

## BOOK REVIEW

### *English Connects Action Research: Learnings from the African Classroom*

Edited by P. Rebolledo, T. Okoth, & I. Simiyu (2023).

British Council (Dakar, Senegal)

Available online at

<https://africa.teachingenglish.org.uk/education/publications/learning-from-the-african-classroom>

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*English Connects Action Research: Learnings from the African Classroom*, edited by Paula Rebolledo, Teresa Okoth, and Irene Simiyu, is a compelling collection of teacher narratives that draw attention to the power of reflection through Exploratory Action Research (EAR) in English language education. This volume starts with an introduction that outlines the background and objectives of an initiative called English Connects Action Research program that supported teachers and encouraged classroom research. The British Council funded and launched this initiative in 2020, and a second cohort followed in 2022. The program included online and in-person training sessions, collaborative exploration of classroom challenges, and ongoing mentoring. Participants designed, conducted, and reflected on their own research projects, which they later shared in online events and in this publication. Their work illustrates how EAR leads to more student-centered teaching. The edition follows a group of twenty-two teachers from six sub-Saharan African countries: Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Mali, Djibouti, and Côte d'Ivoire. Furthermore, the authors bring their teaching experiences to life through their stories, showing how EAR helps them strengthen their practice.

The editors have divided this e-book into five thematically organized chapters, covering language skills, such as speaking, reading and writing (Chapters 1 and 2), pedagogical resources, classroom behavior, and teaching approaches. As a result, the reader envisions, and waits for, the moment when Africa intertwines in a common thread. This publication is an immersive experience of the authentic energy of the African classroom. Despite my being based in Mexico, the stories in this volume resonated deeply with me, transcending geographical boundaries. Teachers in Sub-Saharan African classrooms expressed shared human emotions and struggles that felt familiar. I kept nodding, seeing my struggles reflected in theirs: working with limited resources, facing inequality, and showing up every day with unwavering commitment to our students. Reflecting on their stories helped me reconnect with my purpose and reminded me of why we teach and how powerful it is when we pause, listen, and learn from each other.

Chapter 1 explores five stories about the difficulties and strategies related to speaking skills in the classroom. The stories are vivid and engaging, bringing this crucial but often elusive skill to life. The opening narrative sets the tone for Mayyada Assadig Hamdan Mohammed's research into the challenges primary school students face with speaking participation. Her action plan, which included pre-speaking activities and visual aids, significantly improved students' participation and confidence. In the second account, Bethel

Uzochukwu Udeh's exploration of her students' deficient performance in speaking English highlights the impact of socio-cultural factors. She points out the importance of engaging students through debates and impromptu speaking activities. The rest of this intriguing chapter presents even more compelling examples. Dagnachew Adefris tackled his first-year pedagogical science students' reluctance to speak English through EAR. Using questionnaires, observations, and interviews, he made an evidence-based decision and introduced think-pair-share. His findings aligned with Vygotsky's social constructivism, showed that peer interaction can reduce anxiety and foster inclusive dialogue and confidence. This demonstrates the power of student-centered and collaborative tasks. In a similar context, Mansaray (2021) emphasizes that developing proficiency in English takes time and patience; it is not an overnight process but an ongoing journey. Students can improve their speaking skills through tailored activities that actively engage them, boost their confidence, and promote regular English practice. This section offers clear practical ways to improve speaking skills and encourage an engaging and supportive classroom.

Chapter 2 delves into six stories that capture the struggles and achievements involved in learning to read and write. From teachers trying new techniques to students discovering their own potential, these narratives show us how sometimes a change of heart can lead to aha moments and breakthroughs in the classroom. Moreover, these narratives offer down-to-earth solutions and context-sensitive approaches to literacy instruction. In this chapter, Chinenye Bernard-Nnabuike's research focuses on the reading comprehension challenges faced by deaf students. She improved their skills by shifting lessons to morning hours and using visual aids, underscoring the need for tailored strategies in special education. Digital tools are also transforming literacy instruction, as shown by Patrice Kané and Moussa Tangara's innovative WhatsApp mentoring program. Their remote teacher support system led to notable improvements in challenging contexts. They observed significant improvements in teachers' approach to writing lessons and students' attitudes, reinforcing the positive impact of instructional changes. In a similar situation, mindset shifts among educators are reported to be just as crucial as instructional strategies. Mawela (2022) recognizes the importance of taking responsibility for students' writing development instead of attributing struggles solely to them. Both pieces of writing bring into focus how a shift in the teacher's mindset can benefit students. Mawela's perspective further aligns and supports Kané and Tangara's findings showing that a collaborative teaching approach improves writing skills. This section resonates with me because it emphasizes personalized, supportive, and dynamic teaching methods, which are crucial for fostering genuine literacy growth.

Chapter 3 points out a simple truth: the tools we use to teach can change everything in our classroom. From the fun of a new app to the connection we feel to relatable stories, the way we learn, everything shapes how we understand the world and ourselves. Through the next three narratives, this section highlights how innovative strategies such as digital tools, interactive reading techniques, or culturally relevant texts respond to the diverse needs of students and foster an inclusive learning environment. One particularly striking example is Sufian Mabarook's research on how using smartphones can enhance writing tasks. His findings reveal that integrating mobile technology not only improves student engagement but also bridges the digital skills gap, making learning interactive and accessible. Another standout case is Sarah Balogun's strategies for motivating students to read literary texts, such as reading aloud, group reading, and role play, fostering a love for literature while strengthening comprehension. Her practical techniques make literature engaging and her story particularly inspiring. Finally, the last story in this section, written by Geremew Wozie, further reinforces the power of culturally relevant reading texts. His student-centered approach helps students

connect with content, enhancing comprehension and engagement. Together, these approaches illustrate the transformative effect of well-chosen instructional resources. When students experience learning as interactive, inclusive, and connected to their lives, they embark on a journey that inspires lifelong learning.

