

Review of Teachers researching their classroom issues: Reports from Africa, edited by Kuchah Kuchah, Amira Salama, Ana Inés Salvi (2022). IATEFL in association with Africa ELTA, 52 pp. ISBN: 978-1-912588-37-4 (digital). ISBN: 978-1-912588-41-1 (print).

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Why are my students, after several years of studying English, still unable to communicate? How can a *Sewing and Dressmaking* lesson be adapted to enhance students' speaking skills? And should we stop students using L1 in our L2 classes? Written by teachers and for teachers, *Teachers researching their classroom issues: Reports from Africa* pinpoints teachers' concerns about whether their teaching facilitates successful learning. The publication describes the process of teacher research through the eyes of seven African ELT teachers, who took stock of their pedagogical decisions and perceptions in order to find answers, among others, to the questions mentioned above.

The concise book is truly educational because it addresses issues in a variety of teaching contexts and touches on a range of topics, such as lack of motivation, large classes, low-resource environments, and the role of local languages in English lessons. The seven research stories written by teachers from Cameroon, Cote D'Ivoire, Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa provide an account of how teachers can play an important role in decision-making regarding their classrooms and bring effective changes into their teaching practice for the improvement of their student's learning. The book is also a powerful testimony to the teamwork carried out by Africa ELTA and IATEFL's Research Special Interest Group. The vision of Africa ELTA to develop and advance local expertise in ELT inspired 31 representatives from 12 African countries to join a call for a continent-wide teacher-research project and, ultimately, seven teachers succeeded in submitting a written report on what they had accomplished. Throughout their research journey, these teachers were supported by international mentors, whose facilitation became possible thanks to the joint commitment of Africa ELTA, which promoted and monitored the project, and IATEFL's ReSIG group, which provided speakers for a series of interactive webinars on Exploratory Action Research (EAR).

The volume also showcases an emerging trend referred to as "decentring ELT" (Banegas et al., 2022) namely, a conscious effort aimed at "recognizing contextually situated, 'insider' expertise and creativity in actual practice, and [...] supporting teachers and groups of teachers in understanding and extending practices that are effective for them" (p. 70). The publication of this volume is, therefore, both a celebration of local achievements reflecting African teacher-researchers' identity and an acknowledgment of the relevance of their expertise.

Undoubtedly, EFL teachers from low- and middle-income countries are increasingly making their voices heard, and language teachers around the world can easily identify with the issues

narrated. The seven stories describe the reality of large classes with limited resources aggravated by the intermittent supply of services (such as electricity or reliable Internet connection), often resulting in students' lack of motivation, falling back on L1 language use, and insufficient communication skills. So, let us look at the teacher-research reports and reflect on what they tell us, the two authors (from Ecuador and Uzbekistan) of this review, and explore how far we can identify with the issues raised and the solutions offered in our own context. Our review does not strictly follow the way the volume is laid out. Instead, we bring together chapters with overarching themes, such as teacher and student agency, or challenges that classroom practitioners often face in the Global South. The authors chose to write on the chapters that were related to their context and interest the most. The first three research accounts describe the stories of how teachers re-evaluated their own roles and that of their students as equal agents in the educational process. The findings demonstrate that teacher-student and teacher-teacher collaboration can be key to the construction of an engaging and motivating learning environment.

The publication starts with the story of Annette Obahiagbon from Nigeria, who depicts the situation where a teacher's and her students' perceptions of what is important in language learning differ considerably. This discrepancy in expectations turns out to be a disappointing experience for the teacher, who says, "This was really discouraging to me because I was investing all my time and energy to help them learn what was required of them to be successful in their exams" (p. 1). This gap in expectations led to low exam results, but more importantly, students displayed a general lack of engagement in classroom activities and in their homework. Annette's research on the reasons for the lack of enthusiasm among her students started with 200 anonymous questionnaires, out of which 197 were returned with teaching suggestions. As Annette tells us, this was her first attempt, "to seek to understand her students" (p. 3). The research helped her realize that covering the syllabus does not guarantee successful learning. Moreover, she came to the conclusion that students' language needs and personal interests should be given space in lesson planning in order to nurture students' engagement and focus.

The story of Ernest Kalotoueu Gbeada from Côte D'Ivoire, in Chapter Three, demonstrates how a proactive position of a teacher can make a difference in a situation seemingly out of the teacher's or their students' control. The research describes an attempt to come to some agreement regarding the materials mandated by the supervising bodies and student motivation, plus the learning needs to meet the curriculum requirements for reading skills. The situation Ernest faced can resonate with teachers from other teaching contexts, in cases when "textbooks do not match the topic [teachers] have to cover in each teaching unit" (p. 11). The research journey demonstrates how this challenging situation was resolved through the joint efforts of students, teachers and external pedagogical advisers. An initiative of one teacher for better adaptability of the textbooks has, eventually, promoted a higher level of ownership of learning results among students and teachers and led to the creation of a teachers' community of practice and even a students' reading club.

In Chapter Six, Rethabile Mawela, a university teacher from South Africa, shares her findings about the challenges she experienced when working with ELT in-service teachers taking an academic writing course. The author describes the actions she took to help her teacher-trainees to succeed with written assignments required by the course "Introduction to research". Her research started with setting up a focus group discussion to identify areas and the amount of support needed. The focus group discussion proved to be very effective, and the format was utilized for a further guided discussion, where the researcher acted as a moderator, helping teacher trainees refine their understanding of what constitutes academic writing. Mawela reports that while researching the issue she changed her attitude towards her trainees' lack of academic writing skills; instead, she "took responsibility for their development and treated them as partners in this journey" (p. 28). Building on the results of the discussion, she promoted the environment of partnership further among the trainees, and arranged the teachers in writing groups, where they could develop all stages of academic writing, from brainstorming, outlining, and drafting, to reviewing, and editing, in a risk-free environment. In this way, trainees could support and learn from each other.

