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# Exploratory Action Research for enhanced teaching and learning

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Exploratory Action Research is a form of inquiry that teachers can engage in to better understand their situations and take actions for improvement. Here, we consider how the approach was developed, why it places value on exploration and how an Exploratory Action Research programme can be structured. We also look at the impact it has had on teachers in Latin America and elsewhere, and how it can be introduced to teachers in other contexts.

## Key Points

- Exploratory Action Research involves teachers exploring their classroom situations and improving their practice based on their findings.
- The approach was designed to be practical and useful for public school teachers in challenging situations.
- It helps teachers to gain a greater understanding of issues in their classrooms and to better recognise their students' needs and interests.
- The process helps to strengthen teachers' relationships with their students and to improve student engagement in lessons.
- It supports teachers to develop a more inquiry-oriented mindset, an increased sense of agency to effect change and a sense of empowerment.
- Introducing it to teachers involves challenging pre-conceived notions of what research 'is' and explaining research in a down-to-earth way.
- It is based on issues grounded in practical experience, not literature.
- It uses a data collection process that ensures the least interference with teaching.
- It relieves the pressure of compiling a final report to share findings – oral poster presentations serve as a basis for later write-ups.

## How was Exploratory Action Research developed?

An innovative approach to in-service teacher development, Exploratory Action Research was originally conceived during the British Council's Champion Teachers programme in Chile, in 2013. The approach was specifically designed to address the continuing professional development (CPD) needs of public school English teachers working in challenging situations, and has been taken up – and shown to be beneficial – in other Latin American countries and elsewhere in the Global South.

In its first year, as described in Smith, Connelly and Rebolledo (2016), the Champion Teachers mentoring scheme saw the successful completion of 40 six-month Exploratory Action Research projects, which led to the scheme being repeatedly renewed and, gradually, being integrated by the Ministry of Education Chile into its English Opens Doors Programme CPD offer. According to the Ministry's own lesson observation-based evaluations:

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'[It] promoted [...] empowerment of teachers [and was] sustainable. [Champion Teachers] was the only programme that provided such strong evidence of classroom impact on teachers' practice. None of the other initiatives ha[ve] provided such clear evidence of that.' (cited in Rebolledo & Smith, 2021)

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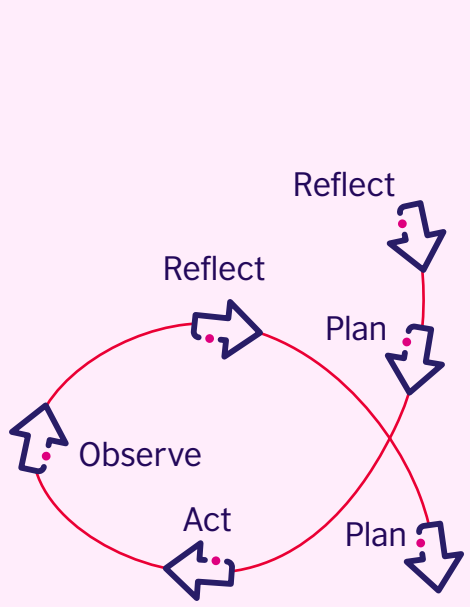
The Exploratory Action Research approach to professional development enhances teachers' abilities to explore and solve classroom problems for themselves. This contrasts with more traditional teacher training initiatives, which attempt to introduce new ideas through a top-down, outside-in approach. With Exploratory Action Research, teachers are mentored to reflect on important issues in their own experience, and to explore them by collecting and analysing data. Then, when ready, they implement changes and evaluate the impact. This bottom-up, evidence-informed perspective on professional development counteracts prevalent deficit views of teachers and teaching.