Chapter 4 delves into three thought-provoking accounts that emphasize the importance of classroom management, discipline, and student motivation. The stories provide valuable insights into creating an engaging and well-structured learning environment. The first account in this chapter featuring Abdisalan Muhumed's research on managing large classes through think-pair-share and peer feedback is particularly insightful. His approach encourages active participation and collaborative learning, making it a favorite for its effective solutions to common classroom challenges. A similar approach was implemented by Issa Tidiane Tounkara (2023) in his classroom, where students reflected on the benefits of working in pairs. One student noted that it "built self-confidence and gave me a sense of unity, complicity, and solidarity" (Tounkara, 2023, p. 68). This comment draws attention to the deeper impact of peer collaboration, reinforcing Muhumed's findings, demonstrating that structured interaction promotes a positive and efficient learning environment. Moreover, Muhumed's story subtly reminds us of the need for gender balance in focus groups, reflecting a commitment to inclusive gender-sensitive practices in African education. Making sure everyone feels included, especially female students, is important in many classrooms. We can almost feel the difference, can't we?

Bringing another layer to this part of the e-book, the third story by Yassin Mohamed Omar and Ali Farah Warsama highlights the role of moral support and student involvement in boosting motivation. Their approach addresses the emotional and psychological aspects of learning, making their story stand out for its holistic perspective. They found that having students have a say can encourage them to make a difference in their motivation levels. It is that feeling of 'someone believes in me' that is crucial for building communities and effective learning environments that meet students' academic and emotional needs. In short, it is about creating a classroom where students want to be. I appreciate that this section focuses on practical strategies and discipline management to maintain an engaging and well-organized classroom.

Chapter 5 explores the power of innovative teaching approaches in shaping students' success. The five stories are all about those sparks of brilliance that happen when teachers get creative and find ways to make learning click. The moments when students feel genuinely excited. This chapter's initial story presents Isaac Akinseye's research on improving spelling tasks through pre-practice and group activities is particularly insightful. His approach reduces student anxiety and builds confidence. Suddenly, spelling is not a mountain to climb anymore. It is a task students can tackle as a team, and we can almost see the relief on their faces.

Continuing this section's theme, the third narrative explores how Aliyi Hassen's work on strengthening programming skills through increased practice and coding clubs fosters creativity and problem-solving. His innovative techniques provide students with hands-on experience, engagingly improving technical skills to build something and figure things out together. Moving forward, the fifth story shifts the focus to Ahmed Shareef's research on the flipped classroom strategy which brings teaching up-to-date and improves learning outcomes by blending online and in-class activities. He shows us that prioritizing students' needs means effectively meeting them at their point of learning. In general, in this chapter, teachers are not

just teaching; they are showing their students that learning can be exciting, that they are capable of more than they think while making learning feel like a journey they are all on together.

I appreciate the unique perspective of African teachers, writing with great empathy, and understanding of their educational system's cultural nuances and complexities. In sub-Saharan Africa, Ubuntu is both a philosophical concept and a linguistic expression found in many Bantu-derived languages spoken across central, eastern, and southern regions. Ubuntu emerges from the Nguni language family, but its values transcend linguistic and geographical boundaries (Udom, 2024). One of the understandings of Ubuntu is the belief that "I am because we are," emphasizing interconnectedness, compassion, and shared humanity. This is deeply reflected in their teaching approach through the implementation EAR since growth and improvement are seen as collective efforts. To better understand the connecting idea of this volume, an African map in the very first pages of the e-book is presented to show a commanding view of the continent and indicate the local settings of the narratives. It is this map that further plays a key role in one's evolving awareness and the final representation of the African classroom. It becomes a visual and conceptual anchor for the reader as it shows that diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds embody a shared journey in which growth is a collective process. Besides, it adds to the reader's understanding of the volume as teachers come together in unity and shared purpose, conveying a sense of connection individually and collectively across the continent. Moreover, teachers' insights into diverse teaching practices make this volume a significant contribution to educational literature. However, the absence of page numbers hinders navigation, making it difficult for readers to reference specific sections or revisit ideas efficiently.

For anyone interested in improving English language teaching, this publication is an essential resource. It provides practical insights and evidence-based strategies that instructors, educators, researchers, and policymakers can apply in various educational settings. This volume of EAR stories is a powerhouse of hope and innovation for those navigating complex educational environments. As a result, it demonstrates how even minor changes can profoundly impact progress and achievement while guiding transformative practices and reshaping our societies.

Ultimately, this collection brings forward the transformative power of EAR and challenges us to reimagine our role as educators. The stories remind us that in the dynamic field of education, the most impactful educators are lifelong learners. Further, the experiences shared in the volume are relevant to the African context but also resonate globally, making it a pertinent read for those engaged in language education. Finally, this volume is also a vibrant reminder: excellent teaching connects us all, everywhere!

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### **Acknowledgments**

I am sincerely grateful to Elizabeth Bekes, Omid Kalantar, and Robert Dickey for their unwavering support, thoughtful guidance, and generous time investment throughout the write-up phase of this review..

### **Statement on 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.

