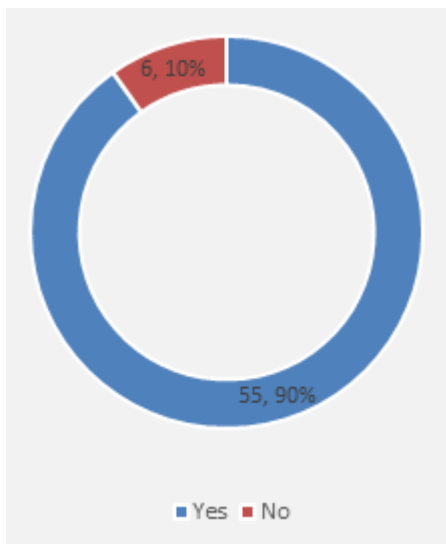
Figure 9.
Did Teachers' Interest in Students' Out-of-class Activities Improve Their Motivation?

Another question also intended to find out whether the interest of the teacher in what the students did outside school had helped motivate them to do more, or made no difference; 46 out of 61 students marked more and only 15 students chose no difference. This is depicted in Figure 10.

The students' comments about the interest of the teacher in what they did outside school were varied, but they mostly included positive comments shown in the word cloud in Figure 11.
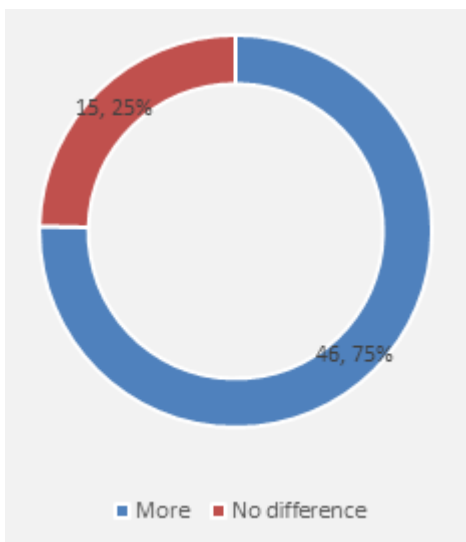
Figure 10.
Did Teachers' Interest in Students' Out-of-class Activities Make a Difference?

Figure 11.
Students' Comments about the Teacher's Interest in Their Out-of-class Activities

In the word cloud above students put emphasis on improvement, confidence, interest, and help, among other things. A few questionnaire items were in the form of Likert-scale questions, these are questions about the impact upon their motivation and are based upon the motivational items identified in Figure 1 near the beginning of this paper. These have been merged and are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5.
Students Views After the Course

No.	Statements	4 (high)	3	2	1 (low)	Mean
1.	My personal interest in learning English is	23	26	8	4	3.11
2.	I think the value of learning English to me is	30	20	8	3	3.26
3.	I feel I have a lot of control over my learning and I am able to set appropriate goals	15	30	12	4	2.91
4.	I feel I am mastering English and I am developing my language skills	9	38	10	4	2.85
5.	I am very aware of my strengths and weaknesses in learning English	16	27	16	2	2.93
6.	I think learning English and about the culture of English speaking countries is	29	24	7	1	3.32
7.	My confidence in speaking and writing English is	5	28	25	2	2.60
8.	I am anxious and fearful when talking or speaking English	6	26	22	7	2.51

In Table 5, the average value of the four options equals 2.50 (4+3+2+1 = 10; 10/4 = 2.50). Mean values above 2.50 would mean that the students chose more of the higher options (3 and/or 4) than the lower options (2 and/or 1). The first statement in Table 3 received the mean score of 3.11, indicating that the students' interest in learning English was above average. The respondents also had an above-average opinion of the value of learning the English language (M = 3.26). They also believed that they had a lot of control over their learning and that they were able to set appropriate goals (item # 3, *M* = 2.91). Similarly, the other items in this part of the questionnaire had above-average mean scores, which means that they felt they were mastering English and developing their skills, they were aware of their strengths and weaknesses, they thought learning the language and culture of the English speaking countries was important, and they felt confident speaking and writing in English. Item # 8 in the table above revealed that despite their skills, developments, and awareness, the students still felt a bit anxious and fearful when they were supposed to write and speak in English.

The students were also asked to identify among parents, peers, and teachers, which factor was most important, second and third relative to their motivation to learn English. The stacked bar chart (Figure 12) shows the proportions for the importance of parents, peers, and teachers.

The bar chart in Figure 12 shows that the most important factor was parents, while the second most important factor was teachers, and the third was peers. All the three factors received considerable degrees of importance, however. This is also evident in some of the students' comments: *"Parents want me to improve my English", "Teachers are the most important to giving me motivation, they are the ones who are most involved in your learning …"* and *"To be honest, fellow classmate motivated me to study the most because when I see people speak fluently I feel a bit embarrassed because I cannot speak well like them, however that the point I take upon myself to give me motivation, and try harder in order to get better."*
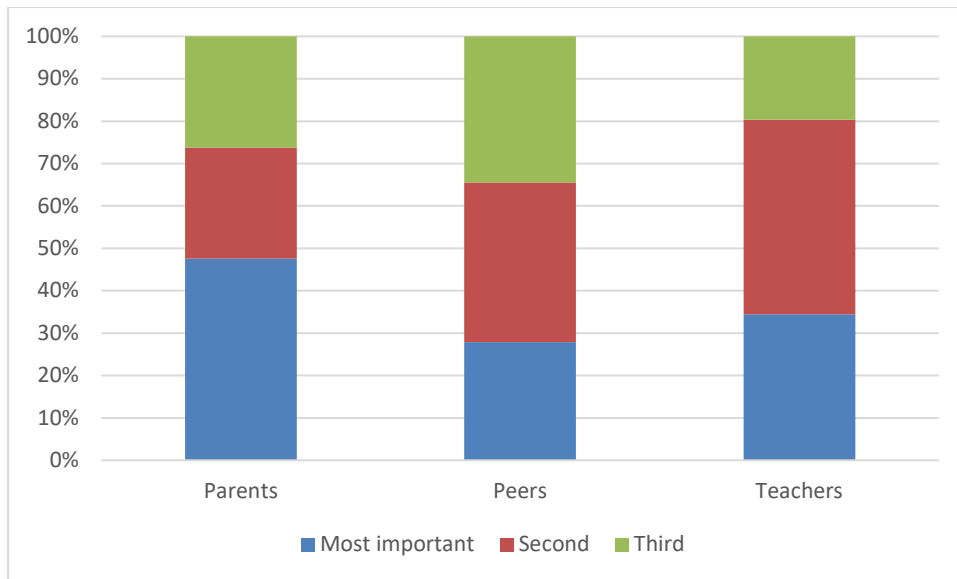
Figure 12.
Comparison of the Role of Parents, Peers, and Teachers in the Students' Motivation

The students were also asked to identify the ranking of feedback, praise, and punishment for their motivation to learn English, and the following results were obtained (Figure 13).
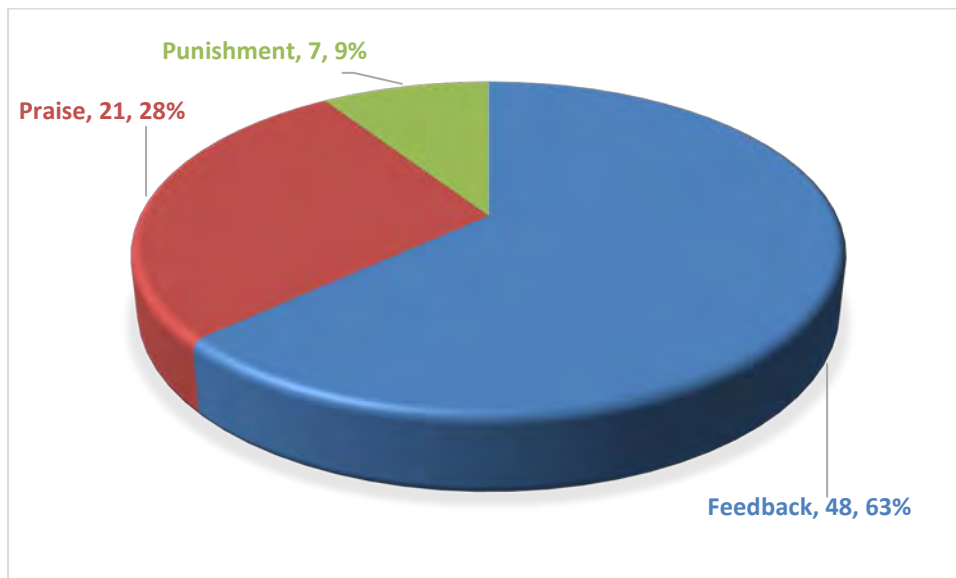
Figure 13.
Comparison of the Role of Feedback, Praise, and Punishment in the Students' Motivation

Among the three factors mentioned above, feedback (f = 48, p = 63%) had the greatest role in the students' motivation, and punishment (f = 7, p = 9%) had the least important role, while praise was ranked second (f = 21, p = 28%). A few of the students' comments on these factors and their impact on motivation are presented in the following excerpts.

One of the students commented that, *"feedback can show me which part for me to improve and praise I don't know for me I feel great when I get compliments, it encourages me*

to work more." Another said, *"praise encourages you to learn English; feedback gives you information on parts of what you're doing is right or wrong."* That is why the students marked feedback and praise more than punishment, about which one student remarked, *"punishment could make students awkward and embarrassed."*

Another piece of supporting evidence for the findings above could be traced in another student's comment: *"I do like it when I'm praised, I kinda think we all do. But the most important factor should be receiving feedback. I wouldn't like it if everything I do is right and there's no constructive feedback along the way."*

The students were also requested to comment on the impact of the learning environment (e.g. comfort, resources, time of day, week, year, size of class or school, school values) on their motivation to learn English. A few random answers were collected from the students in this regard: one student wrote, *"I think we should be able to get along with the environment in class,"* and another one believed *"It's not depend on school values.... For me I think it just from yourself,"* and still another said *"It's not really impact me."* One of the respondents wrote extensively against online learning, and the excerpt below shows how she felt about this mode of instruction:

> *"Online learning is very bad …. it feels extremely lonely staring into a screen, if no one is active in the classroom it's just silence in the room, no soul, no emotion, no nothing the teacher is just left to talk to no one it feels… Assignments are also terrible when putting them online, there's nothing to interact with, there's no person I can at least look at, you just do them alone with nothing to feel."*

Finally, another student believed that *"time of the day"* had a role to play in their learning and motivation to learn.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the results obtained in this research project support the view that language teachers' genuine interest in their students' learning can have a significant impact on student motivation and progress in language acquisition. By creating a positive learning environment and fostering teacher-student relationships, teachers can help students feel valued, supported, and motivated to learn. However, it is essential to be aware of the challenges and potential pitfalls of showing interest and maintain a balance between involvement and autonomy. Ultimately, by incorporating interest in the activities of students in English outside the classroom teachers can help students achieve their full potential in language learning.

This study set out to identify whether the reality of Cambodian students' activity in English outside the classroom matched our beliefs that it existed and was shown to not only exist but to be significant, with a majority of students involved in activities in the four language skills outside the classroom. As shown by the surveys mentioned by Carmen Muñoz (2020) this could help the students develop as practitioners of English as an International Language.

Furthermore, this activity took up more than two hours a week for the majority of the students and that there was a small, but noticeable difference in activity in Reading and Writing, two of the three skills Cambodian students perform worse in when taking the IELTS test, compared to students elsewhere in the world.

Also, virtually all students responding to the surveys welcomed the interest of the teacher in their activity in English outside the classroom and a significant majority said this interest increased their motivation to carry on, or increase their activity in English outside the classroom.

Next, using William and Burden's (1997) framework of L2 motivation the students expressed themselves more than averagely motivated on internal factors and expressed the location of their main motivation on the external factors.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

There are some limitations to this work in that there is no information about the impact of age or gender differences on activity in English outside the classroom; it is not known why different numbers of students responded to the questions on the different language skills and whether the failure to reply to some question but not others is as a result of being inactive in that skill, or other reasons. It is also not known how the students listened to what they said they did, whether that was online or not.

As well as trying to rectify these limitations, further work could be undertaken to discover why there is a difference in use of reading and writing compared with the recorded deficiencies of Khmer L1 speakers at these skills in the IELTS test. As well efforts could be made to bring the benefits of what students do in English outside the classroom into the classroom and in some way link them. Another area identified for further research is the impact of the preponderance of writing in English outside of the class being upon social media, what impact does this have for the kind of English being learnt?

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About the Authors

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Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.
All contributors have seen the contents of the manuscript, and all authors agree with the contents and the order of presentation. The listing of authors correctly identifies their level of contribution to this work.
We hereby certify that the submission is our own original work and is not under review at any other publication.

Appendices

Appendix A: Pre-treatment Questionnaire

The respondent's email (**null**) was recorded on submission of this form.
*Required

1. Email *

_____

Reading

2. Outside the class I do the following things reading in English. *

Mark only one oval.

◯ Read a book

◯ Read a magazine in English

◯ Read online on websites

◯ other (Please detail below)

◯ nothing

3. The other reading I do is:

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. I spend _____ reading on average a week. *

Mark only one oval.

◯ 1 hour

◯ 2 hours

◯ 3 hours

◯ more

◯ less

◯ I do not read outside lessons

5. Is there anything you would like to say about reading outside lessons?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Listening

6. I take part in the following activities outside lessons in English (Subtitles are when there are words at the bottom of the screen detailing what is said, sung etc):

Mark only one oval.

◯ Watch tv programmes in English without

◯ subtitlesWatch tv programmes in English with

◯ subtitles Watch films in English without

◯ subtitles

Watch films in English with subtitles

◯ Listen to songs in English without the

◯ wordsListen to songs in English with the

◯ words Other (please detail below)

◯ I do not do any activities where I listen to English outside the class.

7. Please detail other or anything else you would like to write about listening tomaterials in English:

_____

_____

_____

_____

8. On average I spend _____ a week listening to materials in English. *

Mark only one oval.

○ 1 hour

○ 2 hours

○ 3 hours

○ more (Please detail

○ below)less

○ I spend no time listening to English materials outside the class

9. Anything else you would like to write about listening to materials in Englishoutside the class:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Speaking

10. Please write details of any things you do to speak in English outside the class(Please include things like online games you play with friends in English):

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

11. In an average week I spend _____ speaking in English outside the *classroom.

Mark only one oval.

◯ 1 hour

◯ 2 hours

◯ 3 hours

◯ more

◯ less

◯ I do not speak English outside the class

12. Anything you would like to write about things done outside the class to speak English:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Writing

13. I undertake the following activities each week where I write in English: *

Tick all that apply.

☐ Chatting with friends/family on social media in

☐ English:Writing posts on social media in English

☐ Writing emails to family/friends

☐ Writing other materials in English (Please detail

☐ below)I do not write anything in English outside

the classroom

14. The other writing I do, or something else I would like to say about writing inEnglish;

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

15. I spend_____ writing things in English outside the classroom: *

Mark only one oval.

◯ 1 hour

◯ 2 hours

◯ 3 hours

◯ more

◯ less

◯ I spend no time writing in English outside the classroom.

Appendix B: Post-treatment Questionnaire

The respondent's email (**null**) was recorded on submission of this form.

*Required

1. Email *

English activity outside school | This section is seeking your feeling/response to the interest of my teacher in what you do outside school in English.

2. I am pleased my teacher is interested in what I do in English outside school. *

Mark only one oval.

⬭ Yes

⬭ No

3. The interest from my teacher, in what I do in English outside school, has helped motivate me to continue doing things in English outside school. *

Mark only one oval.

⬭ Yes

⬭ No

4. The interest of my teacher in what I do outside school has helped motivate me to do more, or made no difference. *

Mark only one oval.

⬭ More

⬭ No difference.

5. Something I would like to say about the interest of my teacher in what I do outside school.

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    | Motivation | Please answer some more general questions about your motivation to learn English. |

6. My personal interest in learning English is: *

    Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Strong	◯	◯	◯	◯	Fragile

7. I think the value of learning English to me is: *

    Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
High	◯	◯	◯	◯	low

8. I feel I have a lot of control over my learning and I am able to set appropriate goals: *

    Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
True	◯	◯	◯	◯	False

9. I feel I am mastering English and I am developing my language skills: *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
High	○	○	○	○	Low

10. I am very aware of my strengths and weaknesses in learning English: *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Very aware	○	○	○	○	Unsure

11. I think learning English and about the culture of English speaking countries is: *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Important	○	○	○	○	Not so important

12. My confidence in speaking and writing English is: *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
High	○	○	○	○	Low

13. I am anxious and fearful when talking or speaking English: *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Highly anxious	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very relaxed

Things which have an impact on my motivation

Please answer a couple of questions about outside factors which help your motivation

14. Please identify which of these three factors is most important, second and third in your motivation to learn English: *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Most important	Next most important	Third most important
Parrents	◯	◯	◯
Peers -- fellow students	◯	◯	◯
Teacher	◯	◯	◯

15. Please comment on the impact of any of these factors upon your motivation to learn English.

_____

_____

_____

_____

16. Please identify the ranking of these factors for your motivation
   to learn English.

   Mark only one oval per row.

	Column 1
Feedback	◯
Praise	◯
Punishments	◯

17. Please comment on the impact of any of these factors upon your motivation to learn English.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

18. Do you have any comment upon the impact of the learning environment(e.g. comfort, resources, time of day, week, year, size of class or school, school values) on your motivation to learn English

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Finally

Please help me to make the learning in this class better

19. The materials (slides, quizzes etc.) used in the class were helpful or not helpful to learning this term.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	
Helpful	○	○	○	○	Not helpful

20. Do you have any comment on how the materials may be improved.

21. On a scale of 1 – 10 I think the teaching of my teacher is: *

    Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Top of the toppermost	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Oh dear

22. Ways my teacher could improve:

Thank you for your help and your participation in the
learning this term.