The other four research projects have been carried out by teachers who usually conduct their lessons characterized by limited access to educational resources and classes with a large number of students. Besides having to solve resource-related issues, these teachers have been challenged by students' lack of motivation to learn the language and to communicate in English even during lessons. Overcrowded classes have been considered one of the most serious challenges that schools and teachers face, especially in remote areas around the world. In Chapter Two, Fatoumata Khoto, an EFL instructor from Senegal, narrates how she is facing this situation in a class with low resources. A survey administered in the research project conducted by Fatoumata revealed that a large number of students (more than 60 in her case) affected motivation and performance, and due to the limited space, as shown in the photo on page 6, students seem to struggle to concentrate and take part in the various activities. In order to explore possible solutions and get ideas on how to manage the situation, the researcher administered questionnaires and interviewed other EFL teachers and students. From the interviews with her colleagues, the idea of using outdoor areas emerged as a possible solution for large classes. They seem to "reduce students' distraction, and decrease behavioral problems", and help students be more active and comfortable (p. 7). Equally important is group work, which promotes collaboration among students and can facilitate the teacher's work. Finally, Fatoumata suggests teacher training in order to embrace new techniques to alleviate this problem.

In Chapter Four, another frequent issue, namely, poor communication skills among EFL students is explored. Ita Frinwie's research aimed to analyze the factors that impede students' effective communication after 6 years of studying English. Through her piece of exploratory research, she demonstrates how paying attention to students' interests and needs can help enhance and promote speaking skills in an EFL class. Ita observed that students in her class were unmotivated to speak, and this was confirmed through peer teacher observations in her class, when it was found that "students were distracted or doing other activities [and] secretly doing an assignment under the table for the next teacher" (p. 15). Thus, in order to examine students' perceptions, she administered questionnaires and conducted interviews that revealed that her students were afraid of making mistakes and did not feel engaged and comfortable with the speaking activities (mostly debates) included in the lessons. She came to the conclusion that students needed more assistance and help with vocabulary so that they could feel comfortable when speaking. Therefore, in order to plan her speaking lessons more effectively, she would first create an effective dialogue and brainstorm with the students the possible topics and even the activities that they would prefer to be included in the class. For instance, in the lesson titled "Sewing a dress", she first explored students' necessities and planned the activities they needed in order to produce the language. Thus, some techniques such as drilling, and working in pairs were chosen by the students. She observed that during the activities they unconsciously learned questioning techniques and collaborated with their peers. Consequently, they were able to "take more responsibility for their learning and express their opinions freely" (p. 17). This research shows that teachers can learn from their students' feedback and improve the techniques applied in large and otherwise under-resourced classes.

The stories in Chapters Five and Seven contribute to the debate of whether to use L1 in class or not. The use of L1 in EFL classrooms has been a topic of discussion for a long time. Some authors claim that L1 does not have an essential role in language teaching and that using L1 could deprive learners of L2 valuable input (Almoayidi, 2018) while other studies claim that it is hard to avoid using L1 and describe the pedagogical and affective benefits (Zulfikar, 2019). Moussa Ngom from Senegal and Ruth OnyecheOgboji from Nigeria encountered this puzzle when teaching English to their multilingual students. They observed that students would frequently communicate in mother tongues, such as French, Pidgin, Wolof, Sérère', and 'Puular rather than English. They were concerned this would hinder learning and wondered in which situations the use of L1 should be allowed in an EFL class. In both studies, researchers administered questionnaires to teachers and students in order to explore their students' preferences and perceptions of using other languages in the class compared to the teachers' opinions. The research results helped the teacher-researchers realize that allowing students to use their mother tongues in class creates a more comfortable environment for them to

work in. Students feel less intimidated and their performance is not affected. The researchers' conclusions support the view of L1 as an integral part of teaching and acquiring a second language. In terms of multilingual classrooms, translanguaging, which is defined as the ability to access and switch between L1 and L2, is considered a resource that "seeks to understand the fluidity of language use and examine how teachers and students move freely across language boundaries" (Sahan & Rose, 2021, p. 352).

In sum, the stories do not only narrate Exploratory Action Research, but they also describe a truly impressive level of collaboration among groups of teachers and students, a situation in which educators feel empowered by taking action in their classes. This is a crucial aspect of the "decentering ELT" initiative. Banegas et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of creating spaces for empowerment, which implies "encouraging teachers to collaborate with each other to articulate key features of their work, reasons for these, and ways they feel their practice can be improved" (p. 70).

In general, each of the chapters of this book marks an important contribution to the EFL teachers' community, members of which will be able to connect to present or past teaching experiences and think deeper about the importance of small changes introduced in a classroom. A significant takeaway from the volume is the story of Ernest Kalotoueu Gbeada from Côte D'Ivoire, which underpins the shift in teachers' perception of their roles in a pedagogical decision-making process. It was truly inspiring to learn about the proactive position of the teacher, whose research project contributed to the development of the entire school community, enabled him to pursue his professional growth, and serves a greater audience by having shared his experience through this volume.

Altogether, we highly recommend this book to teachers, pre-service teachers, and researchers who want to explore their students' learning needs and wish to start taking action in their classrooms. For us, beginning teacher-researchers, the main merit of the book is that it narrates stories that have evolved in real contexts. The accounts can definitely motivate other teachers to contemplate starting their own research. Even though initially the process might seem daunting, the experience of the seven teachers from Africa show that we do not need a high level of expertise to start exploring our classrooms and, in due course, act on what we have found out.

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