In Chile, more than 200 teachers have now voluntarily completed an Exploratory Action Research project, directly benefiting over 6,000 pupils. This success saw the programme being expanded to Peru, in 2017, where around 100 teachers completed an Exploratory Action Research project between 2017 and 2019, directly impacting more than 3,000 pupils. Comparing cohort entry and exit data in Peru provides strong evidence of an increased sense of agency among participating teachers to bring about positive change (Rebolledo & Smith, 2021). The programme was subsequently taken up in Mexico, where 100 more educators, including leaders in teacher training institutions, have engaged in Exploratory Action Research projects. To date, more than 12,000 pupils across Latin America have directly benefited from teachers engaging in the process.

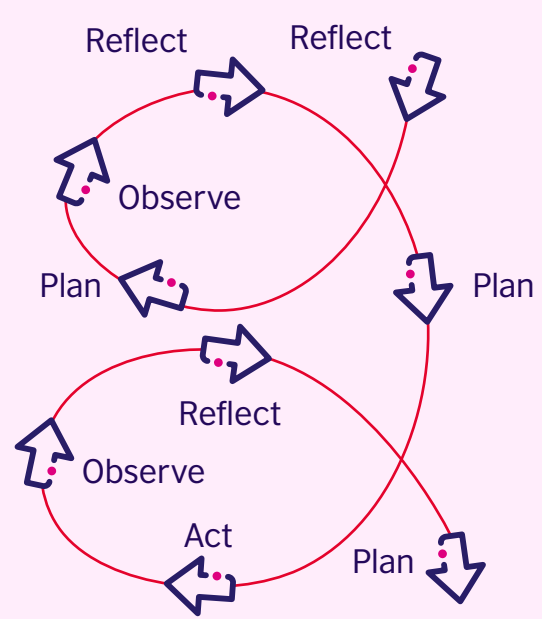
The positive impact of Exploratory Action Research on teachers and classroom learning can be seen through the collected experiences of teachers from Chile, Peru and Mexico in the Stories of Exploratory Action Research series (2016, 2018, 2019–2020). These freely downloadable publications provide reader-friendly reports of teacher-research projects to serve as an inspiration for other Champion Teachers cohorts and teachers elsewhere. Indeed, they have been used by teacher educators across Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and South Asia to support in-service and pre-service teachers to carry out their own research, as well as groups of teachers wanting to learn how to explore challenges and opportunities in their own classrooms.

### Why Exploratory Action Research?

Action Research is a well-known approach that teachers and other professionals can use to improve their practice, by planning a change, engaging in data-based evaluation of the effects of that change, and then planning further improvements (as can be seen on the left in the diagram below, adapted from Smith 2015, p. 40):



**Action Research**



**Exploratory Action Research**

As an example of Action Research, a teacher may reflect that her students are lacking in motivation, so she plans a change to increase participation – perhaps by introducing YouTube videos in class. After asking her students to complete a questionnaire, she may find that some, but not all, feel more engaged, so she plans a new modification (e.g. choosing more engaging videos) accordingly.

In *Exploratory* Action Research (as represented on the right in the diagram), the same teacher would first be encouraged to look as deeply as possible into the existing situation – *to explore it* – before taking any action. They would be invited to reflect on areas they

are unsure about, and to come up with specific questions relating to these (e.g. ‘what do students say motivates or demotivates them?’, ‘which students engage or don’t engage, and when?’). The teacher would then plan to generate data to answer these questions (e.g. via reflective writing by students and a colleague’s observations). By analysing and reflecting on the exploratory findings, they would then plan a change, and a cycle of action research, with confidence that the change they introduce will meet a real need in the given situation.