Improving Thai Teenage Students' Confidence to Speak English

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Abstract

This practitioner research report focuses on 19 ninth-grade students in a rural area of Chiang Mai province, Thailand. The study addresses the prevalent issue of student reluctance to perform speaking tasks in a secondary school classroom setting. The authors employed an Exploratory Action Research approach where the exploratory phase was followed by an intervention involving the application of the Know-Want-Learn (KWL) strategy and the use of an online collaborative whiteboard platform (Miro board). The research study sought to find answers to how students perceive speaking tasks in the target language and what kind of speaking activities they prefer and whether effective instruction regarding speaking activities improves oral performance. Data was gathered through focus group discussions, peer observations, and students' self-evaluation forms. Findings from the exploratory phase suggested that students' reluctance to speak was due to low levels of self-confidence and the inadequate manner in which speaking activities were introduced and managed. The intervention improved students' confidence and engagement, resulting in more active class participation.

Keywords: speaking confidence; conversation enhancement strategies; peer conversation; collaborative speaking tasks

Introduction

Students' confidence in speaking English is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it enhances communication by enabling clearer and more fluent expression (Ananda & Hastini, 2023). Secondly, it boosts motivation and engagement, fostering active participation and language improvement (Gustaman, 2015). Lastly, confidence in English creates opportunities, such as better job prospects and global competitiveness due to its status as a lingua franca (Patel et al., 2023). Consequently, the aim of the present research project was to find ways to boost students' confidence and create the conditions for enhanced oral performance. An Exploratory Action Research (EAR) approach (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018) was chosen to systematically explore the root causes of the issue and then to find effective solutions.

The present project grew out of the first author's personal experiences and difficulties while instructing English language learners. The challenge he faced was that his students lacked confidence to engage in oral communication activities, such as speaking in front of the

whole class or participating in group discussions. The whole project was facilitated and scaffolded by the second author in a mentorial capacity, but the current report has been written up in the first person by the first author, namely, the teacher-researcher. The exploratory and the action phase of this piece of EAR was carried out from October 2022 to January 2023 in pursuit of answers to the overall research question: "What speaking activities should I use to enhance students' confidence in speaking English?" When looking for answers to the research question, the teacher-researcher and their mentor's core objective was to identify and employ effective methods for the enhancement of English-speaking skills in the context that is described below by the first author, Anek.

Context and background

I teach English to Grade 7–9 students aged between 13 and 16 years in a rural government school in Chiang Mai province, Thailand. Many of the students belong to various ethnic groups, including Shan, Hmong, Hlahu, and Karen, and they use English as a third language (their second language being Thai). In my own classroom, there were six Thai and 13 minority-language students. The educational and cultural context of minority-language students differ significantly from those whose first language is Thai. Their educational and social background is more distant owing to a different ethnic-cultural heritage, making their English learning journey more intricate and challenging compared to Thai speaking students. As a result of the ethnic composition of my class, I had to pay extra attention to the challenges my minority-language students were facing, whose English proficiency was assessed as significantly deficient in the previous semester's final exam (September 16, 2022). Their scores ranged from approximately 21 to 30, averaging at 23, which is considerably below the A1 beginner level. While I was considering how I could provide extra support to my students in speaking English, a unique opportunity for being trained in EAR (as part of my Continuing Professional Development) arose. [* end note]

Literature Review

Before discussing how the research project was designed and accomplished, there are three related topics that merit some consideration for language learning in the context of the investigation that was carried out: Exploratory Action Research (EAR), the Know-Want-Learned (KWL) strategy and the online collaborative whiteboard platform known as Miro board.

Exploratory Action Research is a 'branch' of Action Research (AR) together with Collaborative Action Research (CAR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Hanks, 2021). For the whole 'family tree' of Practitioner Research (PR), see Figure 1 in the Appendix. EAR itself is based on the work of Smith and Rebolledo (2018), who define it "as a way to explore, understand and improve our practice as teachers" (p. 22). It consists of two phases, the exploratory phase and the action phase (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, p. 27). These can be perceived as steps of a staircase where, in certain cases, one can decide to stop after the first three steps that are denoted as *plan to explore*, *explore*, *analyse and reflect*. In most cases, however, the research process continues with action defined as plan to change, act, observe and reflect. The present research project involved both phases, namely, it included an initial exploration followed by an action phase aimed at improving the teacher-researcher's practice for their own benefit and that of their students.

The action phase employed the Know-Want-Learned approach, which goes back to Blachowicz and Ogle's key work (2008) on how reading comprehension can be improved in order to create strategies for independent learners. 'KWL' stands for 'Knows, Wants to Know, and Has Learned'. For the purposes of reading, KWL involves three cognitive steps. First, learners access what they know (prior knowledge). Second, they discover what they want to learn and third, they recall what they learnt as a result of the learning process. Even though the KWL approach has mainly been employed for reading comprehension (Macartney, 2023; Usman et al., 2018), it has also been used to enhance speaking skills (e.g., Mantra, 2016). Lubis (2019) also applied the KWL strategy to enhance students' speaking skills successfully. Her research indicated that students' speaking performance improved significantly compared to the pre-test, which measured their baseline knowledge before the KWL strategy was employed.

Lumbangaol (2019) also explored the impact of the KWL technique on students' speaking skills. Conducted using a Classroom Action Research design, it involved 40 English education program students. The study found that the use of the KWL technique did enhance students' speaking skills, as evidenced by increased average grades in the action phase. Data analysis based on the responses in a survey questionnaire further confirmed the positive effects of employing the KWL technique in learning speaking skills. Altogether, this strategy serves as a valuable tool for teachers to help their learners process, understand, and retain newly presented material in the context of language instruction.

Finally, as regards one of the main tools that was employed in the action phase, the Miro board used is a versatile whiteboard platform that enhances students' engagement and creativity in the classroom (Allah, 2023). Miro was launched in 2011 and has gained popularity over time. It is a digital tool that facilitates remote work and enhances student engagement (Spruce & Moriarty, 2022). Among the many advantages that make it a useful collaborative whiteboarding platform is the fact that it "enables distributed teams to innovate and work effectively together, from brainstorming with digital sticky notes to planning and managing agile workflows" (Allah, 2023, 78). The software allows students to create designs, move things around, and communicate through embedded video calls or online chats. Its versatility is proven by the fact that it has been used effectively by Ukrainian teachers, whose students are scattered all over Ukraine or are living in European countries (Opryshko, 2022). In sum, Miro in education creates opportunities for students to share and enhance their learning experiences, bridging the gap between theory and practice while encouraging future growth.

Exploratory Research Phase

During the first semester of the 2022 academic year, I assigned a speaking task to my 9th-grade students, which involved giving a mini-presentation in front of the whole class. Many of them appeared nervous and hesitated a lot, even though they practised their presentations beforehand in pairs and groups. I decided to explore the underlying issues so that I could suggest suitable remedial measures. The first task was framing the appropriate research questions.

My mentor, Vanita, guided me through some of the examples in the book Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research (Rebolledo et al., 2016) and helped me formulate the questions for the exploratory phase. She suggested that I create a set of questions to address students' concerns, teachers' perspectives, and the types of speaking activities. I initially listed 17 issues, which were later refined and condensed into three specific questions based on my own context:

1. What are students' perceptions of speaking in the target language?
2. Which speaking activities do my students prefer while practising speaking in the classroom?
3. How far do students show an ability to respond in English after being instructed about a task?

We also chose the data collection methods that aligned with each question. We decided on using focus group discussions for the first and second questions and peer observation by a colleague of mine, Kanyaluck Preechaprasit for the third question. She is an English teacher who observed my classes both in the exploratory and the action phases. After that I made a comprehensive data collection plan to tackle the various aspects of my research, dividing the process into several distinct phases. The first step involved communicating the purpose of my EAR project to both my students and the fellow teacher mentioned above. Right at the beginning of the exploratory stage, I informed the students about my intention to conduct EAR from October 2022 to January 2023. The purpose of the research was to determine the most effective method to enhance their English-speaking skills. I explained to them that their sole responsibility was to actively participate in every activity provided. Additionally, I assured them that any video recordings or transcribed spoken words would not be shared on any other platform. Subsequently, explicit consent forms were distributed to the students for their understanding and agreement, and their parents were asked to sign them. In addition to ensuring the students' understanding and agreement, I also had a discussion with Kanyaluck Preechaprasit, explaining to her the rationale behind conducting this study and the tasks she needed to perform while she observed my class.

The second step entailed teaching a speaking skill module named 'Explore the Moon'. The main purpose of this exercise was to establish my students' English-speaking abilities as a starting point (benchmark). Even though I had been aware that my students were struggling when having to express themselves in small groups and even more when they had to speak in front of the whole class, I wanted to focus on how my students performed on an occasion when I was paying special attention to aspects of speaking skills and students' apparent self-confidence issues. The third phase entailed enlisting the help of Kanyaluck Preechaprasit to observe my English classes, which occurred twice for an hour on 7th and 14th of October 2022. These observations were designed to focus on specific criteria, including the relevance of the speaking topic to the students' lives, their ability to respond to teacher queries, their use of the target language, the extent of mother tongue use, and their engagement and feedback during speaking activities. Any unanticipated challenges encountered by the students were also meticulously documented. These observation guidelines (see Appendix 2) were devised by the teacher-researcher to align with the experiences, interests, and societal context of the students.

My colleague's feedback highlighted that I utilised questions to stimulate students and incorporated a few instructional checking questions to assess their comprehension. I involved volunteer students to demonstrate how a given task was to be accomplished, but only a small number could immediately engage in English; the majority required time to contemplate their answers, often resorting to using Thai during the activities. Furthermore, only a few students were capable of interacting at the sentence level, with most functioning at the word level during the question-and-answer sessions. During the practice stage, most students made an effort to communicate in English, but if they encountered any difficulty, they tended to switch to Thai. In group discussions, the predominant language used was Thai. Despite this, my colleague observed students making collaborative efforts to support each other in carrying out their speaking tasks.

As a next step, I conducted focus group discussions with the students (see Appendix 3) to gather responses pertaining to my first research question, which encompassed topics such as the significance of speaking in English, opportunities for using English both inside and outside the classroom, preferred speaking activities, motivation for speaking, and teacher feedback and correction of errors. During the focus group discussion phase, students were divided into three groups of five and one group of four. We utilised both English and Thai languages during the discussions, prioritising Thai when it was necessary to overcome any language difficulties. Following the data collection process, I compiled and organised the data to summarise the insights from both my students and my colleague. Figures 1–3 below present the data obtained from the observation notes, focus group discussions, and the teacher-researcher's reflective notes.

The initial findings from the exploratory research phase indicated that most students were aware of the significance of English owing to their city's status as a tourist destination. This circumstance can open up greater opportunities for them to engage with foreign tourists and improve their quality of life in the long run. Some students said that English would only be important to them in terms of recreational activities, such as playing games or chatting with peers. However, most of the students, despite having opportunities to speak English in class, were hesitant to do so in front of their peers and were reluctant to participate in speaking activities.
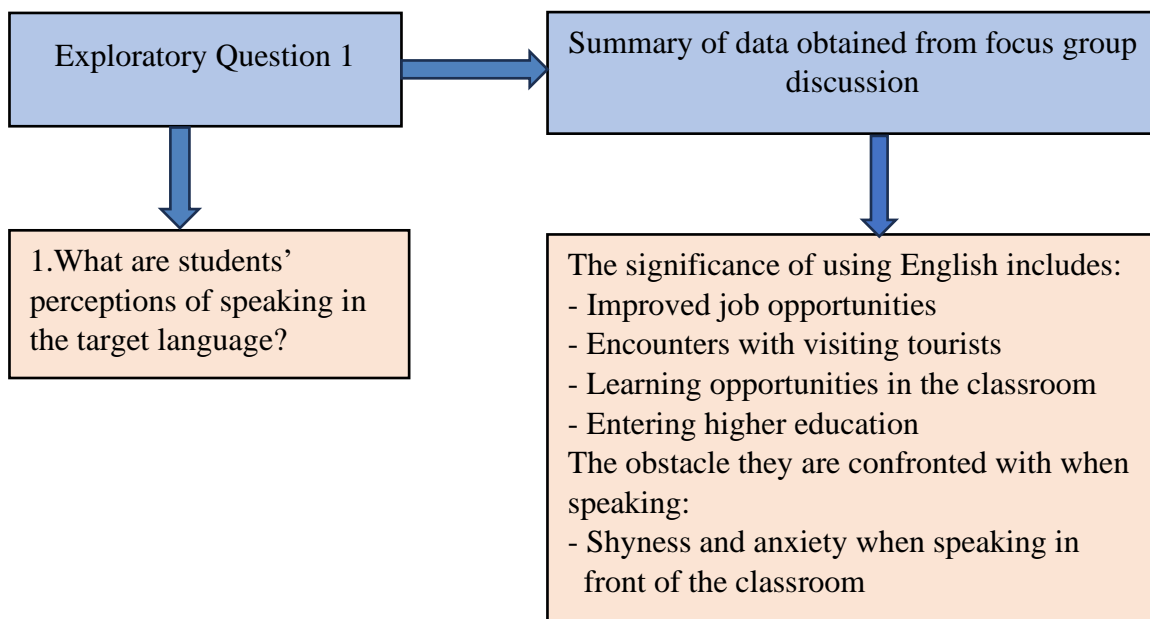

Figure 1.
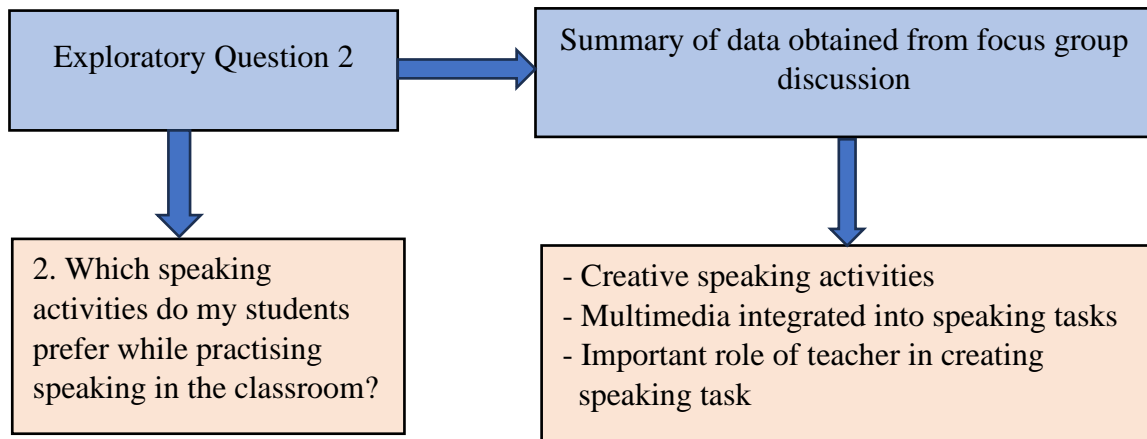**Main findings of the exploratory phase related to Question 1**

Figure 2.
Main findings of the exploratory phase related to Question 2
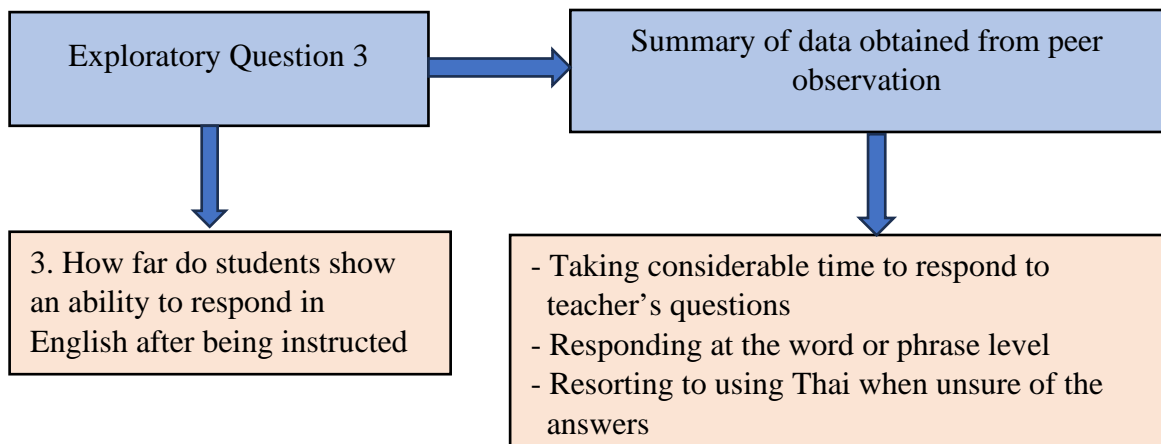
Figure 3.
Main findings of the exploratory phase related to Question 3

Most students had only limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Some engaged with foreigners when giving directions or interacted with taxi drivers, while others incorporated English into their daily routine through games. My students pointed out that the tools available for improving speaking skills were outdated and had been used repeatedly. Technology tools employed for a period during the practice stage, such as PowerPoint and Google Translation, were deemed uninteresting. Meanwhile, a number of students thought that creative speaking activities improved their English-speaking skills. They particularly enjoyed collaborative activities such as "Mingling", "Find Someone Who", and Think-Pair-Share. Students also mentioned that, on occasion, they were confused about the steps of accomplishing speaking tasks. This confusion, in turn, affected their ability to actively participate in speaking activities. In summary, students' hesitancy and nervousness did not result from a lack of motivation or the lack of recognising the importance of speaking English for the purposes of communication but rather from insufficient self-confidence and a lack of clarity on how speaking tasks should be managed (e.g., clear instructions).

Action Research Phase

Having drawn these conclusions from the data analysis, I was ready to design strategies and use innovative approaches to address the issues that had been identified. Table 1 below provides an overview of the action plan that was created in order to set up a logical, step-by-step project management timeline.

