

Empowering Teachers through a Training on Exploratory Action Research

Rachanee Dersingh¹

Khoi Tan Minh Vuong²

Abstract

Professional development is a requirement for Thai schoolteachers for their annual evaluation. Engaging in teacher-research can be one of the options of the professional development programs for schoolteachers. Exploratory Action Research (EAR), one kind of teacher-research, has been introduced to schoolteachers in primary and secondary classes in Thailand. With the collaboration between the British Council Thailand and King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, pilot training on EAR was launched in 2022. The objective of the training is to provide teachers with knowledge and skills for conducting EAR. During this particular project, the trainees received guidance from two trainers through webinars and two mentors through online mentoring to complete their EAR. This research was conducted to investigate how this training changed teachers who were involved with it. With the recommendation from two mentors and voluntary participation, seven schoolteachers were interviewed. The results revealed both benefits and challenges. Schoolteachers experienced significant shifts in their beliefs towards teacher-research and teaching. The classroom research was perceived practical while the problems in the classroom were systematically tackled. Moreover, the importance of building rapport with the students was also reported by schoolteachers. Hence, the EAR training has shaped the schoolteachers' roles towards being teacher-researchers.

Keywords: Exploratory Action Research, professional development, classroom research, teaching practice

¹ Lecturer, School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand

Corresponding Author e-mail: rachanee.der@kmutt.ac.th

² Master's student of Applied English Studies, School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand

Author e-mail: khoivuong2906@gmail.com

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การส่งเสริมศักยภาพครูผ่านการฝึกอบรมเกี่ยวกับการวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการเชิงสำรวจ

รัชณี เดอร์ชิงห์³

คอย ตัน มินห์ วง⁴

บทคัดย่อ

การพัฒนาวิชาชีพเป็นข้อกำหนดสำหรับครูในโรงเรียนของประเทศไทยเพื่อการประเมินผลประจำปี การมีส่วนร่วมในการวิจัยครูอาจเป็นตัวเลือกหนึ่งเพื่อพัฒนาวิชาชีพสำหรับครูในโรงเรียน ทั้งนี้การวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการเชิงสำรวจ (Exploratory Action Research: EAR) เป็นการวิจัยประเภทหนึ่งที่ได้รับการนำเสนอให้แก่ครูในชั้นเรียนระดับประถมศึกษาและมัธยมศึกษาในประเทศไทย จากความร่วมมือระหว่างบริติช เคานซิล ประเทศไทย และ มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีพระจอมเกล้าธนบุรี การฝึกอบรมนำร่องเกี่ยวกับ EAR เริ่มต้นขึ้นในปี ค.ศ.2022 โดยมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อให้ครูมีความรู้และทักษะในการดำเนินการ EAR ในระหว่างการอบรมผู้เข้ารับการฝึกอบรมได้รับคำแนะนำจากผู้ฝึกสอนสองคนผ่านระบบ webinars และได้รับคำแนะนำจากที่ปรึกษาสองคนผ่านการให้คำปรึกษาออนไลน์เพื่อให้การดำเนินการ EAR สมบูรณ์ การวิจัยนี้ดำเนินการเพื่อตรวจสอบว่าการฝึกอบรมดังกล่าวได้เปลี่ยนแปลงครูอย่างไรบ้าง ด้วยคำแนะนำจากที่ปรึกษาสองคนและการมีส่วนร่วมโดยสมัครใจ ครูเจ็ดคนได้รับการสัมภาษณ์ ผลการวิจัยเผยให้เห็นทั้งประโยชน์และความท้าทาย ครูมีการเปลี่ยนแปลงความเชื่อที่มีต่อการวิจัยและการสอนอย่างมีนัยสำคัญ การวิจัยในชั้นเรียนเป็นสิ่งที่มีความหมายในทางปฏิบัติเพราะสามารถแก้ไขปัญหาในชั้นเรียนได้อย่างเป็นระบบ นอกจากนี้ครูในโรงเรียนยังได้รายงานการสร้างความสัมพันธ์กับนักเรียนซึ่งเป็นสิ่งสำคัญอีกด้วย ดังนั้นการฝึกอบรม EAR จึงได้หล่อหลอมบทบาทของครูในโรงเรียนไปสู่การเป็นครู-นักวิจัยได้

