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Exploratory action research: experiences of Nepalese EFL teachers

Sagun Shrestha, *Suman Laudari, and Laxman Gnawali*

The number of reports and publications about exploratory action research (EAR) has been increasing in recent years; however, there is still a dearth of studies that examine its effectiveness for improving teaching and learning. This study explores Nepalese EFL teachers' perceptions of EAR, the ways they explored their classroom issues, and how they acted to improve their classroom practices through involvement in an online EAR training course for a year. The data collected from interviews and the teachers' written reports show that these teachers found EAR to be an effective approach to explore their classroom puzzles or problems and develop informed, context-sensitive strategies to solve these. The findings of this study are relevant for teachers, teacher educators, and education policymakers in providing insights into the value of EAR for bringing about changes in teaching and learning situations.

Key words: exploratory action research, teacher-researcher, exploration, intervention, Nepalese teachers

Introduction

Although in-service training and other learning opportunities can add to working teachers' knowledge repertoire to function better in the classroom, what may most enrich their understanding of what works in their specific contexts is the knowledge they create for themselves, for example by engaging in practitioner research. Johnson (2009) terms this knowledge that practising teachers generate 'legitimate knowledge' as it develops as a response to issues teachers face in their everyday classroom practices. Teachers can identify their problems and experiment with proposed solutions suitable to their contexts. They own the knowledge thus produced, and if it is shared in the teacher community, it can become more widely relevant.

Guided by the above ideas, the authors ran a course entitled 'Exploratory Action Research (EAR) Online Training for Nepalese EFL Teachers' for

a year that aimed at familiarizing teachers with EAR by engaging them in conducting it in their own real-world classrooms. There are different models of teacher research, such as action research, self-study, lesson study, and design-based research (Admirral, Smit, and Zwart 2014). The authors chose EAR as opposed to any other teacher research model because they believe that EAR is bottom-up research, suitable to their local contexts and closely connected to everyday practice.

Exploratory action research

EAR, conceived by Smith (2015), is a type of understanding- and action-oriented research initiated and carried out by teachers themselves on classroom issues of importance to them in order to gain a better understanding of the dynamic nature of classroom life and possibly to bring about change. It is a way to explore, understand, and improve practices as teachers. It has two phases: an exploratory research phase and an action implementation phase (Smith and Rebolledo 2018). In the exploratory phase, the teacher-researcher explores the issues and problems, whereas in the action implementation phase, they plan for actions and implement them. Thus, in EAR it is considered important for teachers to understand their situation and to arrive at informed decisions before implementing an action plan (Smith and Rebolledo 2018).

Smith (2015) considers EAR to be a gradualist approach, useful to encourage teachers to undertake research without interfering with their everyday teaching. Békés (2019) claims that the findings which come from teachers who are involved in EAR are more easily transferable than second-language acquisition research findings that can be difficult to access and understand. Admirral, Smit, and Zwart (2014) contend that one of the ways to close the gap between research and classroom practice is through research by teachers to deal with their classroom issues on their own.

EAR seems to resemble exploratory practice (EP) in the sense that these both focus on exploring puzzles in teachers' minds—and thus differ from action research, with its focus on immediate problem-solving. However, one thing that makes EAR distinctive is that it allows for an action research phase following on from exploratory research. Also, EAR focuses on teachers as researchers, whereas in EP both teachers and learners are involved as co-researchers who work collegially to explore issues (Hanks 2017). In EP, teachers and learners set agendas to explore puzzles by using normal pedagogic practices (Allwright 2003), while in EAR, teachers may collaborate with learners to understand the puzzles and/or problems but do not consider learners as co-researchers, and teachers can use any research tools to explore their classroom issues, although Moran (2017) shows that learners' collaboration with teachers during the research process can be central to EAR.