Table 1.
Taking action

Action to be taken	Reason for action	Knowledge base for action	Tools for action	Objectives
Check the curriculum	The need to stay aligned	Foreign Language Learning Curriculum	Self-study by reading official documents related to the curriculum	To have an understanding of the requirements
Develop new teaching materials	The need to make topics more relevant to students	Own research with the help of a mentor	Mentoring sessions and materials writing	To create engaging speaking activities
Employ new approaches to learning	The need to facilitate learning	KWL strategy	Practical application of the KWL strategy	To use the "what I know", "what I want to learn", and "what I learned" approaches effectively
Employ new IT tools	The need to engage students	Miro board	Introduction and practical use of this digital tool	For students to become familiar and comfortable with the use of the multimedia tool
Integrate grammar and speaking skills	The need to combine fluency and accuracy	Sources on grammar and speaking activities	Revision and practise of the Simple Past and Simple Present forms	To improve the use of grammatical forms and increase the ratio of sentence-level responses
Employ new strategies for speaking	The need to enhance students' speaking confidence	Dialogue guidelines and prompts	Practising conversations using dialogue guidelines and prompts	To improve students' confidence in speaking

The process of accomplishing the action plan involved multiple steps. Initially, I familiarised myself with the English strands and indicators outlined in the Foreign Language Learning subject of the Thai Education Curriculum (Basic Education Core Curriculum BE 2551 (AD 2008). The learning objectives, outcomes, and evaluation criteria for each unit are aligned with these strands and indicators. The document highlights the importance of foreign language skills both for communication and accessing knowledge within the Thai education system. It stresses that proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing is essential for effective communication and building relationships. Teachers are urged to help students develop these language competencies as outlined by the Education Ministry. I was keenly aware that my students' speaking skills were not up to the indicators and that I needed to take steps to improve the situation.

Subsequently, I developed two units: 1) tourist sights in Thailand, and 2) renowned festivals in Thailand. Each lesson plan spanned two hours, resulting in a total of eight hours for both units. The choice of the first unit stemmed from the students' recognition of how significant their home town was as a tourist destination. The second unit, focusing on Thai festivals, was selected due to students' interest in such events, particularly those occurring at the time of the intervention (the Loy Krathong festival). These topics were seamlessly incorporated into the speaking lesson plans, employing the pre-while-speaking stages of the learning process (for a lesson plan, see Appendix 7). Choosing these particular units aligned with the information gathered during the focus group discussions. As mentioned above, during this stage, participants emphasised the importance of utilising English to shape their future professional paths, citing their city's main sights as attractive destinations for visitors.

In the third step, I examined the initial grammatical concepts in the curriculum and opted for the present and past simple tenses to integrate them into the two topics. The rationale behind selecting these tenses was to build on students' prior knowledge and familiarity with these grammatical structures. Simultaneously, I introduced prompt dialogues to prepare students and boost their confidence in practising speaking. The dialogue guidelines followed the Wh-question format, featuring 10 questions and responses. Sample questions included inquiries like "Where did you go on vacation?" and "What were the challenging activities you could do there?" Corresponding responses were structured, covering aspects such as the destination, companions, duration, and challenging activities. Based on the results of a focus group discussion with students during the exploratory phase, it was discovered that a significant proportion of students spent time responding to both teacher and peer inquiries. Due to their uncertainty about the correct answers, they frequently switched to using Thai. As a result, incorporating prompt dialogues at this stage helped students better prepare to articulate their thoughts accurately.

The fourth step involved seeking input from an experienced teacher, Phakakrong Ruksakrit, who works at the same school and has offered to look at the appropriateness and accuracy of the speaking lesson plans. Finally, I implemented these speaking lesson plans in my English classroom on November 7th, 9th, 14th, and 16th, 2022.

I also decided to design new-style speaking activities in my English classes. Drawing from the findings of peer observation during the exploratory phase, it was clear that a notable number of students exhibited a preference for activities that could generate the conditions for engagement over passive ones. Consequently, I opted for the KWL strategy, recognizing its effectiveness in application, which can sequentially contribute to enhancing students' speaking abilities with increased confidence and retention of the material learned. KWL was combined with the use of a collaborative whiteboard application called Miro board whose merits have already been discussed in the Literature Review section. My aim was to employ this multimedia tool to support students' confidence, since this had been indicated as lacking in the exploratory phase. It needs to be pointed out that even though connectivity can be a problem at times in our region in Thailand, overall, my learners were able to work with Miro without serious connection problems and found the application fairly easy to use.

The following graphic (Figure 4) summarises how the KWL strategy and Miro work in a speaking class.

Figure 4.
The implementation process of the KWL strategy combined with the Miro board as set up by the teacher-researcher

During speaking tasks, I implemented the following steps:

In the pre-speaking phase, I introduced unknown words for students to find meanings in groups. I also introduced the KWL chart to gather background knowledge.

In speaking lessons, students were grouped into four or five members and were given individual KWL charts. I explained the KWL chart and the instructions in English, but when students appeared confused, I used Thai for clarification. The lesson involved introducing new vocabulary and questions to activate prior knowledge. The function of each KWL column was explained, and students collaborated in groups to discuss and exchange their knowledge on the topic.

Finally, volunteers from each group presented their findings to the class.

Figure 5.
Teacher input during the pre-speaking phase
Note: Photo used with students' permission

In the speaking phase, students listed questions about the topic, discussed them in groups, and shared their questions. They practised constructing and answering questions. During the practice stage, students actively engaged in questioning their classmates using the questions generated within their groups. They freely moved around the classroom, exchanging answers and sharing personal experiences related to the content, fostering lively and motivating dialogues. The majority of students participated naturally, displaying ease and comfort while partnering up for discussions. The teacher's role involved circulating around the class, noting successes and challenges in students' speaking delivery. Additionally, less proficient students received assistance from more capable peers when facing difficulties in expressing themselves. Overall, the activity created a positive and supportive learning environment, as was evident from the students' smiles and laughter during the process.

During the practice phase, I predominantly employed English to provide instructions, assess comprehension, and ask questions. Essentially, English was utilised for 100 percent of verbal communication during this stage. As the speaking activity commenced, I circulated around the classroom and noticed that 13 out of 19 students utilised English to converse with each other. I endeavoured to monitor and tally the number of pairs effectively communicating in English. However, in instances where students encountered difficulty responding in English, they reverted to using Thai. Similarly, when attempting to construct new sentences outside of the previously learned structures, Thai was employed instead of English.

Figure 6.
Students talking to each other during the while-speaking phase
Note: Photo used with students' permission

In the post-speaking phase, students summarised what they had learned, shared ideas using the Miro board, and presented in small groups as well as to the whole class. I used the Miro board for visual mapping to expand their understanding and provided a checklist for speaking confidently. In this phase, they mostly used English, with some Thai incorporated during the sharing activity.

In the final stage, students shared their experiences on the topic using a Miro board. Firstly, I created the template that corresponded to the topic, and then I assigned each role for students to complete their data. Secondly, I asked each student to provide their personal views. Then, students created individual bulletins, transferred data from their KWL columns, and incorporated video recordings with their opinions. Classmates could engage through spoken language, emoji stickers, and video responses on the Miro board. This helped increase students' speaking ability because they could rehearse their speaking tasks. Moreover, this also raised students' confidence in speaking with peers because they could see their peers' tasks and also reflect on their peers' opinions through spoken or written platforms. A 5-minute mini-presentation was conducted after completing the process, where each group summarised their initial knowledge, their questions, and the information obtained within 5 minutes. The lesson concluded with the distribution of a self-reflection form that the students were asked to fill out. In this step, English was used exclusively throughout the post-speaking phase.

These activities were implemented over two weeks between the 7th to 16th of November, 2022.

Action Research Findings

To evaluate the effectiveness of the KWL strategy and the multimedia Miro board application the following data gathering tools were used: focus group discussions, a self-reflection checklist, and peer observations. The focus group discussion (see Appendix 4) was conducted at the conclusion of the intervention and helped the teacher-researcher get the views of all 19 students. The data revealed that the implementation of the KWL (knows, wants to know, and learned) method had a noticeable positive effect on learners' confidence in speaking English. Specifically, during the speaking stage, when students engaged in peer interviews, a majority of students proficiently employed the supplied dialogue prompts to pose and respond to questions accurately and confidently. Moreover, they could share their own experience while replying to peers. Furthermore, at the stage of the post-speaking task, students again had a chance to present their group mini-presentations in the classroom. They could exchange ideas and give feedback on their peers' presentations while their own self-evaluation allowed them to learn about their progress and performance. Ultimately, the majority of the students felt that they had gained confidence in speaking English.

Below are a few students' quotes that were derived from a focus group discussion. The quotes are my translations into English, as the students gave their feedback in Thai:

"I felt confident talking to my peers because I had sufficient knowledge for meaningful discussions. Furthermore, if I wasn't sure about structuring the conversation, my classmates were supportive and assisted me in improving."

"The KWL technique boosted my self-assurance in speaking English. It allowed us to express ourselves freely and confidently without any hesitation."

Following the two-week implementation of the KWL strategy and the Miro tool, I asked the students to respond to a self-observation checklist (see Appendix 6). The survey was introduced in English to the students and they were encouraged to use a translation application if they were unclear about any of the questions. The information derived from the students' observation checklist indicated that their participation in speaking activities was deemed satisfactory. A total of 16 students (84%) out of 19 indicated that they felt that they actively participated in meaningful discussions and presentations during group activities, demonstrating good listening skills and appropriate responses to their peers.

Furthermore, the proficiency of students in English speaking also seemed to have improved with the incorporation of the KWL strategy and the Miro tool. A majority of 15 students (78%) out of 19 acknowledged that these tools had boosted their confidence in speaking. These enhancements contributed to making their English learning experience more engaging and meaningful, particularly in the practise of speaking. Additionally, 13 students (68%) out of 19 affirmed that they were able to articulate their thoughts without undue pauses or hesitations. This was attributed to their utilisation of expressions and vocabulary from the intervention materials, allowing them to present their ideas in a logical, organised manner and apply appropriate sentence structures.

Peer observation took place three times in November 2022, on the 9th, 14th, and 16th. I asked my colleague to observe the classroom and note down their remarks under the headings of students' apparent preferences and participation while carrying out a speaking activity. Kanyaluck Preechaprasit, the same person who was involved in the exploratory stage, observed

my English class from the beginning to the end of the lesson. She had the option to remain stationary or move around, but it was emphasised that she should not disrupt students. She had the freedom to approach students to assess their participation in speaking tasks and their willingness to engage in group work. If she required additional information or wanted to delve deeper, she was free to ask questions. After the lesson, she provided me with detailed information that she had noted down in each column of the observation form (see Appendix 5).

The findings from the peer observation indicated that several students actively participated in pair and group activities. Additionally, the majority of students displayed heightened confidence and ease while collaborating in group settings. Many students highlighted that the KWL strategy played a crucial role in enhancing their understanding of expectations. The dialogue prompts contributed to more meaningful interactions with classmates. Consequently, these students demonstrated increased enthusiasm and a greater willingness to engage in well-structured speaking activities. This enhanced motivation and confidence were attributed to the organised approach facilitated by the KWL strategy. The three-stage speaking activities—pre-, while-, and post-speaking—were set up and managed systematically. Especially in the while-speaking stage, students had a lot of opportunities to discuss and share their group's opinions. Furthermore, a prompt dialogue was provided to practise sentence construction. My colleague and I observed that they tried to rehearse, ask and respond whenever they had to perform in pairs or in groups. Moreover, when I did a survey of the group's collaboration, they all aided each other; even weak students were assisted by more able students. When asked about their satisfaction using the KWL strategy, they all emphasised that learning through this type of speaking activity helped them speak in English more confidently. It was evident that while the KWL teaching sequences supported students' speaking ability, the multimedia programme, namely, the Miro board, helped students collaborate with each other.

Learning and Reflections

My involvement in Exploratory Action Research has deepened my understanding of student development, teacher practices, and pedagogical approaches. Specifically, it has enhanced my knowledge of:

1. Student Progress: Understanding students' responses to different instructional methods, their learning preferences, strengths, and challenges.
2. Teacher Methods: Identifying effective teaching strategies and recognizing areas where teachers need additional support and training.
3. Pedagogical Strategies: Expanding my knowledge of various pedagogical approaches and their impact on learning outcomes.

This newfound knowledge has empowered me to adapt and improve my teaching methods for better results. Considering the experiences described above, in the future I will aim to promote Exploratory Action Research and encourage other teachers to participate in research studies. This can contribute to the development of effective pedagogical approaches, fostering a culture of inquiry and reflective practice that benefits teachers and students alike. I aspire to assist not only English teachers but instructors of various other subjects by sharing my personal EAR experiences from my classroom, offering practical insights, tips, and lessons learned in order to facilitate successful EAR implementation and enhance the professional development of the teacher community (e.g., Ministry of Education, Sierra Leone, 2021).

The contributions of my mentor were very valuable throughout the process. Vanita assisted me in selecting and designing the necessary tools through individual meetings and webinars. Additionally, she recommended that I familiarise myself with the EAR process from the handbook titled *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). This process aided me in identifying qualitative tools that aligned with our research questions. During our meetings, Vanita provided numerous examples and demonstrated how to design items related to various tools. Her constructive feedback proved instrumental, enabling me to refine and ultimately finalise my data collection tools after several iterations. This achievement filled me with pride and delight.

I believe that my experience may have wider implications: teachers who are confronted with the issue of low confidence levels in students when they are asked to speak English, can resort to innovative learning techniques and applications. Future research on oral performance in naturalistic classroom contexts may result in further insights and lead to other innovative solutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has shown that teachers need to provide a variety of speaking activities to enhance students' motivation levels. It is also useful for teachers to be familiar with the use of technological tools to facilitate language skill development in a classroom. Here, KWL combined with the Miro board significantly enhanced students' speaking skills.

For me, this was a remarkable experience in my overall career to date, where I implemented the Exploratory Action Research (EAR) process to address the learning issues of my students and modify my ways of teaching speaking. Through this, I gained a deeper understanding of how to effectively conduct research by aligning it with the two phases of EAR. As a result, my students displayed increased enthusiasm for learning English, as they recognised that this process was designed to bring about positive changes in their learning progress. Furthermore, I am proud of my continuous aspiration to develop myself as a dedicated and professional classroom researcher.

End Note

* My students' struggles and reluctance to engage in English communication prompted me to participate in a British Council Thailand project, which recruited 40 English teachers across the country in 2022 to be trained in Exploratory Action Research. Within this project, a consultant with British Council India, Vanita Chopra, became my teacher-research mentor, and our collaboration continued beyond the official end of the training programme.

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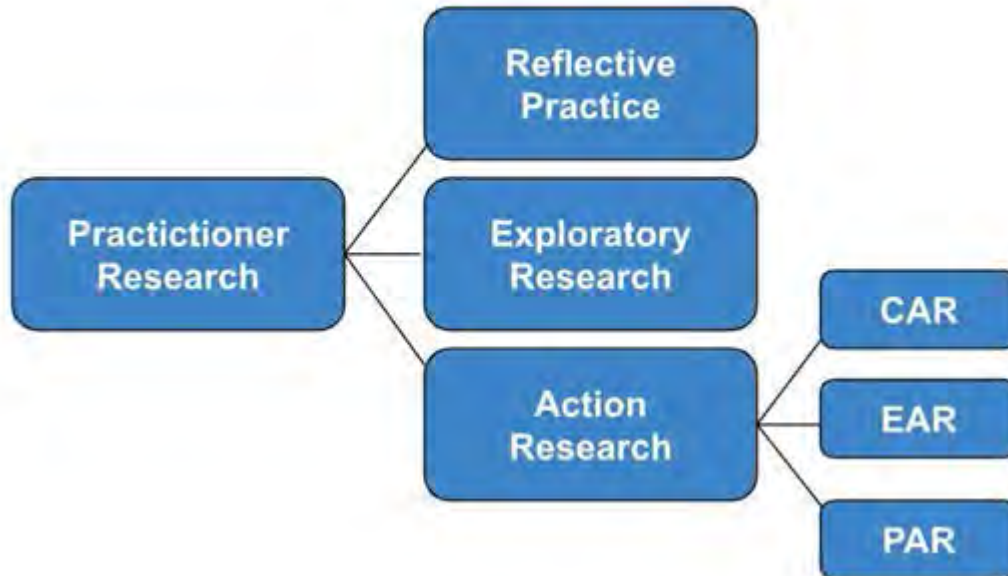
Acknowlededgments

Appendices

Appendix 1

Types of Practitioner Research

Note. From Hanks, 2021, p.464.

Appendix 2

<u>**Observation form for the exploratory phase**</u>

Observe the lesson and make annotations under the specified category, predominantly focusing on the third question.

Descriptions	1st observation (7th October 2022)	2nd observation (14th October 2022)
1. How did the teacher give instructions to the students to perform a speaking task?		
2. How does the teacher first demonstrate the speaking activity before having students practise?		
3. How is the speaking topic made meaningful and relevant? For example, is the topic related to their life to practise speaking in the target language?		
4. How many students could reply to the teacher's questions as a follow up task?		
5. To what extent were students able to express themselves in the target language, for instance using a word / sentence?		
6. How much mother tongue did the students use to perform in a speaking task?		
7. What kind of feedback and support did students extend to each other while performing a speaking task?		
8. Were there any unanticipated challenges faced by students while responding in the target language? Please mention what kind.		

Appendix 3

Focus group discussion form for the exploratory phase

These questions were given to 19 students primarily focusing on question items 1 and 2.

Descriptions	Ss1	Ss2	Ss3	Ss4	Ss5
1. Do you think speaking in English is important? Please explain.					
2. Do you have the opportunity to use English in the classroom or not? Why or why not?					
3. What opportunities do you have to use English outside the classroom and why?					
4. How much English do you think you are using at home and why?					
5. What types of speaking activities in the class do you enjoy? Why?					
6. Do you think that English speaking activities contribute to your speaking skills?					
7. What can improve your speaking abilities the most?					
8. What kind of English learning environment do you like? Why?					
9. Do you understand the teacher's instructions clearly when you are engaged in a speaking activity? Why/ or why not?					
10. If you outperformed would your teacher compliment you? How?					
11. Do you think you are motivated to speak both inside and outside the classroom? Why or why not?					
12. If you mispronounce would your teacher correct that mistake? How?					
13. Does your teacher give you feedback at the end of the lesson? How?					

Appendix 4

Focus group discussion form for the action phase

These topics were discussed by the 19 students (in small groups) at the end of the intervention.

