

Exploratory Action Research in a Teacher Education Program: In-Service EFL Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study explores the perspectives of three Vietnamese primary EFL teachers as they engaged in an exploratory action research (EAR) course during a degree-upgrade teacher education program for in-service teachers. As part of the program, the teachers were required to complete an intensive eight-week EAR course and subsequently implemented a one-month classroom-based EAR project, under the guidance of a researcher-mentor. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted after an analysis of their EAR reports. Findings indicate that the teachers were able to critically investigate classroom issues and implement contextually appropriate actions. They developed a deeper sense of reflection, became more aware of diverse stakeholder perspectives, and gained skills in using multiple simple data collection methods. Despite these gains, their engagement was constrained by factors such as heavy workload, time constraints, and limited collegial support. The study highlights the potential of EAR as a valuable tool for improving teaching practices and fostering teacher research. The findings hold practical implications for teacher educators and school leaders seeking to foster teacher-led research and evidence-informed practice in EFL contexts.

Keywords: EFL teachers, Primary schools, Exploratory Action Research, Vietnam

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1. Introduction

1.1 Exploratory action research

Over the past three decades, teacher professional development has facilitated the growth of classroom practitioner research (Burn, 2011; Hanks, 2019). Exploratory action research (EAR) has gained recognition under this movement. EAR is a novel approach to in-service teacher development that was first developed in 2013 in Chile as part of the British Council's Champion Teachers initiative (Smith & Rebolledo, 2022). According to Smith and Rebolledo (2022), EAR consists of two phases: an exploratory research phase and an action implementation phase. The exploratory research phase encourages deeper reflection on challenges teachers encounter in their classrooms. This involves identifying areas of concern and formulating specific questions. The action phase involves planning and acting to generate transformative change. By analyzing and reflecting on the exploratory findings, teachers would then plan a change, with confidence that the change they introduce will meet a real need in the given situation. Therefore, in EAR, teachers need to grasp their situation and make informed decisions.

1.2 Teachers' perspectives on exploratory action research

Research on teachers' perspectives of EAR has reported numerous benefits and challenges. Regarding the benefits, EAR was reported to enable teachers to address issues grounded in their own experiences, making changes more relevant and sustainable (Rebolledo et al., 2017; Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). In settings like Nepal and Peru, teachers found EAR more adaptable to the realities of under-resourced classrooms (Shrestha et al., 2022; Rebolledo et al., 2017). By encouraging teachers to see teaching as a process of inquiry, EAR instills a more reflective and research-oriented professional identity. Teachers learn to frame classroom challenges as "puzzles" rather than problems needing immediate solutions (Hanks, 2017; Ramdani et al., 2023).

However, several challenges have also been reported. They include time constraints, risk-taking concerns, and limited understanding of action research methodologies (Al-Mamari et al., 2022; Rebolledo et al., 2017; Saeb et

al., 2021; Shrestha et al., 2022). Teachers often lack formal research training, which impacts their confidence in designing studies, collecting and analyzing data, and interpreting results (Al-Mamari et al., 2022; Saeb et al., 2021). Effective mentoring and peer support are critical in overcoming this barrier (Burns et al., 2022; Ramdani et al., 2023).

1.3. Background of the study

In Vietnam, teachers are expected to undertake teacher research (TR) through a top-down national scheme called ‘*sáng kiến kinh nghiệm*’ (‘initiatives–experiences’ or I-E). This scheme requires them to explore classroom issues and apply the ‘innovative solutions’ to address the issues (Pham et al., 2024). Following this scheme, teachers produce reports describing classroom experiences, issues or problems and how they were solved. These reports are often produced to obtain the title of “good teacher” in award competitions. While framed as a form of teacher research for professional development, the value of these schemes has been questioned. Pham et al. (2024) found that teachers lacked access to quality research models, mentoring, or literature, which are essential for building research capacity. There was a strong emphasis on using TR for performance evaluation, thus undermining its intended purpose. Teachers produced I-E reports to meet external expectations, risking a shift in focus away from the primary goal of enhancing student learning outcomes.

As an alternative form of teacher research, EAR has emerged internationally as a more dynamic and teacher-driven approach to professional development. This approach not only emphasizes reflective practice but also demands the systematic exploration of teaching and learning through the deliberate collection and analysis of evidence. These features of EAR have fostered its adoption among teachers globally. A series of *Stories of Exploratory Action Research* (2016, 2018, 2020), featuring experiences from teachers in Chile, Peru, and Mexico (Rebolledo et al., 2016; Rebolledo et al., 2018; Rebolledo & Bullock, 2020) has been published and served as an inspiring model for educators worldwide. These stories demonstrate how EAR can be implemented successfully even in resource-constrained environments and highlight the empowering effect of practitioner-led research.

