

BOOK REVIEW

Teachers Researching Their Practice: Explorations in the Georgian Classroom



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Reviewed by Zeynep Öztürk Duman

Karadeniz Technical University, Türkiye

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7346-5410>

Living in my hometown, which lies right next to the Georgian border, I have always felt a special connection to the country, its people and their culture. This sense of closeness made the book *Teachers researching their practice: Explorations in the Georgian classroom* especially relevant to me.

As an English instructor and teacher-researcher dedicated to teacher education, I found the book's emphasis on Exploratory Action Research (EAR) and the presentation of real-life classroom examples a good way of spreading effective practices in English language teaching. Going beyond geographical boundaries and bridging the gap between theory and practice, this concise volume serves as a practical and convenient source for teachers and teacher educators who are committed to continuous professional development.

The book starts with an introduction that highlights the importance of English in Georgia and explains the Exploratory Action Research (EAR) online course developed as an additional component to the Online Teaching Community (OTC), which is a peer-led British Council online platform for English language teachers. The purpose of this course is to let participating teachers learn about and carry out research simultaneously. The book presents specific problems faced by 17 English teachers in their classrooms. Each piece of research addresses a classroom issue related to speaking (7), writing (4), listening (1), reading (1), vocabulary (1), technology integration (1), and learner autonomy (1).

The accounts follow a similar format in terms of introducing the teaching context, the research problems, research methodology, data collection tools, findings, the discussion of the results, and the proposed plans for change. As suggested by Action Research (AR) methodology, each teacher offers solutions to the current issues observed in their classrooms, and if those cannot be satisfactorily resolved, the research process begins again as an upward moving spiral (Mills, 2014). The present review is grouped around key skills in learning English, such as speaking, writing, listening, reading, vocabulary, technology, and learner autonomy.

Speaking skills

Speaking skill is the most frequently discussed topic in this book. Seven chapters focus on various challenges students face when they intend to communicate. Although the research projects were conducted at different educational levels, and involved students of different ages, four main themes stand out.

Emotional and psychological barriers

Several teacher-researchers emphasize that students' fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and shyness reduce their participation in speaking activities (Inga Mdivani, Nino Tsereteli, Nino Kalandia, Nino Sturua). As a solution, teachers recommend creating a supportive classroom environment, giving positive feedback, and strengthening students' sense of confidence.

Linguistic inadequacies

Quite a few chapters point out that students' lack of vocabulary and grammar makes it difficult for them to express themselves during speaking activities (Salome Zarkua, Nino Tsereteli). Suggested solutions include teaching vocabulary in advance, displaying important words on the board, and creating opportunities to revise vocabulary.

Lack of participation and interaction

Research has identified uneven participation, passive students, and lack of interactive tasks that encourage confidence and participation as significant problems (Inga Mdivani, Ketevan Gogaladze). Recommendations include group work, paired activities, topic selection with students, and nomination strategies.

Activity type and content selection

Some teacher-researchers have noted that students are unmotivated due to uninteresting topics or insufficient discussion skills (Tinatin Gabunia, Nino Sturua). As a solution, teachers suggest topics that can appeal to students' interests, discussion videos, role-playing, and presentations, all of which are real-life-related speaking activities.

Altogether, all seven teacher-researchers who set out to explore why their students appear to be reluctant to speak in class, identified causes that may easily apply to classroom contexts far beyond Georgian classrooms (Gnawali et al., 2021; Rebolledo et al., 2023). Fear of making mistakes, low confidence levels, lack of quality feedback, and unengaging topic selection were some of the common reasons mentioned. The teacher-researchers came up with a number of solutions, such as pre-teaching vocabulary, using interactive speaking tasks, offering constructive feedback, choosing interesting topics, and motivating students to build confidence in speaking. What stands out in these chapters is the wealth of practical solutions aimed at enhancing students' communication skills, many of which, I believe, are easily transferable.

Writing skills

Writing skill is the second most frequently discussed topic in the book. Four chapters focus on lack of motivation in writing, difficulties faced by students, and some of the ways to improve writing.

The research projects by Nino Gurgenadze and Natia Katamadze focus on students' disengagement from writing activities. Gurgenadze found that monotonous writing tasks, lack

of timely feedback, and stress of assessment discouraged students. She came up with the idea of designing more engaging writing tasks, such as creating dialogues and character development narratives. Katamadze concluded that her students had difficulties in writing because of inadequacies in grammar and vocabulary. She now intends to integrate different writing strategies, pave the way for more practice opportunities, and provide more constructive feedback.

In another study, Khatuna Kharkheli focused on improving writing skills in English through formal and informal letters. She discovered that her students had difficulties in spelling, grammar, and generating ideas. To address these problems, she decided to focus more on grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and collaborative writing activities. Consistent with Kharkheli's research, Nato Kldiashvili explored coherence and cohesion in her teenage students' writing. She found that they were in need of using writing strategies, such as brainstorming, planning, and revising. She decided to modify her strategies, such as delivering clear instructions, paying more attention to vocabulary teaching, and allocating sufficient time to complete writing tasks effectively.