คำสำคัญ: การวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการเชิงสำรวจ, การพัฒนาวิชาชีพ, การวิจัยในชั้นเรียน, การฝึกปฏิบัติการสอน

³ อาจารย์ คณะศิลปศาสตร์, มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีพระจอมเกล้าธนบุรี, กรุงเทพฯ, ประเทศไทย

⁴ นักศึกษาปริญญาโทในสาขาการศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษเชิงประยุกต์ มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีพระจอมเกล้าธนบุรี, กรุงเทพฯ, ประเทศไทย

INTRODUCTION

Teacher's professional development is essential for improving the quality of education. It equips teachers with the latest knowledge and skills, enabling them to adapt to new teaching methods and educational trends. By participating in structured training, workshops, and collaborative learning experiences, educators enhance their teaching practices, which directly benefits student learning outcomes. Ultimately, effective professional development fosters a supportive environment where both teachers and students can thrive (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Professional development allows educators to refine their instructional techniques and strategies, covering key areas such as classroom management, curriculum design, and assessment methods. Research by Ingersoll et al., (2018) shows that sustained professional development is linked to increased teacher effectiveness and a stronger sense of self-efficacy. This means that when teachers invest in their professional development, they should not only improve their teaching skills but also enhance their confidence and overall impact in the classroom.

Current professional development for teachers is often characterized by short-term, standardized workshops that lack relevance to individual classroom contexts (Kennedy, 2016). These "one-size-fits-all" programs frequently provide generic solutions, which teachers may struggle to adapt to the specific challenges they face in their own classrooms. In many cases, the content delivered in these professional development sessions is disconnected from the daily realities of teaching, making it difficult for teachers to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills. This disconnection leads to a failure in bridging the gap between theory and practice, a concern well-documented in the literature on teacher development (Borko, 2004). Moreover, these professional development approaches often lack sustained follow-up, which is crucial for enabling teachers to implement new strategies effectively. Research has shown that teachers benefit from ongoing support that allows for reflection and refinement of practice over time (Desimone & Pak, 2017). However, many current professional development programs do not provide opportunities for teachers to engage in continuous professional growth. Instead, they are exposed to isolated training sessions, with little to no follow-up. This issue is exacerbated by a lack of collaborative learning opportunities where teachers can share experiences and solutions with their peers (Garet et al., 2001).

Without sustained and individualized support, teachers may struggle to apply what they have learned from professional development programs to their classroom practices,

which can result in limited long-term impact (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). As a result, there is increasing agreement in the field of education that more personalized, reflective, and context-responsive approaches are required to effectively address teachers' needs and facilitate meaningful, lasting change (Avalos, 2011). One such approach is Exploratory Action Research (EAR), which has been developed to tackle this issue. EAR enables teachers to actively investigate their current classroom situations and create tailored action plans to improve their practice (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). By engaging teachers in a cycle of reflection and action, EAR fosters deeper professional learning that is more likely to be sustained over time (Burns, 2017).

In 2022, a collaborative project between King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi and the British Council Thailand was launched to train teachers in conducting EAR. This project stands out as one of the first professional development programs to offer not only formal knowledge training but also continuous, personalized support from mentors. Unlike conventional programs that often leave teachers to implement what they have learned on their own, this model integrates ongoing mentorship, guiding teachers as they apply EAR directly in their own classrooms. The combination of formal training and hands-on support addresses a significant gap in traditional professional development approaches, where the lack of follow-up can limit the translation of knowledge from the training into their daily teaching practice. This study, therefore, aims to investigate how teachers change when they undergo this new model of training.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective professional development

Professional development offers teachers opportunities for self-reflection and growth. Through engaging in reflective practices, educators critically analyze their teaching methods, identify areas for improvement, and set specific goals for enhancing their instructional strategies (Darling-Hammond, 2017). This reflection fosters a culture of continuous learning, where teachers become active participants in shaping their professional development journey. Reflective practice is another key benefit of effective professional development. It encourages teachers to critically examine their teaching methods, assess student learning outcomes, and continuously improve their approaches (Desimone, 2009). Teachers become more aware of

the individual needs of their students, more open to feedback, and more willing to make adjustments for better outcomes.