This study builds on that momentum by introducing EAR as a practical and sustainable alternative to the I-E model in the Vietnamese context. To facilitate this, an EAR course was developed within an in-service teacher education program at a Vietnamese university, strategically utilizing available international resources on EAR. The course guided primary EFL teachers through a structured combination of coursework and classroom-based research, supporting them in conducting their own mentored EAR projects. This research explored how these in-service teachers perceived their engagement with EAR during the program.

The study aims to address the following research questions:

What are primary EFL teachers’ perspectives of exploratory action research after experiencing it in a degree-upgrade teacher education program?

2. Methodology

2.1 Contexts and participants

The participants in this study were three in-service English teachers among the 25 teachers who joined a degree-upgrade teacher education program for in-service teachers at a public university in the South of Vietnam. To complete the program, the three participant teachers were required to attend a course entitled ‘Exploratory Action Research’ over a course of 8 weeks (two intensive sessions at the weekend). The participants were based in three different primary schools in rural areas across a Mekong delta province. They had from three to 20 years of experience in teaching English. Table 1 presents the participants’ details. All were female. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants. A detailed account of the participants’ profile is presented below.

Table 1. Participants’ profile

Participants (pseudonyms)	Gender	Teaching experience	Grade	School locations
Hoa	Female	8 years	3 & 4	Rural
An	Female	6 years	4 & 5	Rural
Mai	Female	6 years	3 & 4	Rural

All teachers in this study were experienced primary English teachers working in local primary schools in the rural areas within the same province. Each had prior experience with producing ‘*Sáng kiến kinh nghiệm*’ (I-E) reports. At the time of the study, Hoa had won two awards for her I-E reports over the two consecutive years. In contrast, despite multiple submissions, Mai and An had not yet received any awards for their reports.

2.2 Course structure

The course was designed to introduce in-service teachers to the principles and practices of EAR. The materials for the course were derived from several sources, with the primary source being the recent comprehensive EAR book entitled, “*Exploratory action research for enhanced teaching and learning*” by Smith and Rebolledo (2022).

As outlined in Table 2, the first two sessions of the course focused on providing essential knowledge of EAR and exploring the value of teacher research. Teachers were required to share their concerns and reflect on pressing issues within their own teaching contexts. Session 3 guided teachers to adapt research instruments such as questionnaires and interview questions available in the sample EAR reports to explore their own classroom issues. For example, checklists and classroom observation tools created by teachers in *Exploratory Action Research: Stories of Nepalese EFL teachers* (Gnawali et al., 2021) did a wonderful job in scaffolding the teachers’ initial research project. In Session 4, all 25 teacher participants were instructed to write a research proposal in which they reflected on their own experiences, identified their concerns and proposed methods to address them.

In this study, the researcher acted as both a course instructor and the primary investigator. The three teachers who agreed to participate in the research component continued working with the researcher during the action phase. This included two follow-up briefing sessions. In the first of these, the group collaboratively reviewed sample EAR reports from *Exploratory Action Research: Stories of Nepalese EFL Teachers* (Gnawali et al., 2021) to guide their planning and implementation. The reports were analyzed to explore the concerns raised by teachers in their reports, the research processes they adopted, and the outcomes they achieved at the end. This analysis helped the participating teachers conceptualize their own projects and consider contextually relevant approaches. In the second session, the researcher guided the participating teachers in selecting appropriate methods for data collection. Teachers were instructed to adapt instruments, such as surveys, interview questions, and checklists, from the sample reports and plan how these tools could be applied in their own classroom contexts. Following this preparation, each teacher spent approximately four weeks conducting the action phase of their individual EAR projects under the guidance of the researcher-mentor.

Table 2. Procedures of conducting an intensive EAR course and one-on-one meetings

EAR phases		Activity	Sessions	Note
Exploration Phase (25 teachers)	Plan to explore	Explore what EAR is and value of research	1-2	Intensive EAR course
		Reflect on the current situation		
		Identify the concern and plan questions		
		Analyze successful EAR reports	3-4	
		Prepare data collection tools (e.g. questionnaire, interviews...)		
		Prepare and present a research proposal (course ends)	5-6	
Action phase (3 teachers)	Explore	Collect data	7-8	One-on-one mentoring for the three teachers
	Analyze & Reflect	Analyze and reflect on findings		
	Plan to change	Action plan design		
	Act & Observe	Collect and analyze data		
	Reflect	Reflect on findings & conclusion (Complete EAR reports)		

Finally, after completing the action phase, the teachers prepared their EAR reports drawing on the structure and examples from the sample reports previously analyzed. These reports were collected for analysis, and the findings are summarized in Table 3. As shown in the table, each teacher addressed different concerns: students' lack of spontaneous speaking ability, difficulty in retaining vocabulary, and the ineffective use of flashcards. To investigate these issues, the teachers employed various data collection tools and identified several contributing factors. Ultimately, all three teachers reported positive outcomes as a result of their interventions.