So far, only a limited number of reports and publications related to EAR explain EAR and the ways to conduct it (e.g. Smith 2015; Smith and Rebolledo 2018). The EAR reports that exist so far (e.g. Rebolledo, Smith, and Bullock 2016; Negi 2019; Gnawali, Laudari, and Shrestha 2021) are collections of reports which contain teachers' individual reflections but do not provide an overall evaluation. As regards some studies related to EAR, Moran (2017) looked into French engineering students' oral presentations

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in English. She reported that the process of involving a new group of students in the next cycle benefited from the learning of the previous cycle. Likewise, Dikilitaş and Comoglu (2020) explored how reading and reflecting on the research published by some previous teachers engaged in EAR affected pre-service teachers in a language teacher education intervention. Chapagain (2018) conducted classroom research through which she established that teachers have the ability to devise locally appropriate approaches to tackle classroom issues. Negi (2019), in the introduction to a collection of EAR reports by schoolteachers in the far western parts of Nepal, argues that the elements of exploration made a difference in the EAR design as they helped teachers explore the current classroom situation and plan for the action to better the situation. This brief review reveals that existing reports related to EAR have not explicitly investigated the benefits of EAR as perceived by the teachers involved. Thus, in this study, we looked into the perceptions of participating teachers towards the effectiveness of EAR for addressing their classroom puzzles or problems, their experiences of exploration to deal with their issues, and the strategies they adopted to address the issues that they identified.

The following research questions guided this study.

1 What are the benefits of EAR as perceived by Nepalese EFL teachers who got involved in a year-long EAR online course?
2 How did the teachers explore their classroom puzzles or problems and make interventions in their classrooms to improve the situation?

Methodology

This was a qualitative study that explored participants' experiences of conducting EAR in a year-long course that aimed to mentor the participants exclusively online, collaborating with the facilitators (the authors of this article), who were based in Ireland, Australia, and Nepal. Using online means, the authors reached out to the participating teachers in Nepal, establishing that an online mentoring modality would be most feasible as it has the potential to reach out to a wide audience. Out of the 100-plus participants who showed interest initially in the course, 27 teachers completed the course successfully (Shrestha, Gnawali, and Laudari 2022). The participating teachers were from the far-west to far-eastern parts of Nepal. The call for participation was disseminated to them through the Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA) as well as the personal networks of the facilitators, and all those who registered were accepted into the course.

In the first webinar of the course, the facilitators introduced the concept of EAR and explained their plans to the participants. There were in all six webinars and six meetings to mentor teachers synchronously during this course. The EzTalks platform was used for synchronous sessions. The facilitators conducted six webinars, in which participants could only communicate with the facilitators using text chat and later they switched to online meetings. In the latter format, the participants could speak to the facilitators as required during the meeting, which helped in making sessions interactive. Google Doc was used in the course to give feedback on the participants' research issues and research questions and also to allow interaction between course participants. Additionally, emails were used for general communication.

The data collected for this study are from six open-ended interviews and nine reports that participants submitted to the authors. In the interviews, the authors asked teachers to share their experiences related to their EAR journey. The interviews were conducted in Nepali and selectively translated into English. Table 1 presents the participants' details. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants.

The participants who consented to voluntarily participate in this study were teacher researchers of the EAR training course who were chosen using purposive sampling. Of this sample, all participants had completed the course. Nine of them wrote reports which appeared in the book *Exploratory Action Research: Stories of Nepalese EFL Teachers* (Gnawali, Laudari, and Shrestha 2021) that was edited by authors of this article. Their reports included the issues they explored in their teaching context, the process they adopted, and the outcomes they achieved at the end. A thematic analysis approach was followed to analyse the data. The authors coded interview notes and reports, and generated themes based on the patterns that emerged (Braun and Clarke 2006). Three broad categories emerged in relation to our research questions: (1) the benefits of EAR for teaching and learning; (2) exploration in EAR; and (3) intervention in EAR. The themes under these categories are delineated in the next section with supporting excerpts from the interviews and reports.

Benefits of EAR for teaching and learning

Participants indicated—both in their interviews and their reports—several benefits of EAR for teaching and learning, such as EAR being practice-driven research, EAR enabling identification of context-sensitive strategies, and EAR as a means of reflection. It is noticeable that all participants reported EAR as helpful for them as it enabled these teachers explore their classroom issues and puzzles and effect changes in their classrooms. In consonance with Smith (2015: 42), who claims 'the phrase

Research theme	Participants (pseudonyms)	Gender	Teaching experience (years)	Type of school	Data contribution for this article
Issues of learner participation in speaking activities	Bhojraj	Male	9	Community	Report and interview
	Chaitanya	Male	4	Private	Interview
Teacher's encouragement for students to communicate in the classroom	Paras	Male	10	Charity	Report and interview
Learner confidence issues	Sanjog	Male	20	Community	Interview
Learner interest issues in creative writing	Priti	Female	9	Private	Report
	Samipa	Female	8	Private	Interview
	Sangita	Female	15	Private	Report
Issues of student participation in classroom interaction	Jaya Ram	Male	8	Community	Report and interview
	Puran	Male	10	Trust	Report
Reading comprehension	Deepak	Male	13	Community	Report
Homework and stress in students	Jibika	Female	12	Private	Report
Issues of speaking skill	Manita	Female	4	Community	Report