Steps of speaking tasks	Descriptions	Ss 1	Ss 2	Ss 3	Ss 4	Ss 5
Pre-speaking step	1. What support did the teacher provide before having you write on K column? 2. What is your opinion on whether KWL could indeed affect your speech?					
While-speaking step	3. What kind of support from the teacher could help you deliver your speaking tasks in the classroom confidently? 4. How did working collaboratively support you to speak during the tasks? Please share an example. 5. What other types of assistance do you think you need while you are doing a speaking activity? 6. Did you have unanticipated challenges come up with every speaking task? Please provide details.					
Post-speaking step	7. To what extent did using the multimedia aid you in speaking English confidently? Please share an example. 8. What is your opinion regarding your own self-evaluation of speaking performance at the end of the task? Please provide details. 9. Do you think you have made sufficient progress to speak in English? Why or why not? 10. Do you feel more confident now to speak out individually? Please provide details.					

Appendix 5

Observation form for peer observation in the action phase

Direction: Keep an eye on the classroom and take notes on what happens during the speaking lesson.

Steps of speaking tasks	Descriptions	1st observation (9th November)	2nd observation (14th November)	3rd observation (16th November)
Pre speaking stage	1. How did the teacher demonstrate the use of KWL to facilitate students' learning? What do you think about it?			
	2. How did the teacher elicit the students' background knowledge from the picture on the board? Please share examples.			
	3. What support did the teacher provide to students before a speaking task? Please share an example.			
	4. How did the teacher facilitate and encourage students to work in collaboration? Please share an example.			
While speaking stage	5. To what extent could students ask questions to be written under W after they shared what they already knew? How many questions were formed and were they relevant?			
	6. Did they use a substitution table? How?			
	7. Did the students face unanticipated challenges while they were interviewed by peers as a speaking activity? Please provide details.			

	8. While students were doing an interview, how did they supplement extra information in their opinion? Please share an example.			
	9. Did the feedback provided by the teacher help students improve their performance when speaking? Please provide details.			
Post-speaking stage	10. What kind of feedback and support did the students extend to each other while practising speaking?			
	11. How did the use of multimedia encourage the students to speak with confidence?			
	12. To what extent were the students able to express themselves fluently in the target language based on the feedback and support provided by the teacher? How do you feel about it?			

Appendix 6

<u>Self- observation checklist for students after the action phase</u>

Directions: After implementing the KWL and multimedia tool, observe yourselves and rate the following statements according to how accurately it describes what went on.

1.   Can the KWL and Multimedia tools enhance your confidence in speaking English?
      1   2   3   4   5   n/a

2.   Do the KWL and Multimedia tools make your English learning more interesting and meaningful?
      1   2   3   4   5   n/a

3.   Is the Miro tool beneficial in your speaking practice?
      1   2   3   4   5   n/a

4.   Did you use relevant vocabulary from the intervention materials in your spoken responses?
      1   2   3   4   5   n/a

5.   Do you speak confidently and without excessive pauses or hesitations?
      1   2   3   4   5   n/a

6.   Do you present your thoughts in a logical and organized manner, using appropriate sentence structures?
      1   2   3   4   5   n/a

7.   Can you effectively incorporate relevant multimedia content into your speaking, such as referring to images, videos, or audio clips?
      1   2   3   4   5   n/a

8.   Are you able to analyze the content, making connections between what you already knew, what you wanted to know, and what you learned?
      1   2   3   4   5   n/a

9.   Are you able to ask thoughtful questions related to the content, and can they elaborate on their responses?
      1   2   3   4   5   n/a

10. During group discussions or presentations, do you actively listen to your peers, respond appropriately, and engage in meaningful dialogue?
      1   2   3   4   5   n/a

Appendix 7

<u>**Lesson plan form**</u>

This lesson plan was created by the teacher-researcher using the pre-while-post speaking format, with each lesson lasting 2 hours.

Daily lesson plan

Foreign Language Department (English Language)   **Secondary 3**
Unit: 1   **Theme:** Attractive Places in Thailand   **Time:** 4 hrs.
Lesson Number: 1   **Topic**: Where did you go for your latest vacation?   **Time:** 2 hrs.

1. Strands and Indicators
Strand 1: Language for Communication
Standard F1.2: Endowment with language communication skills for exchange of data and information; efficient expression of feelings and opinions
Indicators F1.2 M3/5. Students speak and write to describe their own feelings and opinions about various matters, activities, experiences, and news/incidents with proper reasoning.

2. Core competences
1. Communication capacity
2. Capacity for applying life skills

3. Specific competences
1. Students expressing their opinions and feelings towards a situation. (CEFR A2)

4. Desirable Characteristics
1. Public-mindedness

5. Competent learning objectives
Students should be able to incorporate the issue into their daily lives by keeping up with current events or following their interests. They then communicate their task using communicative skills, as well as the data provided by the application of technology and the information sought. They also participate in group activities.

Objective Analysis
Knowledge – Skills – Attitude (KSA)
1. Students can construct sentences in the present and past simple tense formats. (Knowledge) Express ideas to each other on the Miro board.
2. Students can use questions and responses to express their opinions or experiences. (Skills) Observed through their speaking activity.
3. Students engage in group activities. (Attitude) Rotated group activity to ensure accuracy.

6. Learning Procedures

Step 1: Pre-speaking step
- Write unknown words and let students find meanings via an online dictionary in a group of four.
- Present the KWL chart on the board and describe how it works. Also, place a picture on the board and ask questions related to the topic to elicit their own background knowledge.
- Exchange ideas, discuss, write down on the board, and list down what they know in the K column.

Step 2: While-speaking step
- Ask them to list questions about what they want to know about this topic, discuss it in groups, and note it down in their own W column. Also, let a representative of each group share their own group's questions, which can be supplemented in classmates' W columns.
- Next, a substitution table with prompts will be provided to practise constructing the questions and how to respond.
- After having been rehearsed by a pair or group, they will have the chance to interview their classmates. In this stage, extra general ideas can be supplemented thanks to the prompted dialogue and comfortable atmosphere, which lead them to think and share without hesitation.

Step 3: Post-speaking step
- Let them write down what they have learned in the L column, then they will be asked to use the Miro Board to format the KWL chart and share their ideas in groups (mini-presentation) and in front of the class, respectively.
- Attribute the checklist containing aspects related to speaking with confidence to them at the end of the lesson.
-

7. Evaluations

- Observe students' confidence while participating in speaking activities with classmates.
- Ask students about their progress in speaking English after completing the activity.

8. Evaluation tools
- Peer observation form
- Self-reflection form

9. Feedback:

School Director's feedback

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Achievement of learning objectives:

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Recommendations for increasing achievement levels and enhancing activities:

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Appendix 8

<u>**KWL Chart**</u>

In the first column, write what you already know about the topic. In the second column, write what you **w**ant to know about the topic. After the lesson, write what you learned in the third column.

Name_____Number_____Class_____

Date_____School name_____

What I Know	What I **W**ant to Know	What I Learned

Nepalese Students' Reluctance to Submit Homework in Online Classes

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Abstract

This Exploratory Action Research (EAR) investigation was carried out in Nepal and involved 40 secondary school students aged 13 to 15. The primary purpose of the research was to explore the reasons why students were reluctant to submit their English homework in their online classes in the second phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and implement actions in class so that students revert to submitting homework at the level before the global health crisis. In the exploratory phase, the teacher-researcher used a Google form questionnaire, focus group discussions, peer observation and a reflective journal for data gathering. Based on the findings, which showed that students liked homework but not the way it was assigned, the teacher-researcher prepared a 6-point action plan and changed the frequency and type of homework as well as the way feedback was provided. The intervention involved the use of educational web tools and the creation of a dedicated Facebook group to share students' ideas. The outcomes of the intervention were evaluated by the same tools (Google form, focus group discussions, peer observation and reflective journal). The findings show that the majority of the students were satisfied with the new-style homework routine and there was a considerable rise in regular homework submission rates. The EAR report also describes the ongoing support received by the teacher-researcher (first author) and her mentor (second author) denoting that their regular collaboration has contributed greatly to the well-organized carrying out of the research project and its successful accomplishment.

Keywords: homework submission; online learning; technological tools; feedback; rapport building

Introduction

Homework is seen as an intrinsic part of school life; teachers routinely set homework and pupils expect to be given some to do. Cooper et al. (2006, 1) define homework as "tasks assigned to students by schoolteachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours". Homework is assigned to students to revise the material taught in their free time and is, therefore, aimed at consolidating their learning. It also gives them a degree of freedom as they can accomplish tasks at their own pace. Appropriate homework has been shown to have several benefits. Cooper et al. (2006) state that there is "generally consistent evidence for a positive influence of homework on achievement" (1). Their meta-analysis research study found that there is a correlational relationship between the amount of homework and academic

achievement. Remarkably, compared to kindergarten through sixth grade, there seems to be a stronger correlation between homework and academic achievement in grades seven through twelve (Cooper et al., 2006). In addition to improving goal setting, time management, and attention span, homework assignments can also strengthen the development of self-regulation processes and self-efficacy beliefs (Bembenutty, 2011). In particular, high achievers claim that they have to work more than low achievers to organize their workplace, schedule their time, deal with distractions, sustain motivation, and regulate their emotions when doing homework (Xu, 2009).

However, some researchers disagree with setting homework and argue that it creates inequality for students from marginalized family backgrounds. Kralovec and Buell (2000) present solid arguments against homework claiming that it puts learners from families with limited resources at a disadvantage as students struggle to finish their assignments due to their socio-economic circumstances. They may not get support from their parents or guardians, and they may not have time to complete their homework because of their household chores (Jimissa, 2021) or owing to the sheer amount of homework set by teachers of different subjects (Rai, 2021). Jimissa argues that parents' and guardians' involvement in homework completion is significant.

Both parents and pupils should know the importance of homework for learning. Costley (2013), in his systematic review, argues that homework has both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, homework can enhance independent learning, and parents can see the progress of their children. On the other hand, overtly repetitive homework leads to boredom and disengagement. Rai (2021) in her EAR study entitled 'Why does homework cause stress on students?' found that too much homework in several subjects did indeed cause stress in her students. She reduced the frequency of homework and asked her students to submit it in any form they liked: for example, they could choose to hand in written notes or make oral or PowerPoint presentations on the same topic collaborating with a partner or a group that they chose. Subsequently, she found that the rate of homework submission increased in her class.

Although homework plays a significant role in developing academic excellence and maintaining students' self-discipline, it is still often perceived as a burden. Students generally do not enjoy doing their homework if they do not understand the task and when it takes them too long to finish. Harmer (2008) points out that students usually do not like doing their homework when teachers provide them with uninteresting assignments.

As a teacher in grade 8 (age range 13-15), I also became concerned because many of my students did not submit their homework in my online English classes at the time of the pandemic. I wondered if the reason was that they did not like the kind of homework that I assigned them. I contacted my mentor, Gyanu, with whom I had already worked in a mentor-mentee relationship for several years, and we decided to carry out an Exploratory Action Research (EAR) project. A mentor is a more experienced teacher than a mentee and their task is to help the mentee to explore and reflect on the solutions to the problems that have been identified. The mentor-mentee relationship is significant in EAR. The latter is practice-based research that aims at solving classroom issues through exploration and action. Smith and Rebolledo (2018) argue that "EAR is an effective way to address and cope with genuine issues in the classroom since it enables teachers to gain a better understanding of their classroom contexts and develop appropriate ways of teaching" (p. 4). Gyanu and I decided to explore the reasons behind low homework submission rates. I also wanted to develop my understanding of online classroom settings and improve my practice through an EAR intervention.

In order to do so, I clarified the objectives of the EAR project presented here. These were to discover the causes of students' reluctance to submit homework, explore ways to improve the situation and implement actions in class so that my students could connect more effectively with their lessons and continue to receive quality education even during the pandemic.

Background

When the world was hit by COVID-19, everything ground to a halt and education was no exception. In Nepal, during the nationwide lockdown starting on 24 March 2020, schools, colleges and universities remained closed physically and distance learning was introduced. My school followed suit and conducted online classes for all our students from grades 6 to 12 (ages 11 to 18). During the first wave of COVID-19, all of us teachers were quite excited since we needed to move our classes to an online platform for the first time, which was challenging. Teachers had to adjust and update themselves with the new context, scavenging, surfing, and attending webinars and online training sessions to equip themselves with digital knowledge and skills so that they could continue teaching during the emergency created by the pandemic.

My students were even more excited because classes were set up in a way that they could use their digital devices. Therefore, our students seemed motivated to learn online in the first phase of the pandemic (lasting from March to July 2020 in Nepal) but the same level of enthusiasm seemed to have evaporated by the start of the second wave of COVID-19 in April 2021. I could see my students gradually losing interest in classes delivered online and one of the signs was that many of them had stopped submitting their homework.

Giving homework at the end of the lesson is considered an important part of lesson planning in the Nepalese context. It is meant to enhance the productivity, creativity, and critical thinking of the students and keep them connected with the material taught. During face-to-face classes, ensuring students did their homework and submitted it on time was easy. If they did not hand in their homework, we could ask them why, and make them submit it later. In online classes, it was not possible to communicate in the same way. Students appeared to be taking advantage of the situation and skipped doing their homework. Over a month, only about 30% submitted homework regularly. This situation became more and more concerning for me because I believe homework is important for students to review the material discussed in the lesson and reinforce the skills they have already acquired. It was high time to explore the issue more closely during this phase of the pandemic. Therefore, I conducted the Exploratory Action Research described below from July to December 2021.

Planning for Exploration

At the very beginning, my "research question" was fairly unfocused and primarily reflected the doubts I had regarding my performance: 'What is wrong with my online English classes?' As mentioned in the Introduction, it was at this point that I contacted Gyanu, who had been mentoring me since 2019. I was aware of how much homework I was assigning to the students. However, I was not sure whether my students perceived homework as a burden or if there were some other reasons behind their apparent reluctance to submit homework in my online classes. During one mentoring session, Gyanu asked me various questions and our mentoring dialogue made me reflect on my classroom issues. Gyanu elicited the problems by asking questions for clarification and deeper meaning. She reflected on the problem and presented some alternatives. That helped me focus on only one group of students in whose class I seemed to be facing the

most challenges. Once we agreed that they should be chosen as the target group for exploration and action, we got down to planning the stages of EAR.

The total number of students in that group (8D) was 40, however only 80 percent of students joined the online classes regularly, and very few of them sent in their homework. We narrowed down the research topic to 'Students' reluctance to submit their homework in online classes'. Then we formulated the exploratory research questions based on our previous mentoring sessions:

1. How do my students feel about English homework?
2. Why do I think my students don't like to do their homework?
3. Do they have enough time and exposure to the target language to accomplish and submit their assignments?
4. What kinds of home assignments do my students expect from their English language classes?

Designing Data Collection Tools for Research

With Gyanu's help, I designed a Google form questionnaire (see Appendix A), set up focus group discussions, and I also kept a reflective journal. The questionnaire contained both open and closed questions related to our online classes and English homework. Altogether 23 students (out of 40) sent back the Google forms that were filled out in English. Since English is the medium of instruction, we often try to communicate in English even in an out-of-classroom context. After looking at the responses, I arranged for focus group discussions with nine students in three breakout rooms in Zoom. The discussions took place for about 30 minutes. I talked with them in their mother tongue (Nepali) to explore the issues more deeply. I asked them about their perceptions of homework, preferred ways of homework submission, and the challenges they faced in homework completion and submission. I recorded their responses, translated them into English, and analyzed the content. Furthermore, I wrote entries in my reflective journal after my online classes and kept a record of the homework submitters in Google Docs. I also received information by talking with colleagues and parents in virtual meetings and via telecommunication. I learned from the discussions with colleagues that the students of that class (8D) had not submitted homework for other subjects either. The parents that I consulted often told me that they did not know much about homework assigned to their children. The data I gathered was, therefore, triangulated, so Gyanu and I were ready to begin the analysis.