Table 3. Summary of EAR reports by each of the three teachers.

Teachers	Concern	Exploration methods	Findings	Actions taken	Observed outcomes
Hoà	Students could not express ideas freely or confidently during spontaneous speaking	-Questionnaire -Peer observation -Own classroom observation	-Students wanted to speak English but feared making mistakes -Lacked vocabulary and ideas -Could only speak in simple sentences	- Used mind maps to organize ideas - Gave vocabulary and grammar notes - Used prompting questions	-Improved student performance during presentations -Students became more confident speakers
An	Students did not remember vocabulary, affecting speaking ability	-Questionnaire -Peer observation -Video recording	-60% of students struggled with vocabulary retention - Students bored with visual aids - Used Vietnamese to aid pronunciation - Liked games	-Discouraged Vietnamese pronunciation guides - Used mind maps for vocab - Included vocabulary-checking activities and games	-Students showed higher motivation -Improved pronunciation and recall - Mind maps helped retention
Mai	Flashcards ineffective for teaching vocabulary to young learners	-Student survey -Peer observation	- Flashcards found unattractive - Vocabulary presentation steps were ineffective	- Used flashcards for more engaging games - Designed pair, group, and whole-class activities to reinforce vocabulary	Students engaged more actively

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' perspectives regarding the benefits and challenges of conducting their research project. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the teachers' first language, to facilitate more fluent and comfortable expression. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted by the first coder (the author) to identify recurring patterns in the interview transcripts. This involved a repeated review of the data, allowing patterns and themes to emerge without being constrained by predefined categories. For inter-coder reliability, the second coder (an experienced EFL instructor) independently followed the same coding procedure as the first coder did, as described above, for coding the data set. The two coders discussed the differences until both achieved agreement on all coding results. This iterative process ensured the accuracy and reliability of the thematic analysis.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1 Teachers' perceived benefits

Developing a deeper sense of reflection

A thematic analysis of the interview data showed that the three teachers identified the development of a deeper sense of reflection on their practice as the most significant benefit. They shared that they started to think, observe and reflect more on their classroom problems whenever they arose. As An and Mai shared,

I feel that I am getting more and more curious about my students' needs and interests. I learn to ask myself more if my students like my teaching. (An)

I start to question more frequently about what I am doing in my classroom and how my teaching helps my students learn. (Mai)

This comment suggests an orientation toward more reflective teaching among the teachers. The teachers learned to reflect more on the effectiveness of their teaching.

A greater awareness of looking at a classroom issue from various perspectives.

Another significant benefit reported by the teachers was their increased awareness of the importance of examining classroom issues from multiple perspectives. Previously, their reflection on their teaching practices primarily relied on their own adjustments or informal suggestions from colleagues. This limited approach was also reflected in their previous "experience-initiative" (I-E) reports, which often lacked input from other stakeholders. Their experience with EAR helped them realize the value of gathering useful opinions from their colleagues, students, and even their parents. As Hoa commented,

In my previous I-E reports, I just wrote a report based on my own reflection. I was not aware of collecting ideas as data from students or colleagues or even parents for the report. (Hoa)

Mai further shared that she trusted her students' ability to reflect on the lesson. Other teachers who asked for their students' opinions were surprised as they found that their children could provide useful suggestions.

I used to think that my students were too young to give their own opinions. Now I have learned that they were able to do better than I thought. This helps me understand my students more and build a better relationship with them. (Mai)

Experience with using research instruments.

The final benefit concerns the experiences the teachers gained from designing, adapting, and using tools for collecting data for their EAR project. The teachers shared that although they had written many I-E reports, they admitted that they had had little experience of using formal research tools for collecting data such as questionnaires, interview questions, and video-recordings of their lessons. It was through their engagement in the EAR process that they were able to adapt research tools available from other EAR reports for their own projects. A representative comment from An as follows.