### There are four clear benefits to undertaking exploration before action.

- 1 The planned action will be more appropriate to the situation.** In the above example, the idea to introduce YouTube videos has been decided without consultation, so it’s entirely possible the change won’t satisfy student aspirations. By exploring students’ actual perceptions and behaviours before taking any action, teachers can gain surprising insights and have their assumptions challenged. In this case, through exploration, the teacher may find that what students actually want are more opportunities to share their opinions. In this way, engaging students in more discussions (in pairs, groups and as a whole class) could be more appropriate than introducing YouTube videos.
- 2 There is less disruption to teaching.** By first exploring the issue in a way that does not directly interfere with everyday teaching, as opposed to jumping into classroom experimentation, teachers can gain a relatively gradual and gentle introduction into classroom inquiry, and progressively develop an understanding of the research processes.
- 3 It avoids change for change’s sake.** Through their initial explorations, teachers often find they no longer want or need to introduce a change – e.g. when they realise that student perceptions are more positive than they previously thought. It’s also common to see that, by being directly involved in the exploratory research process, students already feel more engaged, so change can seem less urgent.
- 4 It provides a baseline.** When teachers decide to introduce a change following their exploration, they have ready data – a ‘baseline’ – with which they can compare the ‘before’ and ‘after’ situations.

In the Champion Teachers programme, teachers carry out the whole process of exploratory research, followed by action research, over an average of five months – from the time they start reflecting on their current situation and select a topic, to the day they present their research via a poster presentation. The following table shows the timeline participants follow.

The characteristics of the Exploratory Action Research approach are further explained in a chapter by Smith (2015) and in [A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research](#) (Smith and Rebolledo, 2018), which is a freely downloadable resource containing down-to-earth explanations and practical tasks that illustrate the different stages of the Exploratory Action Research process.

Exploratory Action Research phases and steps		Activity		Week
EXPLORATION	Plan to explore	Topic identification		1
		Defining exploratory research questions		2
		Data collection tools design		3–5
	Explore	Data collection tools application		6–7
	Analyse and reflect	Analysis of data		8–9
ACTION	Plan (to change)	Action plan design		10–11
	Act	Implementation of actions planned	Evaluation of action plan	12–14
	Observe			15–16
	Reflect	Analysis and conclusions		17–18
SHARING	Poster design		19–20	
	Oral presentation		21	

## The impact of Exploratory Action Research

In a questionnaire and interview based study carried out with the first four cohorts of Chilean teachers on the Champion Teachers programme (Smith & Rebolledo, 2017), the most frequently mentioned impact of the Exploratory Action Research approach was self-reported **overall improvement in teaching**, related to the way **teachers now listened more closely to students and engaged them better in lessons**. Additionally, **teachers felt they had gained research skills and developed positive perceptions of research**, which they now tended to see as a crucial part of their CPD. **Teachers also felt their relationships with students had improved** as a result of their projects, and they reported that **students now felt more listened to, more valued and, consequently, more willing to participate in class**.

Rocio, a 2015 participant, reported that:

*'Students lost their fear [of] English; now there is more participation during the lesson. [...] In addition, they feel important and responsible for their own learning, when they see that the teacher cares about their interests and needs and value his/her work.'*

Like many of the participating teachers, she also

*'learned to trust my students' abilities and never underestimate them.'*

Vilma, another 2015 participant, reported:

*'I learned if I have a problem in the classroom, the first thing I have to do is to analyse my teaching practice and take into account my students' feelings and opinions.'*

Overall, respondents felt that their **students' levels of motivation, enjoyment and engagement in class had all increased**.

A thematic analysis of the final reports of Chilean participants up to 2017 (cf. Rebolledo, Smith & Bullock, 2016) also demonstrated the significant depth of impact of the Exploratory Action Research approach, often evidencing **a more empowered mindset on the part of the teachers** concerned. In his final report, participant Mauro notes that the approach increased his self-belief in the capacity for change:

*'[Exploratory Action Research] lights a spark in the darkness of the system; it lights a spark in the mentality of the people who do not want to change; and it lights a spark in the school by making people believe that they own the changes that can be made in any learning environment.'*

This evaluation also reinforced the earlier finding of **a marked improvement in relationships with students**. Participant Camila highlights the importance of an improved awareness of students' needs:

*'We need to stop focusing on our concerns and pay more attention to our students' concerns. As a result of this project, I feel that I am more empathetic.'*

Lastly, an overall thematic analysis of reports (including those from Peru, Colombia and Mexico in 2019), showed that teachers not only identify specific improvements in their teaching, but also a deeper **change in mindset towards a greater sense of being able to address the problems they face**, as well as **enhanced relationships with pupils** (Rebolledo & Smith, 2021).