Findings From the Exploratory Phase

While analyzing the data gathered, I found that I had a misconception about my students' reluctance to submit homework. I thought that they didn't like doing their English homework, and that is why they didn't submit it. However, most of the students (more than 90% in the Google form questionnaire) responded that they liked doing their homework.
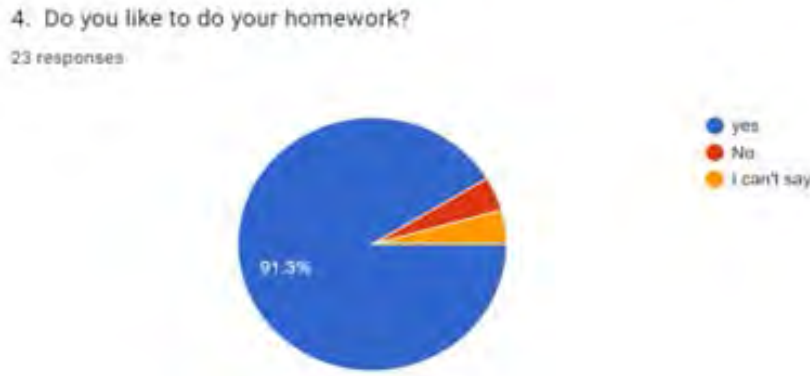
Figure 1.
Students' preference for homework (survey results)

Rather they wanted to get their homework promptly checked with some scores and positive feedback. Samir (all names have been changed to protect students' identities), for example, said "I used to do my homework in face-to-face classes because I got good comments from the teacher but in online classes I do not get responses and smileys and I do not feel like doing my homework". Some said that they needed more time to submit their homework and that they were expecting homework tasks to be creative and innovative. I came to understand that giving too much homework discourages the students as they are not given enough time to explore and submit on time. I realized students needed clear notifications and instructions on homework and the appropriate app should be employed for this. Tara was quite vocal about her suggestions:

> *Teach lessons like Stories, play Games Like Yesterday we played, and Give us a little Homework, When teachers give us Homework in DN* there is no notification of Homework I think there is no Homework so I request to give Homework in Google Classroom because in Google classroom there is a notification of Homework.*
> *DN = Digital Nepal, the Learning Management System used at our school

I used to assign the same kind of homework to everyone, but students wanted to be autonomous and incorporate technological knowledge and skills when doing their homework. Keshav said that he did not like the process of doing homework in his exercise book by hand, then taking a screenshot and uploading it in the Digital Nepal app: *"I like doing presentations and doing project quizzes … rather than writing in copy."*

In the focus group discussions, my students revealed that they needed to do their homework themselves without their parents' or guardians' support. They stated that I would need to give them extra time to submit their homework since they had only recently joined the online classes and did not have anyone to help them with their studies. In Roshan's words:

> *"There is no one to help me with my homework i am also new in technology, I cannot search for homework and do not know how to submit it, I wish someone helped me."*

The students also asked me to provide extra help and explain in class how to submit their homework through the Digital Nepal app as this was the Learning Management System (LMS) that the school had introduced a short while before. Some students felt that homework

should be a repeat of the work done in class so that they could revise it at home and submit it on time as well. For example: *"I can do homework if you ask for the classwork as homework later. Because I get a chance to learn how to do it in the classroom."* (Sujata)

It became clear that I needed to be more realistic in my expectations when setting home assignments, and I should also be able to innovate. Before this EAR project, I usually set the same assignment to everyone in the class asking them to work in their exercise books and then scan and upload their homework. My survey results showed that almost four-fifths of the students mentioned writing among their preferred forms of submitting homework, between half and two-thirds also mentioned other ways of working, which reflected their differences (they were able to mention more than one item).
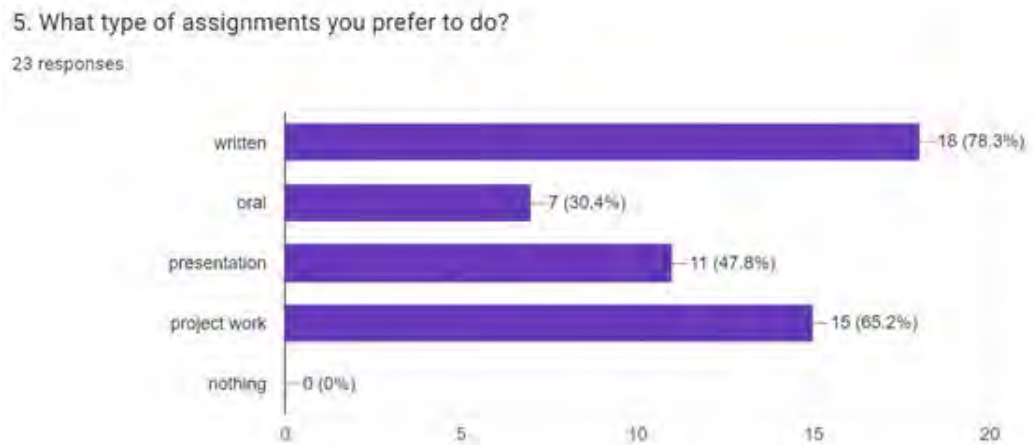

Figure 2.
Students' preferred ways of doing homework (survey results)

As mentioned above, students might not be submitting homework for lack of time on account of their family and other commitments. Figure 3 shows that almost half the students claimed that homework is taking up too much time.
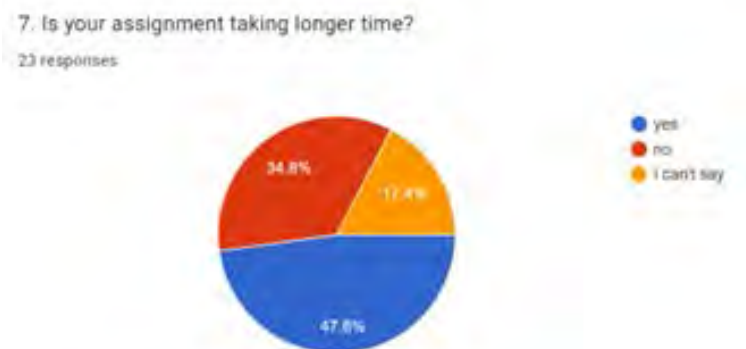

Figure 3.
Students' perceptions of the amount of time spent on homework (survey results)

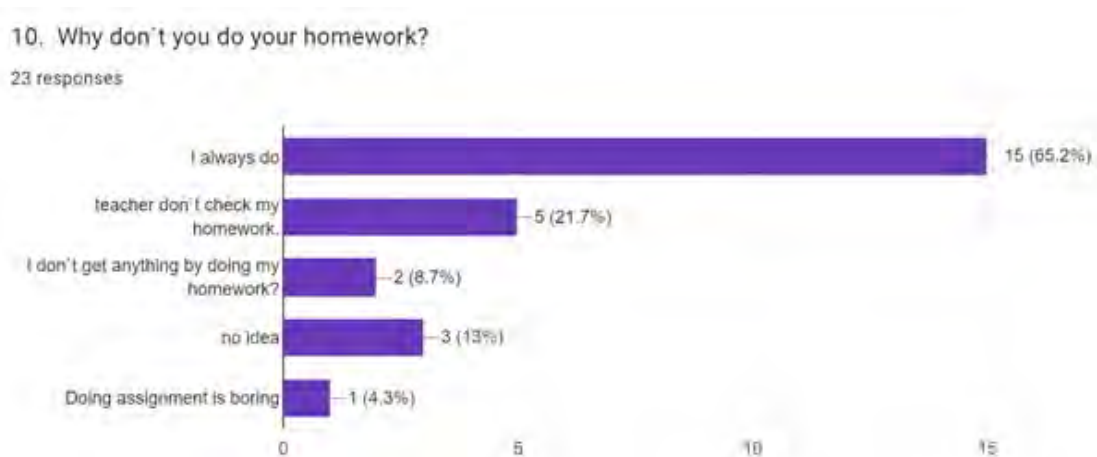10. Why don't you do your homework?

23 responses

Figure 4.
Reasons for not submitting homework (survey results)

The reverse side of this question was to find out what would make students more inclined to submit their homework. While one-third of the students were happy with homework coming from the coursebook, a lot more attached greater importance to scores given to their work and positive feedback by the teacher appreciating their efforts.
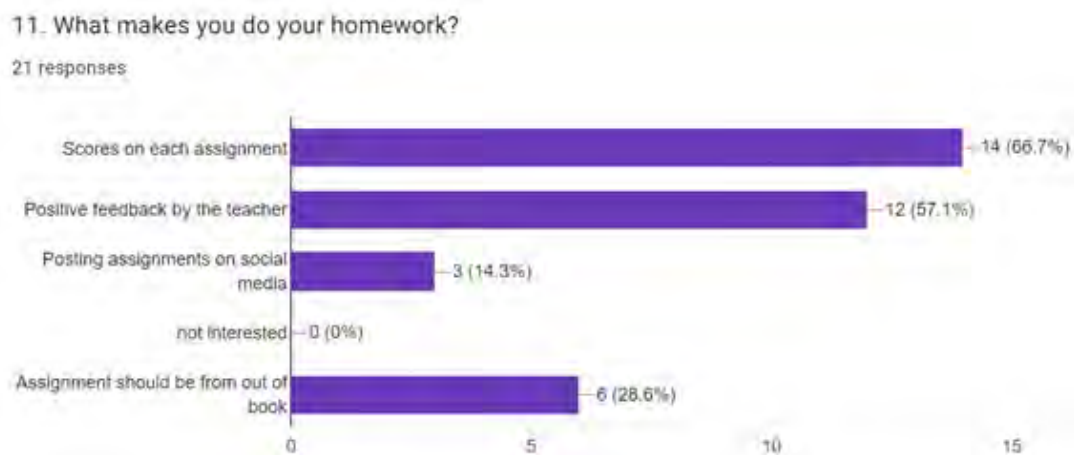
11. What makes you do your homework?

21 responses

Figure 5.
Students' motivation to do homework (survey results)

Students, evidently, wanted me to check their assignments promptly and provide positive feedback, as well as give grades. In addition to this, from the discussions with the focus groups and my reflective notes, I could see that the students had individual differences and interests in doing homework. I had to take into account the variations in their attitudes and their way of thinking. According to Paudel (2012), "It is the teacher's professional responsibility to provide students with feedback on homework. Feedback encourages students to learn from their mistakes" (p. 54). Xu (2011) also concluded that students' homework completion is correlational to the teacher's feedback. The pertaining literature shows that immediate feedback and incorporating technology using an online homework management system is potentially beneficial for students and instructors. Students can receive feedback more instantly in online classes than in traditional classes (Fratto et al., 2016). Paudel (2012) is of the same opinion when he says: "Positive feedback, encouraging words and expressions by the teachers fortify the homework writing habits of students" (54).

Conclusions From the Exploratory Phase

The results of the exploration were at odds with my initial assumption about the causes of the problem. I had assumed that students didn't like to do their homework, but the findings suggested a different explanation. I could see that my students, who may be perceived as 'digital natives', can readily adopt technology, and they often do it faster than their teachers. That is why students wanted to apply technology to their homework by using quizzes, short animation videos, live worksheets, etc. I decided that I needed to integrate some technological tools into my classroom so that students would get energized in learning and doing their homework.

The Action Plan

After analyzing the data, Gyanu and I had a further mentoring session. I explained to her that I planned to develop learner autonomy for homework assignments and presentations. I would check the students' homework on time and return it with feedback and grades. I decided to post homework on a dedicated Facebook page set up for exclusive use by group members so that students could get information and ideas and be inspired by each other's submissions. It was a way of encouraging the students through likes and comments from their friends. Unlike the Learning Management System (LMS), our private Facebook group allowed them to see each other's work and show appreciation towards their peers' efforts.

Figure 6.
Facebook group of Class 8

My action plan is summarized in Table 1, below.

Table 1.
Plan for action

	What?	Why?
1.	Asking for homework once a week in Google Classroom and checking it promptly	It's easy to keep records and give grades, and feedback.
2.	Incorporating educational web tools like Proprofs quiz, Kahoot, Nearpod, Padlet, Live Worksheet, Canva, and Plotagon story	To cater to multiple intelligences and learner autonomy. Students become more engaged using such tools.
3.	Creating a dedicated Facebook group and sharing the homework there	It allows all the students to see each other's homework, get ideas, appreciate each other's work, and reflect on their own.
4.	Including marks for homework in students' end-of-term exam grade	Students were expected to be more mindful of doing their homework because they were made aware that the marks for their homework would be included in the end-of-term exam grade.
5.	Focusing on group work using Google Docs and breakout room discussions	Students can act collaboratively and become responsible for their group's work.
6.	Providing e-certificates for regular homework submitters	To recognize students' commitment and motivate them continuously.

Furthermore, during the exploratory phase, I took part in online training sessions on how to incorporate technological tools in online classes. I was impressed by tools such as Google Docs, Padlet, menti.com, quizzes on Kahoot, Triventy, and Proprofs both for individual and group work. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to incorporate such digital tools and sites into my online pedagogical practice so that students could start enjoying homework and their classes, too. Entries from my reflective journal (see Appendix D) show that students were excited about working on live worksheets since they were able to check the answers and get their scores instantly. I also found that when I assigned the tasks that we practiced in class, the rate of homework submission went up.

Besides these steps, I stayed connected and available for my students at any time during working days. I gave them extra time for submissions and made an effort to help them to complete their work as they wanted to. I became more resourceful, tech-savvy and approachable so that I could support online learning. I aimed at covering all four areas that are perceived to be significant for successful online tutoring, namely, the pedagogical, societal, managerial and technical side of teaching (Berge, 1995). I wanted to build good rapport with the students so they could share their problems with me and work collaboratively to sort them out. Granitz et al. (2009) stress that answering the students' questions, providing feedback and support, and praising them for their work is good for building rapport. I agree with the view that if one can build rapport with the students and parents, the students will reach higher academic performance (Chand, 2021). I also contacted some of the parents and teacher colleagues so that I could share with them the progress I had made.

Findings from the Action Research Phase

After three weeks of the intervention outlined above, I started receiving a fair amount of quality homework from my students. Students could send the homework in their preferred forms, pptx, typing in a Word file, or writing as an exercise book copy. It seemed that my students and I got

to a stage when it was possible to evaluate the early outcomes of my actions. I got in touch with Gyanu, who helped me design, evaluate and finalize the data collection tools. These were the same as the ones used in the exploratory phase. I prepared a new Google form questionnaire and had informal discussions with my focus group students, and I also continued writing my reflective journal. In the Google form (see Appendix B), English was used but I clearly stated that they could use English or Nepali. For focus group discussions I used Nepali language to ease communication. However, all these were now focused on the evaluation of my actions rather than exploring further.

I could see a considerable change in the students' attitude towards homework submission (see Appendix C). I found that students were interested in group work to prepare posters together and they liked project type homework. They also started uploading their homework in the special Facebook group (see Appendix E). This represented a considerable change from the early stages of my exploration when only about 30% of my students handed in their homework through the DN application.

Table 2.
Results after carrying out the action plan (survey results)

	Results	Number of students	Results
1.	Expressed satisfaction with home assignments	25	96%
2.	Regular homework submission	21	80%
3.	Used technology to submit homework	18	70%
4.	Showed interest in group work	19	72%
5.	Regular user of dedicated Facebook group (posting assignments and commenting on each other's work)	13	50%
6.	Received an e-certificate	20	75%

At this point, I asked my students why they complied. They were allowed to tick all choices that applied.
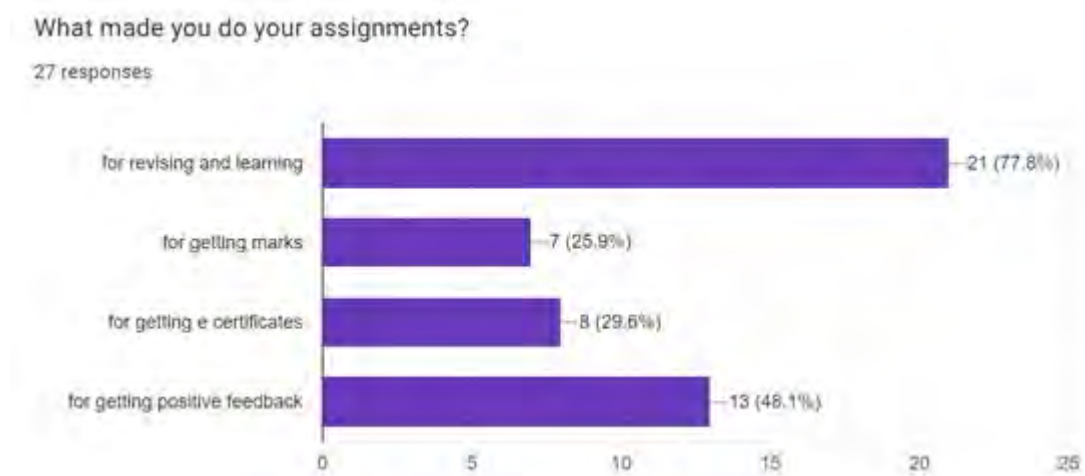

Figure 7.
Why did students submit their home assignments?

The responses to the open-ended questions in the google forms showed that students preferred creative types of homework as opposed to ones that were found in our course book. During the focus group discussions, students also raised important points about how they perceived creativity in homework assignments and the importance they attached to the teacher's feedback (translated from Nepali):

"Assignments should be more about creativity rather than always about book exercises."

"I hope assignments could have been much more interesting, I mean they were great but they were more bookish and exercise of lessons only. but the positive thing is English has become one of my favourite subjects and I am so grateful towards Indra Oli mam for making our studies fun."

"I think a teacher should give positive feedback to the student so the student thinks that I am doing well and student can try and learn new things and teacher should help them."

In sum, from the feedback provided by the students, I could tell that they were happy with their English homework and wanted me to carry on setting creative pieces of homework and not relying solely on the course book for the assignments given. They also appreciated my feedback and the encouragement by new-style certificates. Below are some samples of assignments that were handed in and some of the certificates awarded.

Figure 8.
Samples of student assignments and certificates

My Learning/Reflection

The biggest "lesson" for me was that I should not make assumptions about my students' perceptions and behavior. Exploratory Action Research offers clear stages and a set of tools so that we can either reject or confirm our assumptions, but in most cases allows us to refine our thinking and act appropriately.

I came to understand that just like teachers look forward to receiving their students' homework, the latter also look forward to receiving the teacher's feedback. So, teachers have to be quick and responsive and apply some constructive and engaging strategies in the classroom so that they can connect with the students in teaching and learning and ensure quality education at all times. Teachers need to be encouraging and facilitative in the classroom and explore the challenges that students are facing and help them tackle those difficulties. Students should feel special in the class, especially in online classes, so that they will have an urge to communicate with teachers and attend their lessons.

Furthermore, I learnt that the due date of submissions should be slightly later than it would be in face-to-face classes, especially, when students have been introduced to learning management systems and technological tools not that long before. I also realized that "Learners are unique individuals who learn and develop best in their own idiosyncratic ways" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 6).

Mentor-Mentee Relationship

My mentor, Gyanu has supported me in every step of the way of the EAR process. She made me reflect during our mentoring dialogues, which supported me in finding ways to understand myself as well. Carrying out the EAR project resulted in professional development for both of us. The homework submission issue surfaces every year with incoming groups of students. Now I learned how to deal with that specific classroom issue.

After completing the EAR project, we prepared a poster presentation for the IATEFL Research SIG Teachers Research! Online 2021 conference. We co-created and co-authored the present article, incorporating reflections on the mentoring process and collaborating with an international mentoring teacher-research support group. Now we have started co-mentoring teachers from my school and the community, and we aim to continue this kind of collaboration in the future, too.

Conclusion

Both in face-to-face and online classes, teachers and students need to be ready to collaborate in order to bring about changes in the classroom. Students can apply innovative tools and the teachers' job is to address challenges and create new ways to approach the activities in class and the homework assigned. The findings of the research are applicable in ELT in the context of typical Nepalese classrooms. Since homework is a part of instruction in our context, it is advisable to ask the home assignments innovatively. Students wish to embrace digital tools and technology in their assignments; therefore, teachers should make their students feel free to do and submit the assignments the way they wish.

Since I started this project, I have kept the records of homework submission and appreciated my students' time and effort in all my classes. I have also scored their assignments as part of internal assessment. I am happy with the results because they show that my students are willing to submit their homework and look forward to receiving meaningful feedback and fair grades.