I did not collect formal data by using those research instruments for my previous I-S reports. I found samples online and followed a report-writing guide. My focus was more on meeting the requirements than on really investigating my teaching. (Hoa)

3.1.2 Teachers' perceived challenges

Heavy workload and time constraints

The three teachers, however, cited several challenges. They all shared that heavy workload and limited time they had apart from teaching at schools, discouraged them from conducting any forms of teacher research. Like many language teachers in similar contexts, the teachers had to struggle with finding time for such a EAR they implemented. As Mai commented,

I had to spend quite a lot of time reading and adapting tools for collecting data and analyzing the data while I had lots of classes to teach and lots of paperwork to complete. (Mai)

The teachers further noted that although they were eventually able to use and adapt a variety of data collection tools such as questionnaire and video-recording the lessons, they found it hard to adapt the questionnaire. They admitted that without guidance from the mentor in the initial stages, conducting the research independently would have been far more difficult. They realize that they would need a lot of support from a mentor to successfully complete the EAR process on their own.

Limited collegial support

All teachers acknowledged that finding assistance from colleagues was a big challenge during the implementation of their EAR project. They shared that most of their colleagues had a tight schedule, leaving little time to help them with class observations or post-lesson discussion. As Hoa shared,

My colleagues are very busy. Having them do the extra work of observing my class and giving comments is not something they normally do. (Hoa)

Hoa, An and Mai further reported that most of the previous classroom observations were from investigators who mainly focused on judging their teaching practices based on certain criterion. The kind of observation they need for EAR is totally different. The observer focused not only on the way the teacher teach, but also on how the students react to the activities and the associated problem. After observations, they had to work together to analyze the issues. This tradition is unfamiliar for many of their fellow teachers. This task took them much time. As Mai shared,

The kind of observation we had is different from previous classroom observations. Normally we just listed strengths and weaknesses after each observation. Now we had to discuss the issue, find the cause, and plan to make changes. (Mai)

The teachers also expressed concern regarding the absence of a mentor. They admitted that they would not be able to conduct a successful EAR project if they were not supported methodologically. This result suggests that an initial support or scaffolding from an experienced researcher is important.

3.2. Discussion

All three teachers in this study reported having positive experience with EAR. They noted that EAR is an effective approach to explore classroom issues and develop informed, context-sensitive strategies to improve teaching and learning. These findings are supported by previous research (e.g., Shrestha et al., 2022; Smith & Rebolledo, 2022), which has highlighted the value of EAR in empowering teachers and promoting reflective, evidence-based practice. In the Vietnamese EFL context, EAR can serve as a complementary or even alternative to the existing *sáng kiến kinh nghiệm* (I-E) scheme, particularly when implemented with adequate collegial and pedagogical support.

However, the study also revealed several challenges which may discourage teachers from conducting EAR independently. Consistent with earlier findings (e.g., Al-Mamari et al., 2022; Saeb et al., 2021), participants cited time constraints, heavy workload, and limited collegial support as barriers to the implementation of EAR. One important finding is that while all teachers found EAR to be valuable, they also emphasized their reliance on mentoring, particularly during the initial stages of their projects. This highlights the critical role of scaffolding in teacher research and suggests that mentorship, whether from experienced researchers or through peer support networks, is critical for enabling teachers to sustain teacher research as a form of professional development.

4. Conclusion

This study suggests that EAR can be a useful approach to improving classroom situations in a low-resource context such as Vietnam. It helps teachers develop a greater sense of reflection, an awareness of the importance of examining a classroom issue from multiple perspectives and gaining experience with using research instruments. Thus, it presents a promising alternative to the current *sáng kiến kinh nghiệm* (I-E) scheme. However, to fully realize the potential of EAR for professional development, several contextual constraints such as limited collegial support and a lack of research mentoring must be addressed. More importantly, EAR should be introduced earlier in teacher education, beginning at the pre-service level and continuing through in-service professional development programs. Such integration can better equip teachers for classroom-based inquiry and promote teacher research as an effective form of ongoing professional learning. Finally, stakeholders such as teacher educators and school leaders should consider creating enabling conditions, such as allocating time for research activities, encouraging peer collaboration, and recognizing teacher inquiry efforts as part of professional growth frameworks.

This study is limited to a small number of participants, involving only three teachers, each contributing one interview and one EAR project report. It merely focused on the participants' perceived benefits and challenges, without triangulation from additional data sources. Moreover, the study examined teachers' perspectives on EAR within a context where they received guidance and mentorship. As such, the findings may not fully represent the

realities of conducting EAR independently in less supported environments. Therefore, future research in EAR may be needed to explore issues such as to what extent teachers continue to carry out EAR in their context independently and the challenges they face while carrying out EAR.

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