For Angela, a participant from Peru:

*'This experience has been one of the most meaningful lessons I have had during my career. I learned to be more patient in terms of not anticipating answers or actions before listening to my students' needs.'*

While for Ana, a participant from Mexico:

*'Exploratory Action Research proved to me that the opportunities for creating a positive impact on our teaching environment are there. We just have to be curious enough to explore the issues we're facing in our classrooms. [...] Maybe the solution to a problem is right in front of your eyes, and if not, you can always carry out more research.'*

With these kinds of deep impact, the overall effects of Exploratory Action Research are expected to be long-lasting and have the potential to reach (via continuing improved practice on the part of programme participants) large numbers of pupils during the remainder of teachers' careers.

## How to introduce teachers to Exploratory Action Research

The following principles, derived from eight years of experience of introducing Exploratory Action Research to teachers, all stem from one key point – Exploratory Action Research is not presented as academic in nature. It is practical and useful. It is carried out for purposes of professional development and to improve practice. And it differs from academic research in some important respects.

- 1 Challenge preconceptions about what research ‘is’** Many teachers have a certain view of research – that it is not ‘for them’, but something carried out by academics and scientists. This can be changed by introducing them to short definitions of research, with examples from everyday experience (e.g. planning a journey) that involve some form of research (questions, data, analysis and interpretation). (See chapter 2 of [A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research](#), Smith & Rebolledo, 2018).
- 2 Show the value and practicality of research by means of experiences and examples** The above point can be reinforced, and the value and practicality of research for teachers can be demonstrated, through examples, as provided by the Stories of Exploratory Action Research series.
- 3 Encourage teachers to identify issues from recent practical experience, not literature** Ensure that the starting point is a problem, puzzle or even success from a teacher’s own recent experience, not an issue that comes from the outside. (See chapter 4 of the [Handbook](#))
- 4 Use everyday language to explain the research concept** Using everyday language during explanations – and avoiding jargon – can help to demystify research. Explain procedures (e.g. how to analyse qualitative data) in a step-by-step, down-to-earth way. (See chapter 6 of the [Handbook](#))
- 5 Provide clear structure in terms of awareness of phases, expectations and deadlines** The process of teacher-research is usually a new experience, which can provoke anxiety in some, so it is important to create a clear timeline, but for this to be maintained with flexibility, since situations can change.
- 6 Actively question teachers’ assumptions and encourage them to verify assumptions** Question them actively and encourage them to explore their own perceptions and behaviours, as well as the behaviours and perceptions of others (e.g. students and parents). (See chapter 4 of the [Handbook](#))
- 7 Engage near-peers in teacher mentoring** Supportive mentoring is crucial at key points in the teacher-research journey (e.g. when deciding a topic, when developing research questions, when deciding on research methods, when analysing data, and when considering how to present findings). Best results can come from ‘near-peer’ mentors – those who have experienced similar conditions of teaching and/or experienced Exploratory Action Research themselves.
- 8 Introduce manageable ways of collecting data, which do not interfere with teaching** Many teachers expect to use a questionnaire of some kind, but this can be time-consuming. Show how other means of data collection (e.g. engaging students in brief reflective writing about a particular issue) can be equally instructive. (See chapter 5 of the [Handbook](#))
- 9 Develop informal, teacher-friendly ways of sharing research with others** Requiring a formal written report at the end of a teacher-research process can make teachers feel they don’t have time to engage. Oral presentations, supported by a poster illustrating the key points, can be more useful, and teachers can transcribe a recording of an oral presentation as a basis for writing. (See chapter 9 of the [Handbook](#) and Smith, Bullock, Rebolledo & López, 2016)

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