This EAR project explored the issue of homework non-submission during online classes during the second phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and the steps taken to resolve the

problem. Homework non-submission is a real issue faced by many teachers, a concern which is not addressed often enough in academic research. This study shows that Exploratory Action Research can be an effective way of addressing classroom problems. It also suggests that teachers need to be more understanding, thoughtful, resourceful and creative in their approach to homework, and it is only then that they can expect positive responses from their students.

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Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Appendices

Appendix A. Google form questionnaire in the exploratory phase

8. How often should I give you assignment?

○ once a week

○ twice a week

○ as per teacher's choice

○ never

9. Do you find the homework of English difficult to do?

○ yes

○ no

○ sometimes

○ no idea

8. Why do you/don`t you like to do English homework?

26 responses

I like to do English homework because from it I can gain many useful things which could help me to brighten my future.I can improve my writing and reading skills and also develops my thinking and memory power.

I like to do english homework because all assignment were interesting and new to me.

Because English is easy

I like english homework because mam give creative work , new work out of course.I never let english homework for tomorrow. I always do english homework creatively and i like english homework always. I give more attentions for english homework than others subject.

I always do homework

17. Some students complain that I don`t make a good rapport with my students? What do you think about it and what suggestions do you want to provide me?

18 responses

It good mam

Your are very good teaching I have no complain .

No you make good rapport

I think you make good rapport.

No mam; m you are a good rapport with us

I don't think so 🤔

I think you made good rapport .

Appendix B: Google form questionnaire after the action phase

Feedback Form for Data Collection after the Intervention of the Plans

B *I* U ⊸ ⵣ

Dear students,

Greetings!

This is the form to collect your feedback after the intervention of new plans to address the issue of homework submission.

Dear students, like before, feel free to answer these questions honestly. I would like to compare your perceptions in the past and present in terms of homework doing and submission process. You can answer the questions either in Nepali or in English as per your choice. I would like to make sure that your names won't get revealed with your responses. They will be anonymously presented if needed. No need to write your name if you don't wish. Thank you in advance!

Indra K.Oli

Eng. Teacher

Samik Awasiya Mahavidhyalaya

Manjuapuri, Sunkhet

Could you do your all English assignments yourself?

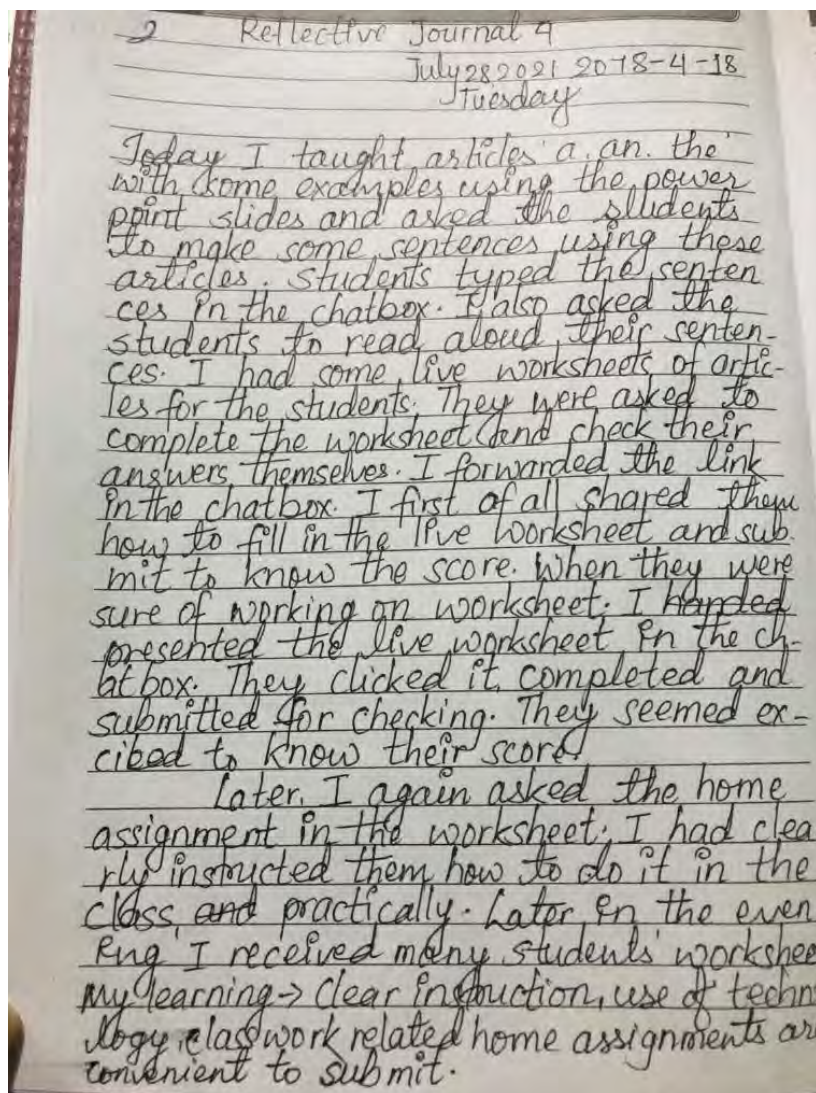27 responses

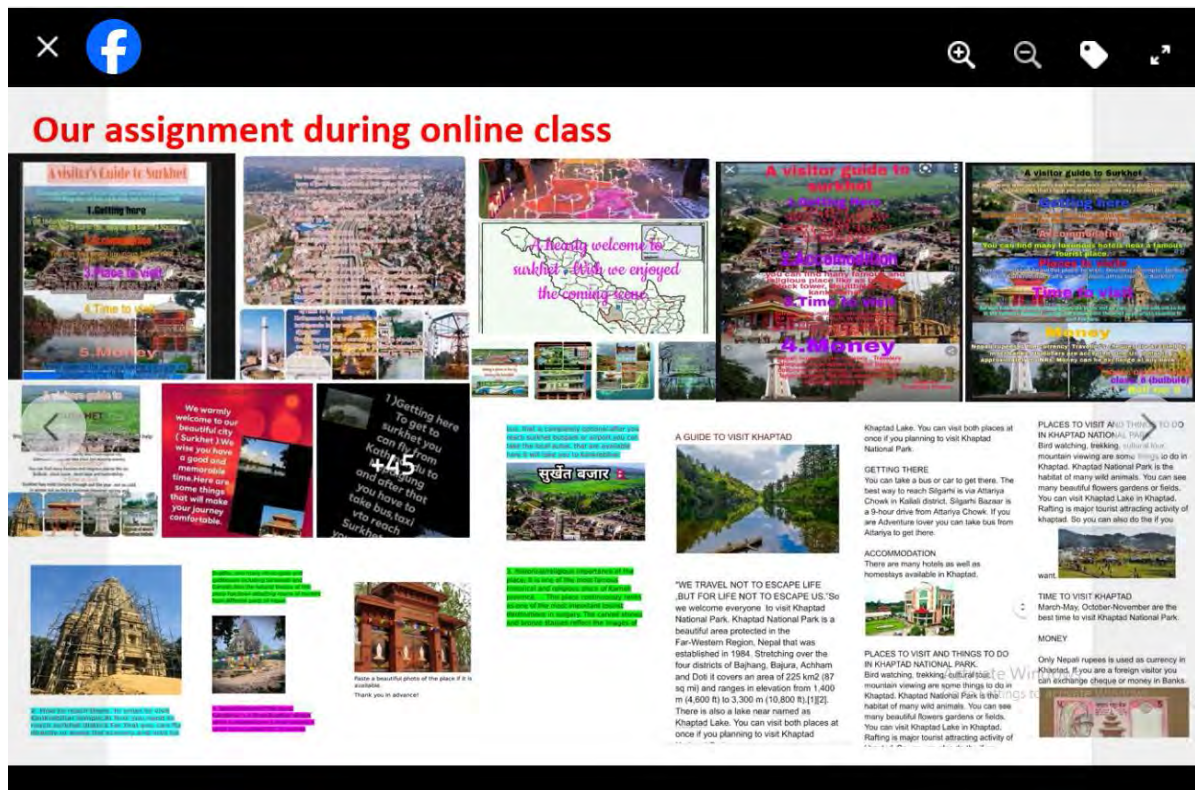- Yes
- No
- Maybe

96.3%

Appendix C: Homework records

Homework Submission Record
Class: 8 D Subject: English Period: 1st(SUN,MON,TUE) Sub.Teacher:Indra Kumari Oli

S.N	Names of the students	1.Exercises of Lesson 1 Unit 1	2.Making sentences	3. Articles	4.Live worksheet on Articles	5. Vocabularies of lesson unit 2	6. 8 Rules and regulations for some places	7. Preparing a leaflet
		Homework Submission Record up to 2078/4/21						
1		Yes	Yes	Yes	YES	YES	YES	YES
2		Yes	No	No	NO	NO	NO	YES
3		No	No	No	NO	NO	NO	YES
4		No	No	No	YES	NO	NO	NO
5		No	No	No	YES	NO	NO	NO
6		Yes	Yes	Yes	YES	NO	NO	NO
7		No	No	No	NO	NO	NO	NO
8		Yes	Yes	Yes	YES	NO	NO	YES
9		No	No	No	YES	NO	NO	NO
10		No	No	No	NO	NO	NO	NO
11		No	No	No	NO	NO	NO	NO
12		No	No	No	YES	NO	NO	NO
13		No	No	No	NO	NO	NO	NO
14		Yes	No	No	YES	NO	NO	NO
15		Yes	Yes	Yes	YES	YES	YES	NO
16		Yes	Yes	No	NO	NO	YES	YES
17		Yes	Yes	Yes	NO	NO	YES	yes
18		No	Yes	Yes	YES	NO	YES	NO
19		No	Yes	No	YES	NO	NO	NO
20		Yes	Yes	Yes	YES	YES	YES	YES
21		No	No	No	NO	NO	NO	NO
22		Yes	Yes	Yes	YES	YES	YES	YES
23		Yes	Yes	Yes	NO	YES	NO	NO
24		Yes	Yes	Yes	YES	YES	YES	YES
25		No	No	No	NO	NO	NO	NO
26		No	No	No	NO	NO	NO	NO
27		Yes	Yes	Yes	YES	YES	YES	NO
28		No	No	No	NO	NO	NO	NO
29		Yes	Yes	Yes	NO	NO	YES	YES
30		No	No	Yes	YES	NO	NO	NO
31		No	No	No	NO	NO	YES	NO
32		Yes	Yes	Yes	NO	YES	NO	NO
33		No	No	No	NO	NO	NO	NO
34		No	No	No	NO	NO	NO	NO
35		No	No	No	YES	NO	NO	NO
36		Yes	Yes	Yes	YES	YES	NO	NO
37		No	Yes	Yes	NO	YES	NO	NO
38		Yes	Yes	Yes	YES	YES	YES	YES
39		Yes	No	No	NO	NO	NO	NO
40		Yes	Yes	Yes	NO	NO	YES	YES

Appendix D: An excerpt from my reflective journal

Reflective Journal 4
July 28 2021 2078-4-18
Tuesday

Today I taught articles 'a, an, the' with some examples using the power point slides and asked the students to make some sentences using these articles. Students typed the sentences in the chatbox. I also asked the students to read aloud their sentences. I had some live worksheets of articles for the students. They were asked to complete the worksheet and check their answers themselves. I forwarded the link in the chatbox. I first of all shared them how to fill in the live worksheet and submit to know the score. When they were sure of working on worksheet, I presented the live worksheet in the chatbox. They clicked it, completed and submitted for checking. They seemed excited to know their score.

Later, I again asked the home assignment in the worksheet. I had clearly instructed them how to do it in the class and practically. Later in the evening I received many students' worksheet. My learning → Clear instruction, use of technology, classwork related home assignments are convenient to submit.

Appendix E: Assignments submitted in the Facebook group

Developing Writing Skills Using Innovative Activities and Enhanced Teacher Feedback

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Abstract

This Exploratory Action Research report involved 35 seventh-grade students (aged 12-13) at a private school in urban North-West Delhi, India. The teacher-researcher found that even though her learners had been studying English from the beginning of their schooling, they were unable to express themselves in writing and often resorted to copying from each other. In the exploratory phase of the study, a variety of data gathering tools were used to find out why learners preferred to submit neatly laid out and apparently error-free work without displaying much of their own thinking and understanding. The analysis of the data showed that the learners were concerned about the judgements of the school administration, the teachers and their parents, and felt more secure when they resorted to regurgitating prefabricated answers. The intervention phase involved various writing strategies as well as detailed and constructive teacher feedback. Almost four-fifths of the learners showed improvement in writing creatively and their feedback confirmed the usefulness of the new-style writing tasks. The report also provides a detailed account of the contribution that mentors of classroom-based research can play when they provide consistent support to teacher-researchers by carefully guiding them through each and every step of Exploratory Action Research.

Introduction

The Exploratory Action Research (EAR) project presented below was accomplished in the course of a 10-month investigation from May 2018 to February 2019 into how writing skills of a group of teenage English language learners in a private school located in New Delhi could be improved. After describing the context and the background in which the project was carried out, the teacher-researcher, Nishtha (Author 1), and the teacher-research mentor, Vanita (Author 2) provide a detailed account of how the two phases of EAR, namely, the exploration phase followed by the action phase, were conducted. In line with Action Research (AR) type studies conducted by classroom teachers (Clark et al., 2020), a concise literature review is followed by a statement of the research questions and the methodology that was employed to answer those questions. The data gathering tools (instruments) were designed in such a manner

that they could best provide an explanation for the puzzle (Hanks, 2017) that the teacher-researcher and their mentor encountered:

> What are the underlying reasons for a lack of creativity in written expression of language learners who have been receiving instruction in English starting from the early years of their education?

The analysis of the results led to the designing of an action plan which focussed on the way writing tasks were designed and assessed. A second round of data gathering, which was carried out during and after the action phase, aimed at examining if the introduction of new-style writing tasks could lead to any improvement in writing skills. The analysis and discussion of the results is based on the assessment of writing tasks accomplished at the beginning of the project and after the intervention. The closing section contains some observations and reflections by the teacher-researcher and the teacher-researcher's mentor related to their experience and the outcomes with regard to their mutual development as reflective classroom practitioners and mentors (Farrell, 2022).

Context and Background

The language learners of the present EAR project come from working- or middle-class families of North-West Delhi, where the parents are mainly involved in small business enterprises. English is not spoken as a mother tongue in these families. However, some parents do speak some English. It is perceived as an aspirational language (Patel et al., 2023) and is treated as essential for the students' further education and good job opportunities. Many students have been learning English from their early childhood. Nevertheless, based on their test results and after having conversations with parents and past teachers, Nishtha found that those learners who come from homes where English was not spoken much struggled to express themselves in written English in spite of studying in an English-medium school from a young age (for about 9 years).

Nishtha is an English-medium educator at a private school situated in an urban sector of New Delhi, the capital city of India. She has been teaching English since 2017 and is trained in storytelling, which she uses widely in her teaching. Her school follows an 'all English pedagogy' approach, in which all formal and informal interactions within the school, beginning with the preschool grades, are conducted in English. Nishtha's class comprised 35 students: 22 boys and 13 girls. As mentioned above, Nishtha's students belonged to families of modest means; they anticipated getting employed in jobs where English language skills are required. Be it in local administration, office work or business life, the aspiration of the parents and the understanding of the students involved were that English is an essential 21st century skill, and this includes being able to express their ideas freely and creatively in writing as well.

Conceptual Framework

Exploratory Action Research, which guided the present project is a type of teacher research (Kostoulas, 2023) that is carried out by teachers, for teachers and the benefit of their students and other stakeholders (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). It can be divided into two phases (exploration and action), with steps that can be represented as a staircase (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, p. 27). The exploration steps are 'plan to explore', 'explore' and 'analyse', and the action research steps are 'plan (to change)', 'act', 'observe' and 'reflect'.
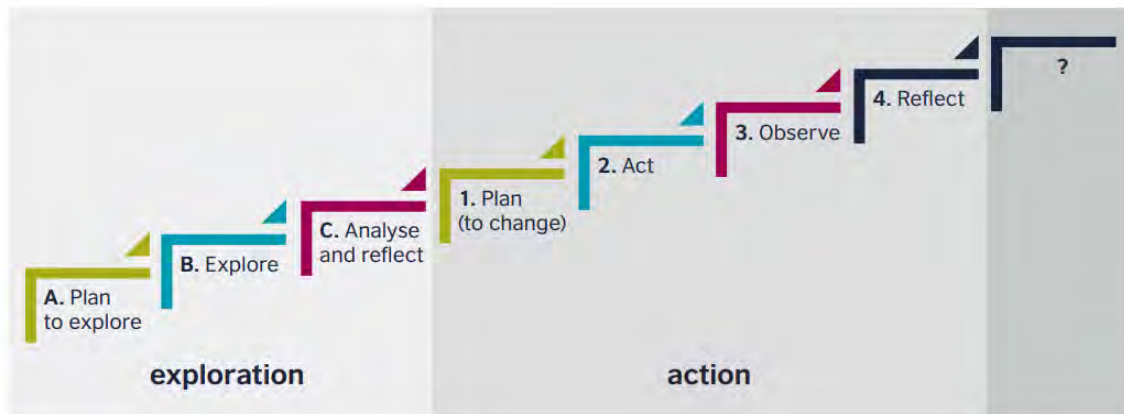
Figure 1.
Steps of Exploratory Action Research
(Source: Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research*, p. 27)

Smith and Rebolledo (2018) contend that even when one is a successful teacher, there can be challenging situations and resolving those requires that the classroom practitioner searches for information (data) related to the issue encountered. They also believe that it might be useful to explore the situation before rushing into action because, on occasion, the teacher's assumptions about the problem could be unfounded and, as a result, the attempt to resolve it may not be appropriate. Furthermore, it does not serve the purposes of such an exploration to have a large, general topic, such as student motivation. The teacher-researcher needs to design their own, specific exploratory questions that would, ideally, need to be SMART: study-oriented, measurable, accurate, realistic and topic-focused (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, p. 40).

