

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 contextualized 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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Acknowledgements

I am utterly thankful to Richard Smith, Elizabeth Bekes and Ana García Stone for their unwavering support and precious time to guide me and help me in the write-up phase of this project.

Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. There is no financial interest to report. I hereby certify that the submission is my own original.