One of the most significant outcomes of effective professional development is the evolution of teachers' knowledge and skills. As teachers gain a deeper understanding of instructional strategies, they become more confident in managing classrooms, delivering engaging lessons, and addressing the diverse needs of their students (Borko, 2004). These changes are often observable in the classroom, as teachers implement newly learned strategies, such as student-centered approaches, differentiation, and formative assessments (Yoon et al., 2007). Research highlights that professional development emphasizing practical classroom application and reflection can lead to lasting changes in instructional methods (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Long-term, collaborative professional development that includes reflection and feedback is essential for deep learning and practical application (Desimone, 2009). To be most effective, professional development must be tailored to the specific needs of teachers. It should account for their diverse backgrounds, subject areas, and teaching levels, ensuring relevance and engagement. Expert facilitators or mentors play a crucial role in guiding teachers through this process, enhancing the overall quality of professional development (Fishman et al., 2013). Customization and flexibility are key to successful professional development. One-size-fits-all approaches are less effective, as they do not account for the diverse needs of teachers. By integrating data collection and reflective practices, professional development encourages teachers to assess their own performance and make data-driven decisions to improve their strategies (Fishman et al., 2013). Additionally, professional development must align with curriculum standards and educational goals to ensure coherence and relevance (Desimone, 2009). Ultimately, the goal is to help teachers transfer the knowledge and skills gained from professional development into their classroom practices.

Exploratory Action Research and teacher's change

EAR is one the many variations of action research. According to Smith and Rebolledo (2018), EAR has two main stages: exploration and action (Figure 1).

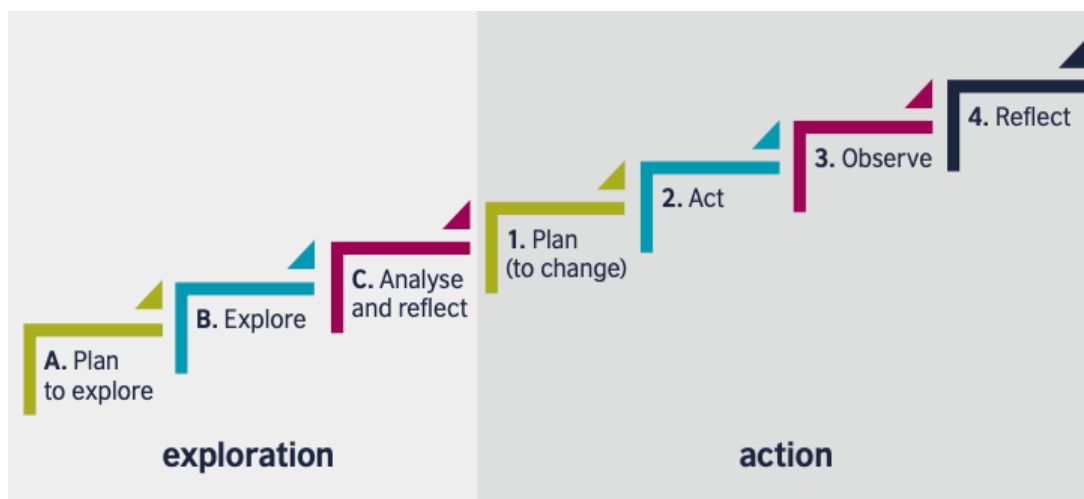


Figure 1. Stages of an Exploratory Action Research (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, p. 25)

In the first stage of exploration, the teacher-researcher will need a focus to explore their classroom. These can be positive stories, obstacles, or something still unknown to the teacher. Exploratory Research Questions will be developed to have a systematic approach in exploring the classroom through the teacher's own perceptions, and through the perceptions or behavior of the students. Following this is the construction of data collection tools. The tools can provide teacher-researchers with both quantitative and qualitative data. Teachers then analyze and interpret the collected data to develop an action plan with the consideration of the newly found ideas from the classroom exploration. The first stage of exploration can be understood as problem identification so that the action plan can address the classroom issues deeply. For the action stage, based on the plan, teacher-researchers will implement interventions or changes in the educational setting to address the identified problem. After that, teachers will collect data to assess the impact of the interventions. Data can be both qualitative and quantitative, offering a holistic view of the situation after the intervention. Finally, teachers will reflect on the data and outcomes, considering what worked or what did not and why. Based on reflection, teacher-researchers adjust their strategies and plan further actions or improvements.