The issue that the teacher-researcher (Nishtha) and her mentor (Vanita) decided to explore was why so many of Nishtha's 7th grade students resorted to copying each other's homework. Before describing how the exploration unfolded, a brief overview of recent literature related to teaching and learning writing in English as an Additional Language (EAL) is provided in the next section.

Literature Review

Learning writing skills is a must for anyone's formal education to be successful. Educators seem to agree that teachers should create adequate conditions for students to develop these skills, bearing in mind that writing activities should be meaningful (Karakuş, 2023) and that teaching writing should be done progressively focusing on the process rather than the product in order to decrease anxiety in students (Bayat, 2014).

Even though a lot of academic work has been carried out on improving language learners' writing skills (Hyland, 2022; Mott-Smith et al., 2020), research studies in ELT have relatively rarely focussed on investigating the issues related to the enhancement of writing in everyday classroom settings. Lee (2022) conducted a state-of-the-art review on classroom-based research on L2 writing. She looked at the 349 articles published in the flagship journal of the field, the Journal of Second Language Writing (JSLW) and found that between 2001 and 2020 only 75 were classroom-based. Lee contends that "Given the insight classroom-based research can produce to guide pedagogical practice in real-world contexts, there is a need to understand … how it has informed classroom teaching and learning, and what further issues merit research attention" (p. 552). The authors of the present report hope that their own

experience in a naturalistic classroom context will reflect the dynamics of real classroom environments and help better understand how L2 writing instruction can be improved.

The teacher researcher and her mentor's main concern was finding ways to spark the creativity of Nishtha's students in their writing. The introduction of creative writing activities that help learners' authentic self-expression in an additional language has come to the fore in recent years since the teaching and learning of the so-called four C's of 21st century skills (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication) have gained ground (Hummel, 2024). Based on numerous research studies in the field, Fitria (2024) emphasises that teachers need to create a fun and engaging atmosphere, which can be achieved by "allowing ample space for students to explore their ideas, offering positive and constructive feedback, and presenting writing challenges and contests to spark their interest and motivation" (p. 7). Next we turn to approaches and methods that appeared to be both appropriate and effective in the authors' localised context: the application of story maps, process writing and art (drawing).

One of the methods that can help the exploration of ideas before writing is using story maps (Nuraini et al., 2022), which can be employed as a collaborative activity as well (Polat & Dedeoğlu, 2024). Story maps include key elements, such as the setting and the time of the story, the main and the auxiliary characters and some of the main ideas of the story line. Learners can focus on important elements of the story and generate ideas while creating a piece of narrative text. In their research study, Rahmawati et al. (2018) found that the approach was more effective than the conventional method of writing notes.

Introducing learners to process writing is another option for improving writing skills because it enables students to first brainstorm ideas and then improve their drafts in several rounds (Serra & Grisolía, 2020). The approach involves reviewing by peers, which can enhance learners' confidence and reduce writing anxiety. Along the same lines, Yeung (2019) stresses the utility of the process writing approach as a pedagogical tool that fosters learner autonomy and supports emerging writing skills. Clearly, the final outcome of the writing process (product) is important, but a high-quality product is, more often than not, the result of several rounds of re-writing with the help of one's peers and the language teacher (Zhang, 2022).

Finally, a short reference to using visual arts for the scaffolding of learners' writing skills. Superable (2020) employed an Action Research design to explore how effective the utilisation of visual arts might be to support creativity in writing tasks. The author concludes that the use of visual arts as instructional materials for writing activities can facilitate learning as well as serve as authentic references connecting writing tasks to learners' real-life experiences.

Adoniu's article (2012) is specifically related to one of the tools employed by the authors of this report, namely, the use of drawing to support the writing development of English language learners. The author emphasises the positive effect that drawing before writing had on her young students for whom English was an additional language. Drawings proved to be useful planning tools that allowed children in her class "to attend to essential details, and to then apply this in their writing" (p. 8). Even though in Nishtha's class students started with the text and then provided the visual representation of the images emerging in their minds, it seems to be the case that drawing as an activity can be a useful tool for the demonstration of understanding and can be perceived as "a part of the continuation of a social construction of knowledge" (p. 14).

Statement and Significance of the Problem

Students' written English expression was a major skill that the school Nishtha was teaching at focused upon and aimed at improving. Therefore, developing her learners' English writing skills was a key objective for Nishtha at the time when the EAR project took place. She agreed with authors who emphasised that living in the 21st century with an expanding technological environment that requires expressing oneself in writing, fostering effective communication, including the written word, has become a priority (Klimova, 2012).

It, thus, became imperative to ensure that the written expression of the students was developed. Writing allows the ordering of one's thoughts and makes it possible to present them in a structured way. Expressing their ideas effectively in writing does not only help learners in their academic pursuits but also supports them in their future lives as employees or business owners. If a student has good writing skills, it will help them to obtain good grades and also prepare them for the professional world. It will further help them to improve their analytical, rational, and critical thinking skills (Bora, 2023). No wonder, therefore, that developing reading and writing has always been a key concern for educators. In this regard, Nishtha and Vanita were hoping that by carrying out their EAR project, they may come up with some answers and solutions that other teachers might be able to apply in contexts that could be perceived as similar.

The Exploratory Phase

The issue that Nishtha found puzzling (Hanks, 2017) was that despite having a lot of ideas and good test results, her students, who happily contributed to classroom activities orally, submitted written assignments that were largely copies of each other's work. Nishtha was able to trace the original work back to 4-5 students from among which three were girls. These students usually submitted their work on time and were confident in their written expression. Moreover, these were also the students who usually were at the top of the class academically and were actively involved in extracurricular activities. Apparently, the rest of the students were not confident enough in their written work and looked to these students whenever the teacher did not provide detailed, preformulated answers for the whole class.

The students, who had studied English since primary school, that is to say for nine years already, seemed reluctant to write down their own understanding of the chapters and poems that they were reading and even now, in middle school (Grades 6-8) wanted teachers to dictate the so-called correct answers. The fact that students resorted to copying from each other seemed puzzling, because verbally they were prepared to voice their opinions. The conspicuous gap between oral and written performance prompted Nishtha to want to explore the reasons behind her learners' reluctance to express themselves freely and creatively in writing.

It was at this point that her mentor, Vanita, introduced Nishtha to the Action Research Mentoring Scheme (ARMS) opportunity sponsored by the British Council. Vanita was assigned as a mentor to support five teachers to conduct Exploratory Action Research in 2018–19. She was free to choose teacher-researchers to work with, and that is how she approached Nishtha and offered to mentor her. Regular interaction between the mentor and mentee took place in both online and face-to-face meetings. It is important to point out that while Nishtha was carrying out the project, she was also a 'learner' of practitioner research. Some of the excerpts that follow describe her reflections as a budding teacher-researcher of EAR.

Designing the Research Questions

To arrive at relevant research questions, the teacher-researcher and their mentor engaged in a conversation in which Vanita asked Nishtha specific questions regarding her current classroom practices, the ideas she held in relation to English language teaching, and teaching writing skills, specifically. Nishtha remembers this stage as follows:

> *"When we got together, we had an interesting dialogue where Vanita asked me specific questions about the concerns regarding my classroom. She gave me specific tasks from Smith and Rebolledo (2018) to arrive at things we were not sure about. Under her guidance, I was able to come up with the following research question, which helped me explore my classroom struggles: 'Why do my students hesitate to express themselves in writing tasks?'"*

During the process of delving deeper into this research topic, Nishtha and Vanita collaborated to elucidate and refine Nishtha's underlying ideas (Smith, 2020. pp. 43-47). In EAR, research questions may go through several evolutions, and this happened in this instance, too. Ultimately, the process resulted in a further general question that would later become the basis for the action plan: 'How do I enable my students to express themselves through writing tasks?'

Vanita asked Nishtha a variety of probing questions to pinpoint the areas of uncertainty for which she was not sure she had the answers. The questions Nishtha decided to explore were as follows:
1. What kind of approaches do I use to enhance my students' expression in writing tasks?
2. What kind of activities do my students prefer for a writing task?
3. What kind of feedback is provided to the students' writing?
4. What are my students' responses to innovative tasks in writing?

Methodology
Participant Recruitment

As is often the case with classroom research, Nishtha opted for convenience sampling for her project. She chose the participants for her mixed-methods research based on accessibility and availability. Therefore, the participants were learners that she was teaching at the time of the research.

The participants comprised 35 seventh-grade students, aged 12-13 years, who were enrolled in a private English-medium school located in urban North-West Delhi, India. Among the chosen participants, there were 22 females and 13 males. The exploratory phase took place from May 2018 to June 2018, while the action phase lasted from July 2018 to February 2019.

Data collection

Since this project was Nishtha's first hands-on experience with classroom research, her mentor, Vanita, supported her throughout the process of data collection, such as selecting and designing the research tools. Vanita also suggested that Nishtha read the stories of teacher-researchers from Smith & Rebolledo (2018). This helped Nishtha choose the qualitative and

quantitative tools that matched her research questions. She decided to employ various instruments to collect data in both the exploratory and action phases of the research.

Data gathering instruments

To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information, Nishtha used a wide range of data sources and data gathering tools. Despite Exploratory Action Research being primarily qualitative in nature, Nishtha made sure to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative tools to enhance the validity of the research. The tools used in both the exploratory and action phases are as follows:

Journal (Field Notes): Nishtha regularly kept a journal to document her observations and wrote field notes, which proved to be a valuable source of qualitative data. Nishtha jotted down notes and made entries in a diary that she always kept close at hand.

Observation notes by the Head of the Department: Observation notes by the Head of the Department offered a fresh perspective on the teaching and learning experience in Nishtha's classroom, ensuring an unbiased view of the qualitative data.

Feedback from colleagues: This was a valuable tool for qualitative data analysis because it supported and confirmed the findings of other qualitative methods.

Informal interviews with the students: Nishtha used this tool to gather qualitative data from the learners' perspective, adding significance to the entire research project. Nishtha gained valuable insights into the learners' thoughts about the tasks through one-to-one informal interviews. These interviews also shed light on the impact, if any, that the tasks had on the students' writing ability.

Focus Group Discussion: Nishtha utilised focus group discussion, a qualitative research tool, to gain insights into the learners' perspectives. It made it possible to gauge the views of students who were uncomfortable having one-to-one conversations.

Rubrics: Nishtha used rubrics as a quantitative research tool to assess writing skills and track any improvements. The information provided Nishtha with concrete data that she could use to measure and evaluate tangible outcomes.

Analysis of the data obtained during the exploratory phase

The processing of the qualitative information gathered provided Nishtha with an opportunity to delve into learning about how to analyse and interpret the data she obtained and, more specifically, the use of thematic analysis (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, pp. 62-65; Xu & Zammit, 2020).

Here is Nishtha reflecting on how she began to notice certain patterns evolving:

"We were asked to look at the data to see any common patterns emerging. The data collected from my students, colleagues, and supervisor gave me multiple perspectives of the class, which helped me notice the students' fear of bad marks and judgement."

After analysing the data by identifying codes in the students' feedback and informal discussions with different stakeholders, Nishtha realised that her students, though confident in expressing their thoughts orally, were hesitant in expressing themselves in writing because they were used to being spoon-fed with standard answers by the teachers of different subjects. This meant that past teachers and teachers of other subjects in 7th grade dictated the 'correct' answers and students had to memorise those without any chance of expressing their own opinions. The students were, therefore, not motivated to create anything original since they got used to the way tasks were assigned and assessed without any meaningful feedback. Moreover, since the school regularly collected the students' notebooks for supervision, they were also afraid about the image they would create in front of the supervisors and their parents if they did not give the 'right' answers.

One of Nishtha's learners described this as follows: *"...the notebooks are required to be neat as it will go for inspection and untidy notebooks will make him lose marks. So, it is better to submit correct answers from (Topper's) notebook."*

Another learner put it this way: *"The teachers in other subjects give us the correct answers and if we don't write the same they mark it as incorrect... it makes it easier that way instead of redoing the entire thing again."*

Action Stage

After analysing the data gathered during the exploratory phase, Nishtha proceeded with the action phase. As she reflected, the results of the exploration had *"motivated me to provide the students with a more comfortable environment along with varied activities catering to the different proficiency levels of the students"*. She planned lessons that included a variety of writing tasks that gave the students space for creativity (see Table 1). She used several drawing techniques, story mapping, and cue cards as instructional support for her students. Using a diverse range of writing tasks in combination with the above-mentioned resources enabled the students to express their creativity (Rini & Cahyanto, 2020), while Nishtha was also able to simultaneously cater to their various cognitive abilities.

For example, while teaching William Wordsworth's poem 'Daffodils' (see Figure 1), the students made drawings to serve as a tool to convey their comprehension of the poem (Adoniou, 2012). The learners were assigned several stanzas of the poem in groups of four, which they depicted through drawings. Subsequently, they were asked to explain what they had drawn to elaborate upon their interpretation of the stanza. At the end of the lesson, they demonstrated the ability to independently provide a comprehensive explanation of the poem.

Story maps (Usman et al., 2020), which worked as a guided form of brainstorming, also helped the students organise their thoughts into meaningful elements of the story. Organising their thoughts in such a manner before finally writing the stories ensured that the students did not struggle with a lack of vocabulary and coherence in the write-up. It also reduced the frustration of not being able to think of what they wanted to write. This acted as positive reinforcement in the safe environment for writing that Nishtha desired to create.

Beyond the above, an environment that was free from the fear of bad marks and judgement was created by regular conversations with the students. Nishtha started giving detailed feedback for every task, highlighting both positive areas and areas that could be worked upon (see Figure 2). The students seemed to be positively motivated to read the

feedback and, in fact, even looked forward to reading it. Avoiding the use of 'ticks' and 'crosses' gave an assurance to the students that there can be multiple perspectives on the same question and they thought that the school administration inspecting the notebooks would also appreciate their efforts.

Table 1.
Some of the Writing Activities in Class

No.	Topic and materials	Activities	Purpose
1	Story writing	Story maps	Story maps proved to be a valuable tool in guiding the students to express their ideas in a coherent manner. It assisted them in gathering their thoughts and generating imaginative and unique narratives.
2	Articles	Process writing	Introducing the process writing approach to the students helped them realise that their writing can always be enhanced. This approach also made it easier for them to revise and improve their initial drafts. It also made them more receptive to constructive feedback.
3	Poems	Supplementary drawings	Adding illustrations to express their comprehension of the poems offered an enjoyable and imaginative avenue for the students. It shifted the attention away from the mundane analysis of the poem. Instead, the students utilised the vivid mental images evoked by the poem to enhance their comprehension and incorporate it into their written assignments.
4	Book chapters	Thought bubbles	Thought bubbles were a valuable tool for students to express their thoughts during the chapter readings. Thought bubbles can be filled with a range of responses, including emotions, doubts, questions, or personal experiences that resonate with the text. Once it was introduced as a way to express thoughts rather than a task to be completed immediately after reading a chapter, it has become much more manageable.
		Group discussions	Group discussions proved invaluable in helping students gain a broader understanding of the tasks they needed to tackle. It also assisted them in gathering a wealth of information to create a polished piece of writing.

Process writing (Serra & Grisolía, 2020) was also included in the lessons; this approach enabled students to revisit their work and make changes. This was conducted in four stages. In the first stage, the class worked as a whole to collate and brainstorm ideas for their writing task. In the second stage, the students wrote their first draft, followed by peer feedback in the third stage. In the fourth stage, students worked on their peer feedback before the final submission, following which they received the teacher's feedback. Peer feedback built a lot of confidence in the students to put forward their views independently of the teacher's approval. Through this approach, students came up with write-ups that were quite original.

Figure 2.
Student's work - Use of drawing to express understanding of the poem 'Daffodils'
Note: Published with student's permission

Figure 3.
Student's work - Process writing: Getting comfortable with receiving feedback
Note: Published with student's permission

Data Collection and Analysis in the Action Phase

In the action phase, data was collected in order to find out if the intervention had any impact on the students' writing skills. Data collection was carried out by using various tools and involving different stakeholders, for example, observation notes by the Head of the Department, journal entries (field notes), rubrics and other tools mentioned above.

The data collected was analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively during the monthly mentoring meetings and teleconferences. For the qualitative analysis, Nishtha and Vanita used codes to highlight keywords from Nishtha's own observations, the supervisor's feedback, and the students' reflections (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, pp. 62–65). The codes related to the parameters of motivation, feedback, and confidence. These codes were then grouped into broader categories, thus facilitating the process of deriving meaningful findings, such as the impact of feedback, the importance of a stress-free environment, and the effect of using a variety of writing activities.

Figure 4.
An excerpt from the qualitative analysis of students' reflections using codes and labels

To assess any change in students' actual performance, the authors compared the scores students had achieved on six writing tasks accomplished at different stages of the Exploratory Action Research process. Work was graded according to the following criteria:

1. Content: Focusing on original ideas and information in the write-up
2. Organisation: Focusing on the coherence of the write-up
3. Vocabulary: Focusing on the use of new words in the write-up
4. Mechanics: Focusing on sentence structure and grammar

Findings of the Action Phase

Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7 allow us to compare the students' performance at the outset (in May, 2018) with their performance after four months of intervention, based on various criteria:

Content

Figure 4.
Students' performance based on content
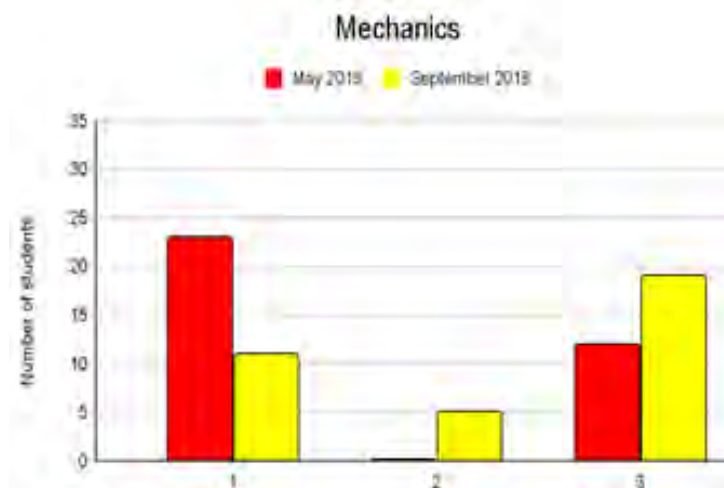*Note: 1 is lowest score, 3 is highest score.*

Mechanics

Figure 5.
Students' performance based on mechanics
Note: 1 is lowest score, 3 is highest score.