In sum, the four chapters on writing, once again, highlight the similarities in the challenges related to writing in a foreign language. After identifying what students felt they were struggling with the most, the teacher-researchers came up with and used (or are planning to use) creative and collaborative writing activities, providing timely and constructive feedback, as well as working on grammar and vocabulary.

Listening Skills

There are two chapters focusing on the challenges that students face while learning listening skills. Nana Gelashvili's data revealed that students avoided listening activities due to nervousness, limited vocabulary, unfamiliar words, fast speech, and accents. Drawing on the findings, she decided to pay more attention to teaching vocabulary, especially as a pre-listening activity. Likewise, Lela Tsagareishvili focused on her students' challenges during listening tasks and this led her to finding interesting audio materials to boost their confidence.

Taken together, both explorations suggest that providing affective support, delivering explicit vocabulary instruction, selecting suitable and engaging listening materials can contribute to an improvement in students' listening comprehension.

Technology Integration and Reading Skills

Thanks to recent developments in technology, students' overall language proficiency can be enhanced by using digital tools. The research by Rusudan Karkadze focuses on the integration of a Web 2.0 tool to facilitate English learning. Her findings suggest that technology-enhanced learning can improve students' language learning. Similarly, Armenui Bijoyan explores the role of technology in reading comprehension. She assumed that the use of Google Translate and Google Lens apps could contribute to her students' success in reading so she focused on the integration of these tools. Her findings revealed that the use of such tools enhanced students' reading performance, and showed that digital tools can make reading materials more engaging and accessible. In conclusion, both research projects suggest that the integration of technology can contribute to effective language learning.

Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary learning plays a crucial role in developing overall language proficiency. The research project by Lika Khurtsilava explored difficulties in vocabulary learning. She found that although she allocated 30 minutes to vocabulary teaching in each lesson through flashcards, audio recordings, visual aids, and the coursebook, most of the students did not pay attention to vocabulary learning outside of the classroom. Based on the findings, she proposes an action plan comprising a print-rich environment by presenting word walls and posters, and intends to create meaningful vocabulary practice opportunities.

Learner Autonomy

Promoting learner autonomy has recently become a key issue in education since it encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning (Chong & Reinders, 2022). No wonder that at least one Georgian teacher-researcher in the volume chose to explore this topic.

Tinatin Bedoshvili investigated primary school students' autonomous learning skills. After the COVID-19 pandemic, she observed that her students lacked such skills. To this end, she decided to provide simple assessment rubrics for homework, develop time management skills, and encouraged students to finish classwork in time by using stickers as rewards. Bedoshvili's project stresses the importance of introducing ways of self-directed learning habits from an early age with the help of practical classroom strategies and motivational tools.

Conclusion

Altogether, I found the book *Teachers researching their practice: Explorations in the Georgian classroom* stimulating because many of the classroom issues discussed in the book are quite familiar to me. I also work as a supervisor for English students who are enrolled in a pedagogical formation program. From this perspective, I find the book really valuable since it offers real-life examples of EAR conducted by in-service teachers. I believe it can serve as a useful resource not only for my students but also for other pre-service English teachers in wider geographical contexts because a key issue for them is to connect theory with classroom practice and reflect on real teaching experiences.

The visuals summarizing the studies act as hooks to capture the readers' attention. The layout of the book is reader-friendly and easy to follow. However, the chapters are arranged in no particular order, which may cause readers to lose focus. Instead, they could have been organized according to language skills or themes. Additionally, while these studies offer valuable insights evolving from classroom realities, a brief comparative discussion across cases might have contributed to the strengths of the book. Lastly, all contributing English teachers are female, and even if we are aware that female teachers are highly overrepresented (80%) in the education sector in Georgia (World Bank, n.d.), it would have been interesting to gain some insight into male teachers' classroom practices and perspectives, which may or may not be very different from the overall experiences of the 17 female English teachers.

In conclusion, the book, *Teachers researching their practice: Explorations in the Georgian classroom* sheds light on the power of EAR in language classrooms. As all teachers highlighted in their research, we need to have a closer look at our classrooms to find the real

issues instead of relying on our assumption. This book will contribute not only to teachers' and teacher educators' knowledge base in Georgia but can inform educators in similar contexts around the world by demonstrating how teachers can portray their own classrooms and generate meaningful solutions. It is an engaging and inspiring resource for teachers, teacher educators, policymakers, researchers interested in language education, and anyone intending to get into classroom-based research by following the concise yet informative contents of this volume.

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The Reviewer

Zeynep Öztürk Duman is a Ph.D. scholar currently working in the Department of Western Languages and Literature at Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon, Türkiye. Her research primarily focuses on language teacher education, particularly pre-service and in-service teacher education, teacher identity, professional development, educational technology, and AI in education. Email: zeynepozturk@ktu.edu.tr