

Review of *English Connects Action Research: Learnings from the African Classroom*, edited by Paula Rebolledo, Teresa Okoth and Irene Simiyu (2023). British Council, 149 pp. ISBN: 978-1-915280-25-1.

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*English Connects Action Research: Learnings from the African Classroom* is a compelling anthology featuring 22 classroom research projects by dedicated teachers from various sub-Saharan African countries. These projects were conducted as part of the English Connects Action Research program, which was sponsored by the British Council. The primary aim of this program was to empower teachers and teacher educators, fostering a culture of classroom-based research and innovation. Co-edited by Paula Rebolledo, Teresa Okoth, and Irene Simiyu, the book provides readers with a window into the inspiring journeys of teacher-researchers from six sub-Saharan African countries, offering profound insights into the challenges and innovations in English language teaching and learning within this context.

This book stands as a significant addition to the field of classroom research due to the wide range of its themes, their thoughtful approach, and substantive contributions. The layout of the volume is reader-friendly, with a clear structure that includes detailed tables of content, making it easy to navigate. The inclusion of photographs, though limited due to permission constraints, adds a visual dimension to the text. Furthermore, the book's online accessibility ensures its availability to a wider audience.

The book begins with an informative introduction that sets the stage for the reader, explaining the origins and objectives of the English Connects Action Research program. It highlights the training and mentorship provided to participating teachers, promoting the idea of classroom research and professional development. The geographical diversity of the contributors, spanning Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Mali, Ivory Coast, and Djibouti, underscores the program's reach and impact (p. 5).

However, it is worth noting a minor criticism: I observed an absence of page numbers within the book itself, despite the reference being specifically to the 5th page in the E-book (where the PDF format displays the page numbers). To address this issue, it may be beneficial for the editors to consider incorporating page numbers in the print edition, thereby enhancing the reading experience for those who prefer physical copies.

The volume is organized into five distinct chapters, each dedicated to specific aspects of English language education in African classrooms, employing Exploratory Action Research (EAR) methodologies. The book "*A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research*", published by Smith and Rebolledo in 2018, has proved to be a crucial reference point and resource for establishing and accomplishing EAR projects and provided guidance for the present volume. Its chapters cover essential topics, including speaking skills, reading and writing, pedagogical resources, classroom attitudes and behaviour, as well as teaching approaches.

Chapter 1, titled "*Researching Speaking Skills*", is a comprehensive exploration of the challenges that students face in speaking English. It addresses issues such as poor performance in speaking activities and provides strategies to improve speaking skills in the classroom by applying EAR

methodologies.

In Chapter 2, titled “*Zooming into Reading and Writing*”, teacher-researchers concentrate on issues related to reading comprehension challenges, errors in essay writing, and difficulties encountered in reading and writing. Through the sharing of their EAR findings and reflections, these educators offer precious perspectives into ways to elevate students’ reading and writing abilities while identifying and rectifying issues associated with these important language skills.

Chapter 3 (*Focusing on Pedagogical Resources*) takes us into the realm of innovative teaching materials and tools through the experiences of three teacher-researchers actively engaged in EAR. These narratives within this chapter revolve around investigating the potential benefits of integrating smartphones to enhance writing tasks, motivating students to read recommended literary texts, and stressing the importance of culturally appropriate reading materials to foster the development of reading skills. The stories in this chapter emphasize the importance of adapting teaching resources to align with the unique needs of students and the specific learning context. This approach not only enriches the overall learning experience but also plays a pivotal role in promoting effective language acquisition.

Chapter 4, titled “*Studying Attitudes and Behaviour in the Classroom*”, explores critical topics related to teaching. Teachers in this chapter confront a variety of challenges, including large class management, discipline issues, and methods to increase students’ motivation for learning English. Within this chapter, three research reports present observations regarding classroom dynamics and propose actionable strategies for fostering an optimal learning environment. It serves as a priceless resource for educators striving to hone their teaching skills and effectively navigate classroom challenges.

Chapter 5 (*Exploring teaching approaches*), the final chapter covers a diverse range of teaching topics, from addressing spelling difficulties to teaching grammar effectively, improving computer programming skills, and implementing the flipped classroom strategy. These five stories provide valuable understanding into creative teaching approaches and their impact on student learning outcomes.