Organisation

Figure 6.
Students' performance based on organisation
Note: 1 is lowest score, 3 is highest score.

Figure 7.
Students' performance based on vocabulary
Note: 1 is lowest score, 3 is highest score.

There is a noticeable difference in the academic performance of students between September 2018 and May 2018. Upon reviewing the content quality of the students at the initial phase of the research, it is evident that their performance was not focused on content. Out of the students assessed, 11 scored 1 (31.4%), 20 scored 2 (57.2%), and 4 scored 3 (11.4%) in the rubrics. The work produced lacked originality. Following the intervention in the action phase (September 2018), the students demonstrated a significant improvement in their write-ups. A total of 29 students achieved a score of 3 (82.9%), while 6 students achieved a score of 2 (17.1%). Notably, none of the students received a score of 1 in the rubrics. From a structural (mechanical) perspective, we have evidence that in May 2018, 23 out of 35 students received a 1 (65.7%), and 12 received a 3 (34.3%). After the intervention in September 2018, there was an apparent rise in performance. 11 students achieved a score of 1 (31.4%), 5 students achieved a score of 2 (14.3%), and 19 students achieved a score of 3 (54.3%). The students demonstrated significant progress in their write-up organisation, as the number of students scoring 3 increased from just 3 in May 2018 to an impressive 23 by September 2018. There has been a significant improvement in the vocabulary usage in students' writing. In May 2018, all 35 students received a score of 1 in the rubrics (100%). However, as of September 2018, there were 21 students who achieved a score of 2 (60%), while 9 students achieved a score of 3 (25.7%).

The students utilised the safe space created in the class as a forum for self-expression, and by taking part in a range of activities, they achieved an improvement in their writing skills that yielded intricate and innovative written compositions. The process allowed them to freely present their own viewpoints and receive meaningful feedback to act upon. As one student said at the end of this phase:

> *"Whenever I submit my notebook, I am always eagerly waiting to get it back, and my first step is to open the notebook and read the feedback. Earlier, we used to write the answers after ma'am dictated them to us, and even if we wrote them ourselves, we would just get a remark 'good' or a question mark. Now, we get to know where our writing actually lacks and where we need to improve."*

Another learner put it this way, *"Different activities make the classes interesting."*

Yet another learner emphasised that

> *"It was a different experience creating summaries of the chapters with our friends without any adult help. Also, getting feedback on our write-ups from our friends before making the final submissions takes away some of the hesitation of writing something on our own."*

Results and Discussion

After analysing the collected data, Nishtha revisited her research questions to guide her in interpreting the results.

What kind of approaches do I use to enhance my students' expression in writing tasks?

To understand how to improve her students' expressive abilities in writing, Nishtha examined her initial teaching strategies and approaches through her journal and feedback from colleagues and the Head of the Department. She realised that her focus had been predominantly exam-oriented, limiting students' opportunities for creativity and free expression. However, by September 2018, her approach had shifted significantly towards fostering students' creative written expression and encouraging them to explore the reasoning behind their thoughts in their writing.

What kind of activities do my students prefer for a writing task?

Through informal interviews and focused group discussions, Nishtha discovered that her students favoured writing tasks that allowed for creative expression. They enjoyed writing elaborate stories and preferred activities that integrated other elements like drawing, music, and games. Moreover, tasks that incorporated critical thinking aspects led to noticeable improvements in the students' written expression.

What kind of feedback is provided to the students' writing?

Initially, Nishtha and her colleagues gave non-constructive feedback, primarily using ticks and crosses along with grammatical and spelling corrections. During the action phase, Nishtha shifted to providing more constructive feedback. She used feedback as a form of written communication, highlighting both the strengths and areas for improvement in the students' work. This approach made students more receptive to feedback and reduced their fear of mistakes.

What are my students' responses to innovative tasks in writing?

Innovative writing tasks encourage students to produce meaningful and original content. Nishtha observed that her students were initially unfamiliar with such tasks. Throughout the action phase, she introduced various writing tasks, which resulted in increased student involvement, excitement, and expressiveness. Informal interviews and focus group discussions confirmed that students were open to and engaged with these tasks.

Through the combination of data from several sources (triangulation), the following conclusions can be made:

1. Nishtha's students had felt hesitant about expressing themselves in writing because they were in the habit of using the standard answers that they were provided with. The students were worried about their image in front of others (supervisors, teachers, parents, and friends).
2. Creating a safe and non-judgemental environment allowed students to express themselves and offered a range of activities resulting in positive outcomes. Students were able to come up with detailed and unique written work, feeling comfortable to share their own perspectives. Detailed and personalised teacher- and peer-feedback on the write-ups made students more confident in expressing themselves.
3. Brainstorming sessions and discussions in class gave the students opportunities to come up with vocabulary which they elaborated further in rough drafts and the final draft, involving working on both content and form.
4. The students' writing improved over the 4-month period because of the interventions that took place. The students moved away from lower thinking skills (remembering and applying) to higher thinking skills, such as organising and creating ideas (see Nugraha et al. (2024) on writing tasks and Bloom's taxonomy in a 7th grade class).

Reflections and Implications

The Exploratory Action Research project conducted within ARMS helped Nishtha focus on two of the challenges that are often ignored in a regular classroom: copying and shying away from expressing personal opinions. The fact that Nishtha was receiving continuous feedback from her mentor allowed her to identify those aspects that hindered her students' writing and she found ways to address this issue. Additionally, during the project, the mentor, Vanita, helped the teacher-researcher to understand the importance of regular reflection on one's teaching. Nishtha realised that scoring good marks does not necessarily mean that her students are confident in expressing their views, and she came to understand that in order to truly develop her students' written expression, they should be given space to express their views instead of the teacher spoon-feeding the answers to them. Moreover, students should be exposed to a variety of activities and situations (like process writing, story maps, group discussions, drawing and crafts) to enhance their written expression. The teacher's detailed feedback also constitutes an important tool in developing writing skills.

Exploratory Action Research, which was introduced to Nishtha by Vanita, gave her the push that she needed to abandon her illusion that good marks are equivalent to good teaching and learning. The following journal entry shows the change in her thinking:

"It was after looking at our data in an in-depth manner that we were able to come up with our final conclusions and were also able to come up with an action plan. It enabled me to understand that a good teacher needs to continuously reflect upon his/her teaching strategies to ensure effective learning in class. Through this project I was able to help my students to be confident about their written expression. The students started creating original write-ups expressing their perspective without much assistance from the teacher and a fear of bad marks."

The EAR took up a lot of time as the teacher-researcher and the mentor had to think about practical and feasible interventions followed by drafting an evaluation plan. The

mentor's timely feedback at every stage coupled with sharing examples, reading chapters from the handbook mentioned above (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018) and participating in the webinars given by the organising team, helped them complete both the exploratory and the action phases effectively and efficiently.

Transference to Other Contexts

In line with the character of classroom research carried out by a reflective practitioner, we need to consider carefully how a project of this kind can be transferred to other contexts. As stated in the Methodology section, the investigation was based on convenience sampling (looking at one specific class where the issue seemed to be the gravest). Likewise, the modest number of participants makes it impossible to present statistically significant data. That said, developing writing skills by using creativity and focussing on the process rather than the end product are issues that teachers in other contexts might also be interested in contemplating.

The development in writing skills and the positive perceptions of the students related to the intervention show that in the microcosm of Nishtha's class, the quality of life in the classroom has indeed improved (Exploratory Practice Group, 2021). Hanks (2017), who is an eminent scholar of Exploratory Practice, argues convincingly that while not all classroom research may satisfy the highest standards of education research as laid out by, for example, Yates (2024), there is what she calls 'good enough research' which may not meet all the criteria but is still able "to contribute to understandings in the field, good enough to build upon, good enough to inspire others" (Hanks, 2017, p. 36).

Future Explorations

By the time the research was finished, Nishtha felt confident as a teacher-researcher as she was now equipped with multiple tools and strategies to conduct Exploratory Action Research. The entire process proved to be a great learning experience and beneficial to exploring in depth the multiple problems a teacher faces in his/her classroom. Exploratory Action Research, thus, is not a one-time event but should be seen as part of every teacher's pedagogy, where they can adopt a continuous cycle of exploration, action and reflection. Furthermore, the project motivated Nishtha and Vanita to get into writing and publishing, as both of them started researching this topic further, in line with their different perspectives. Nishtha, inspired by Exploratory Action Research, started reflecting more on her ELT and classroom experiences in general. She conducted another piece of research in the following year when she faced multiple issues as the COVID pandemic hit the world. As we all witnessed, the barriers of classroom and home were blurred with the introduction of online classes during the pandemic. However, this new way of learning brought its own challenges, which Nishtha wished to explore. Nishtha thus moved forward with Exploratory Action Research trying to solve the problem caused by muted microphones during English classes (Kamboj, 2021).

Conclusion

The EAR report described above aimed at solving a puzzle that the teacher-researcher was keen on deciphering. She and her teacher-research mentor embarked on a journey to explore the glaring discrepancy they could detect between the oral proficiency and the unimaginative writing output of the first author's young teenage students. The exploration resulted in an unexpected result: learners did not resort to stock answers and copying because they were

reluctant to put in more effort, but were concerned about 'losing face' in front of their teacher, their peers and the school management. Therefore, they felt it was safer to repeat the prefabricated answers or copy homework from their well-performing classmates. Once the teacher-researcher realised that the way forward was changing the way she set writing assignments and introduced some innovative writing activities, a creative space was opened up which the learners were ready to step into and use in order to express their unique ideas and produce surprisingly original and authentic pieces of writing. By providing meaningful and non-judgemental feedback that allowed multiple correct answers (interpretations) learners felt free to take on their individual identity as practitioners of an additional language.

The journey was that of both learning and teaching for all those involved. The teacher-researcher learnt how to conduct Exploratory Action Research, while her students benefitted from a fun and engaging atmosphere that led to deeper learning and self-expression. The teacher-research mentor was able to practise and hone her abilities as a facilitator of classroom research resulting in her becoming a more experienced reflective practitioner of mentoring.

The scope of the relationship between mentor and mentee described in this article has now broadened into being an informal, continuing arrangement, whereby a community of practice (CoP) has been established, one in which both Nishtha and Vanita will provide support to other teachers as well.

End Note

The findings of the research project were presented as part of a dissemination event in Chennai (India) in 2019 through a poster presentation.

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Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

All contributors have seen the contents of the manuscript, and all authors agree with the contents and the order of presentation. The listing of authors correctly identifies their level of contribution to this work.

We hereby certify that the submission is our own original work and is not under review at any other publication.

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, Dilafruz 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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The Reviewers

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Acknowledgements

BOOK REVIEW

Exploratory Action Research in Thai Schools: English teachers identifying problems, taking action and assessing results

Edited by Anne Burns (2023)
British Council, 84 pages.
Online edition available at:
https://www.britishcouncil.or.th/sites/default/files/exploratory_action_research_in_thai_schools_english_teachers_identifying_problems_taking_action_and_assessing_results.pdf

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of publications specifically dedicated to classroom research reports and accounts. They show a fair geographic spread, reaching out to Africa, Latin America and Asia (Rebolledo et al., 2016; Rebolledo et al., 2017; Rebolledo & Bullock, 2021). *Exploratory Action Research in Thai Schools* is a twelve-chapter volume that came to crown a six-month pilot project led by the British Council in a number of Thai primary and high schools. The book is offered as a freely-downloadable resource by the British Council via the link above. It is not the first of its kind as the British Council has long been publishing volumes focused on Exploratory Action Research (EAR) (Menglieva et al., 2022; Rebolledo & Okoth, 2023; Rebolledo, Okoth, & Simiyu, 2023). The book's value stems from the fact that it sets another example of projects through which a cohort of teachers are given the opportunity to question their own assumptions, identify the difficult circumstances they may come across and tailor their solutions accordingly.

Exploratory Action Research in Thai Schools follows in the footsteps of other volumes which focus on accounts that reflect classroom research in one single country, for example, Nepal (Gnawali et al., 2021), Uzbekistan (Menglieva et al., 2022) and Mexico (Rebolledo & Bullock, 2021), whose sheer size piques one's interest.

Sailing Across the Book Chapters

From the vantage point of a teacher mentor, I felt a keen interest in reading the book as it relays the stories of twelve Thai EFL teachers who took the plunge to implement EAR projects in their classrooms, a field that has so far received relatively scant attention in my country, Tunisia. The illustration on the cover page is very telling as it brings to the front a classroom scene, thus highlighting the uncontested value the book allots to classroom practice. The book stands as a well-rounded, tightly-welded volume: after a foreword by Helga Stellmacher, editor Anne Burns (a leading figure and an extensive publisher in the field of EAR) offers an introduction, followed by a body of 12 chapters. In the introduction of the volume, Burns highlights the value ascribed to such line of practitioner research, briefs the reader about the different chapters of the book and delineates the context wherein the EAR project was implemented. She also sheds light on the valuable contribution of the chapter authors who readily took the opportunity

to further their professional advancement when they were convinced that EAR "is context-ualized within and focused on their own daily concerns and pedagogical practices" (p. 8).

The book brings together the experiences of a cohort of Thai teachers who teach English as a Foreign Language in Thai primary and/or high schools. They are tenured practitioners whose teaching experience ranges from nine to 29 years. The noticeable feature about these teachers is that, despite the rich experience they must have accumulated over the years, they are still convinced that their classroom practice is worthy of investigation. Hence, they draw on a wide array of investigation tools which comprise teachers' reflective journals, questionnaires, peer and class observation and focus groups. In Chapter 3, for example, the teacher investigated ways of enhancing his 8th grade students' vocabulary retention. He drew on three investigation tools, namely focus group interviews, peer evaluations and reflective journals. Such triangulation of tools has always been appreciated in research because it adds validity to the research findings.

Each chapter describes a particular concern, but all revolve around themes and issues that are immersed in the authors' classroom practice. As such, the volume illustrates a batch of challenges and success stories which constituted the impetus that led the authors to engage in the six-month pilot project. Some chapters focus on macro skills, namely speaking, reading and writing (chapters 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 11). Others focus on subskills, namely vocabulary (chapters 3 and 12), grammar (chapter 5) and pronunciation (chapter 10). Chapter 12 investigates ways of enhancing critical thinking among students.

A quick glimpse at the titles of the chapters shows that there are two overarching themes that preoccupied the authors. The first is their ongoing effort to improve their students' performance. The second is a persistent reflection on how to achieve that. Seven out of the twelve titles involve the words "improve" and "enhance." Nine out of the twelve titles are in the interrogative form, starting with "what" (chapter 1) and "how" (chapters 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9).

Among the success stories that appealed to me is the one told in chapter 1 of the book. It is about a Thai teacher who, thanks to an EAR scheme she implemented in her classroom, could alleviate her students' problem with speaking English. The teacher adopted a reflective attitude toward her students' problem and started investigating a plethora of strategies that would rid her students of their anxiety and invest them with confidence to speak the target language. I find the experience really insightful. As a former teacher and a present teacher mentor, language anxiety has always been an issue at the back of my mind. It was reassuring to find out that the teacher's strategies slowly paid off. Her students' speaking skill markedly improved when she gave them positive feedback, emphasized fluency rather than accuracy, prioritized body language, varied the interaction patterns and gave the learners room to freely express themselves. Thanks to EAR, she was gradually "guided to consider trying to resolve emerging issues by implementing and evaluating new actions," (Smith, 2015, p. 39).

The book is timely as it comes on cue to answer a multitude of questions English teachers might have regarding their students' performance and their own classroom practice. The various accounts also set an example to those enthusiastic practitioners who are keen on exploratory research but still lack the tools to engage in effective projects.

Personal Remarks

On a personal level, the book resonates with my own conviction about the undeniable value of teacher research. It also reinforces my beliefs as a teacher mentor and researcher that it is high time teachers took a step forward toward that decisive shift from the paradigm of passive syllabi implementers to that of active agents of change.

Critical View of the Book

Being immersed in classroom practice, the book has a practical value as it allows teachers to voice their own ideas, thus freeing them from unnecessary jargon and highlighting the authenticity of their experience with EAR. However, a few remarks about content and form have to be mentioned. To begin with, and from my own perspective, the way the book is structured does not help easy access to its different chapters. Another structure that clusters the chapters around common thematic concerns (through changing their order in the book) would certainly provide the reader with a more informed view and guarantee a smoother transition from one chapter to another. Besides, reading through the different chapters of the book, I noticed a few mistakes (e.g., spelling, word order, missing words) that had sneaked into the text. More focused editing could have phased out such inadvertence, to my mind.

Finally, as a researcher, the book leaves me in want for more details about the research projects undertaken by class teachers: the rationale underpinning the choice of the research topic, and above all, the reflection stage that usually crowns the whole research process. For Burns (2010), systematic (self)-reflection is an essential part in any research undertaken by teachers. The reflection stage reinvigorates the teaching practice, provides new insights into teaching and helps with "planning the next steps," (Burns, 2010, p. 145). Burns (ibid, pp. 142-144) identifies four levels of reflection that should intermingle with each research procedure: reflection on practice, reflection on the research process, reflection on beliefs and values, and reflection on feelings and experiences. More details about these aspects of the research process could have cemented all the phases of the research, added value to findings, evidence and credibility to the whole project.

Conclusion

The book makes a valuable contribution to the field of teacher research because it creates the link between EAR and classroom practice. Through the twelve authentic accounts that the book reports, there is due consideration given to Thai EFL teachers who engaged in an EAR project in order to grow as experienced professionals. The stories set an example for other teachers around the world seeking ways to forge their own progress and, hopefully, lead to wider and more systematic dissemination of their findings.

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The Reviewer

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