TABLE 1
Research participants

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"exploratory action research" emerged simply as a logical description (for teachers and mentors) of a form of practice' rather than in a theory-driven manner, Chaitanya stated:

> I thought that research will be done by someone who is an expert but now I have come to know that teacher research can be done by anyone ... I also learnt that even though we do not have knowledge about research, we can still conduct EAR to solve the problems of our own classrooms.

This is also supported by another participant, Jeevan, who found that EAR is practice-oriented in nature and supportive of improving teaching and learning. The above discussion is in line with the claim that EAR is research conducted by teachers to bring improvement in the classroom settings and which teachers can conduct with relative ease in their own local contexts (Smith 2015).

Participants in this study equally emphasized that EAR helped them to devise strategies to address classroom issues. During the interview, Paras claimed EAR had supported him to find context-sensitive strategies as it is very much bottom-up in nature and hence relevant to his context. Paras stated that he had previously tried to solve the issue of his students' hesitation in speaking English by using tips in books and journal articles, but he could not find context-suitable solutions in those resources. Ultimately, he could solve this issue by conducting EAR.

Participants in the interviews and reports emphasized that through their engagement in EAR, they could learn and use learner-centred techniques in their teaching and learning. Puran reported:

> I came to know very useful insights about enhancing teaching-learning practice through action research and by using learner-centred techniques and methods of teaching. In order to encourage my students to enhance their interest in [speaking] English, I started changing my teaching style.

It was found that participants could identify the most suitable strategies for teaching and learning in their local context through their exploration. This finding corroborates Chapagain (2018), who argues that through EAR teachers can make informed decisions when designing interventions to address issues in their classrooms.

In their EAR reports, several participants mentioned that by being engaged in EAR, they learnt that they should look into classroom issues if they are impacting teaching and learning, as shown in the extract below:

> I learned that we should step back and explore the situation if the way we are doing things is not working in our classroom. We are teachers and researchers and problem solvers of any problems that might exist in our classrooms.

EAR was found to have the potential to make teachers reflect, which is beneficial because teachers can, at times, find that the way they teach does not help them to achieve their intended outcomes. According to the participants, through EAR they can explore their classroom puzzles and problems to understand those issues.

The discussion above reveals that the participants at first seemed to be governed by the idea that research is something done by someone else and that it is difficult. Later, they came to believe that they could solve their own issues in the classrooms. They modified their everyday classroom practices and started becoming more reflective. They also developed a sensitivity to notice the impacts of their own practices that take place in a regular teaching/learning schedule.

Exploration in EAR

The exploration phase is significant in EAR. It is what informs the participants to devise some plans for change and implement those plans later in their classrooms. The identification of appropriate instruments during the exploration stage helps the teacher-researcher in collecting the required data to understand the situation. It was found that the teacher participants used mostly questionnaires, self-reflective notes, and interviews with students and their colleagues as the instruments to explore their classroom issues. For example, two participants in their reports shared thus:

> To find out why most of the students were reluctant in using English for communication with each other, I applied two methods: interview with some selected students, and notes from informal talk with students and colleagues.

> The research instruments I used for exploration were focused group discussion, questionnaire and self-reflective notes.

It was also found that some participants requested their own colleagues observe their class during the exploratory phase so that their colleagues could also talk about what went well and what needs to be/can be changed for better teaching and learning.

Teachers were often surprised, when they explored their classroom issues, that their assumptions about the issues and causes were wrong. This meant that the teacher participants could identify actual causes and were then able to devise context-sensitive techniques to address the issues. Having identified the actual causes, this approach also helps them to eradicate negative perceptions that they might have towards their students, as teachers tend to think that issues emerge in the classrooms are due to learners. Sangeeta shared her eye-opener:

> After analysing the collected data, I realised that my students were interested in writing. They wanted to practise writing skills, but they found it difficult due to a lack of vocabulary. I was surprised to learn that they enjoyed writing.