### **Distinctive aspects**

The book boasts several distinctive features that enhance its overall appeal and educational value.

Firstly, the book’s format presents each research project as a separate narrative, transforming complex academic content into engaging and relatable stories. To complement this storytelling approach, the book incorporates helpful tables and diagrams that elucidate key points, facilitating a deeper understanding of the research processes and outcomes.

Secondly, the book’s poster-style layout and design stand out as a remarkable feature. This design choice empowers readers to navigate the book with ease, granting them the flexibility to explore chapters of personal interest without being tied to a linear narrative.

Thirdly, the book effectively employs posters to visually represent the research process and highlight the main findings of EAR. For example, the effective use of the poster in Story 3 (p. 27) illustrates the process of EAR aimed at enhancing speaking skills. The poster clearly depicts how Tarig Ahmed Adam Elamin embarked on an exploration of his students’ speaking abilities and their use of grammar due to his observation that they were hesitant to engage in classroom activities. To comprehensively grasp the situation and devise effective interventions, he employed various data collection methods, including questionnaires, lesson observations, and reflective journal-keeping. Subsequently, he introduced practical tasks, collaborative sessions, listening exercises, and dialogue activities to address these challenges.

This poster element contributes depth and accessibility to the research narratives, making intricate concepts more digestible for a wide range of readers. It aligns with the contemporary educational trend of incorporating multimedia and visual aids in research dissemination, enhancing the book’s practicality as an invaluable resource for educators embarking on their own EAR projects.

Lastly, the inclusion of concise biographical details about each author-researcher adds a

personalized touch to the book. This not only humanizes the research process but also fosters a stronger connection between the readers and the dedicated educators behind the studies, resulting in an inspiring and relatable experience. Moreover, these authors' visual photos provide context and offer readers a visual representation of the geographical diversity of the participating educators.

### Contribution of the book

This book extends significant contributions to English language education and classroom research in the following four areas:

- **Empowering teachers:** This book aligns with the broader trends in mentoring teacher-research, emphasizing educators' active role in researching and addressing language education challenges, highlighting teachers as researchers and problem-solvers. For example, Isaac Akinseye underscores the importance of exploring problems before making assumptions about their causes, stating, "I learned that the best way to find lasting solutions to learners' problems is to engage in exploration to understand the problem" (p. 11). It exemplifies the power of collaborative inquiry and educators' potential to drive positive change within their classrooms.
- **Regional insights:** This book features stories from multiple African countries, offering nuanced perspectives on the challenges and opportunities encountered by English language teachers in different contexts. This regional focus sets the book apart from others in the field by emphasizing classroom-based research conducted by teachers. While many educational research books are available, few provide such a varied collection of firsthand experiences from sub-Saharan Africa. This unique regional perspective not only amplifies the diversity of voices in the field but also offers practical solutions tailored to the specific challenges faced by African educators.
- **Practical solutions:** The book not only identifies issues but also provides actionable, classroom-tested recommendations through EAR, benefiting educators facing similar challenges. This book, with its wealth of practical insights, offers a fresh perspective to the broader field of teacher mentoring and educational research.
- **Professional Development Model:** The English Connects Action Research program serves as a model for ongoing teacher professional development, emphasizing training, mentorship, classroom research, and collaborative learning to improve teaching practices.

In conclusion, this book is a remarkable resource that offers a fresh and engaging approach to sharing valuable classroom research in the field of English language education. Its poster-style layout, rich content, and practical recommendations make it an excellent reference for practitioners, educators, teacher trainers, and policymakers. The book not only showcases the dedication and resourcefulness of African teachers but also provides universally applicable insights and strategies. It serves as a testament to the power of classroom research in improving English language instruction and stands as an inspiring example for educators worldwide.

### References

Smith, R., & Rebolledo, P. (2018). *A handbook for Exploratory Action Research*. British Council.

### About the author

**Chang Liu** (China, UK) is a PhD researcher at Newcastle University, specializing in second language writing and critical thinking. Before her PhD, she taught EFL at a Chinese university for four years and collaborated with Edinburgh Napier University. At Newcastle University, she has been a graduate teaching assistant, research assistant, postgraduate ambassador, and senior exam invigilator. She enjoys reflecting on teaching and pondering cognition, ideally over a scone and flat white coffee.