The exploration worked as an eye-opener for the participants to notice the specific factors that were causing the issues. As Smith (2015: 40) points out, 'the adjective "exploratory" before "action research" can be seen to involve extensively clarifying the existing situation—the nature of a given "problem" or other issue—before any action for change is conceived and undertaken'. The findings of this study support Smith's claim that the exploration stage provides an opportunity to explore actual causes of problems or puzzles.

Intervention in EAR

In EAR, intervention takes place after plans are made which are informed by the exploration of issues. This is a significant and exciting phase as

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teachers aim for certain changes in their teaching and learning. At times, after implementation of interventions in a classroom, there might be a positive and large change, and on other occasions, there might be a moderate change or sometimes no change at all. In the latter case, one can go back to the stage of exploration and re-explore the context in order to come up with more useful plans to deal with the issues identified.

In the reports submitted to the authors, the EAR participants reported changes they observed after their interventions in their classrooms. One of the participants, after the intervention, could bring down the level of stress that learners were having due to homework. Another participant, Sangita, asserted:

> I found an unbelievable change in my students' writing skills after implementing the action for change. My students were very reluctant to write anything earlier, however, they enjoy writing now.

The interventions the teacher implemented in their classrooms were informed by the results of their exploration. For instance, the teacher who was exploring the issue 'lack of learners' participation in classroom interaction' stated:

> To the question what the teacher should do to make the class interactive, a few of the students suggested that the teacher should not be angry, criticise, punish, and intimidate them. A student wrote, 'I fear the teacher.' 'I become nervous.' 'I know nothing, I feel shy among my friends.' ... I started my action to intervene in the situation. I started with confidence-building actions. First thing I did was I stopped verbal and corporal punishment. Similarly, I reconsidered my correction techniques and employed delayed and no correction techniques ... to encourage them to try speaking.

He also mentioned that he shared feelings, personal hobbies, likes and dislikes, and talked about some favourite topics. He did all these activities to build strong rapport and have a positive relationship with his learners. This was to make them feel comfortable to share their feelings and opinions. The participants could design appropriate intervention based on evidence which they could gather at the exploratory stage.

Plans designed at the intervention stage may not work as expected. Teachers might need to modify their plans to bring about the anticipated changes. One of the participants mentioned how he had to change his plan in the middle of his research, after the intervention began, as he found that the problem he was attempting to change was too broad and, ultimately, he could not manage to control the situation. He was attempting to address the issue of hesitation of the learners in speaking in English at the school level as he claimed that the issue was there in the entire school. However, as a teacher of a particular subject, he came to realize that he could not have complete control to change this at the school level; therefore, later he limited it to his own classroom, which was manageable for him. Likewise, one of the teachers who was exploring learners' interest issues in creative writing reports how she switched to a different intervention, having realised that the first intervention was not productive:

> I assigned them to come up with at least two and a maximum of five vocabularies, along with their meaning and sentences every day. ... But I didn't find it more effective. ... Therefore, I changed this strategy and instead, decided to discuss vocabulary related to the topic before they started writing. (Priti)

The teachers' reports and their interview data show that the results from the intervention can be classified into two categories: first, the intervention positively addressed their classroom problems; and second, it helped them to be reflective about their own practices. Within this reflective approach, teachers did not implement their actions mechanically, but they closely observed whether their action plan was materializing in an anticipated manner, and when they saw otherwise, they revised their intervention strategies.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of our study, it can be concluded that EAR helps teachers to understand their classroom issues and devise context-sensitive strategies to improve their classroom teaching and learning. With the support of learners and their colleagues, teachers can explore different kinds of issues that persist in their classrooms. While it can be a valuable means to bring about positive changes in classrooms in all contexts, from this study based in a developing-country context, we particularly conclude that EAR is a useful approach to improving classroom situations in a low-resource context such as Nepal as it introduces teachers to research gradually, in a teacher-friendly way, without being too demanding. It helps teachers understand their learners, their classrooms, and their own practices well so that they can come up with informed decisions to introduce changes in classrooms.

This study was limited to a small number of participants, with six interviewees and nine teacher reports. We only focused on participants' perceived benefits, and their exploration and intervention experiences. Moreover, this was a study of EAR teachers conducted with the support of mentors. Therefore, future research in EAR may be needed to explore issues such as to what extent teachers continue to carry out EAR in their contexts independently and the challenges they face while carrying out EAR in their local contexts. Such research can help teachers, teacher educators, and education planners to understand both the potentials and challenges of EAR which will help stakeholders plan for introducing EAR in their own contexts.

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