Teachers can experience changes in their knowledge and skills through EAR. The research process prompts teachers to go deeply into educational theories, teaching methods, and student learning needs (Mills, 2011). This results in a more profound understanding of effective pedagogy. Data collection and analysis equips teachers with data literacy skills, allowing them to make informed decisions based on evidence (Herr & Anderson, 2015). As

teachers reflect on their classroom experiences and research findings, they often adopt innovative teaching practices and strategies that are more student-centered and effective.

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs undergo transformative shifts. Teachers often experience an increase in self-efficacy as they see the positive impact of their actions on student learning outcomes (Sagor, 2011). Teachers become more open to change and innovation, recognizing that improvement is an ongoing process (Mills, 2011). Engaging in action research fosters an inquiry mindset, encouraging teachers to question, explore, and seek solutions to challenges. EAR can also serve as a form of ongoing professional development. Teachers experience continuous professional growth as they engage in cycles of inquiry, reflection, and adaptation (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Some educators become teacher-leaders, inspiring their colleagues to embrace action research as a means of professional development and improvement (Sagor, 2011). Teachers' involvement in action research contributes to the broader field of educational research, allowing them to share their findings and insights with the educational community.

A training for development to empower teachers

In 2022, a program on training teachers to conduct EAR was launched through the collaboration between the British Council Thailand and King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. The primary objective of the training was to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to conduct EAR in their own classrooms. Another goal of this training was to empower teachers by giving them the tools and support needed to take ownership of their professional growth. Unlike traditional professional development, which often concludes after a single training session, this program emphasized continuous development. Teachers were encouraged to actively practice what they learned during the training, applying it directly to their own classroom situations.

A distinctive feature of using EAR to train teachers is providing the teacher with an organic space for growth. In other words, the training outlines the steps, but teachers are encouraged to adapt these to their unique contexts, ensuring that the process is highly personalized and relevant to their specific challenges. Unlike traditional professional development, this 2022 project extended beyond formal training, offering continuous support from multiple sources. Throughout the program, teachers received guidance from two trainers through webinars, as well as personalized support from two mentors via online mentoring.

Such mentorship helps teachers to conduct their own classroom-based research, ensuring that the learning process is deeply connected to their practical teaching contexts. Although the program provided ongoing guidance through mentorship, the mentors' role is to guide not to dictate. The ultimate decision-making power remains with the teachers, empowering them to design and conduct their own research based on their observations and insights.

The emphasis of EAR as the core of training not only fosters deeper learning but also ensures that the changes in teachers' practices are more likely to be sustained over time. Moreover, the training also provides opportunities for teachers to share their findings, reinforcing the sense of ownership and professional empowerment. By allowing teachers to investigate their classroom realities, make independent decisions, and receive guidance without rigid constraints, the program nurtures true professional development and empowers teachers to continuously improve their practice in their own context.

With this new approach in training for development, this calls for the need to investigate the subjective experiences and perspectives of teachers themselves regarding their growth journey following professional development. While quantitative measures provide valuable insights into the outcomes of professional development programs, they may fail to capture the unique changes in teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and instructional decision-making processes that occur over time. Therefore, this paper aims to seek to find answers to this question:

How do teachers change when they are trained to conduct Exploratory Action Research?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach is well-suited to understand the changes brought by the (EAR) training. Through the qualitative lens, it allows more profound exploration in transformations, capturing not only the visible outcomes but also the underlying processes, motivations, and challenges encountered by the participating teachers.

Participants

The EAR project initially comprised a total of 21 schoolteachers and three mentors—two international mentors and one local mentor. The participating schoolteachers were stratified into three groups based on their English proficiency levels: two groups consisting of

nine teachers each with Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels ranging from B2 to C1, and one group of three teachers with a CEFR level of B1. The former groups received mentorship from international mentors, while the latter group was guided by the local mentor.

Among the participants, 18 teachers successfully completed the EAR in order to complete the training. The selection of participants for this study was guided by the input of the mentors involved in the training program. The mentors assessed potential participants based on several key criteria that indicated their suitability for the research. First and foremost, that the teachers' demonstrated commitment to their work was a crucial factor. This commitment was evaluated through their engagement in the training sessions, willingness to explore new teaching strategies, and their proactive involvement in classroom practices. Additionally, the mentors considered the level of enthusiasm exhibited by the teachers. Teachers who showed excitement about applying new knowledge and experimenting with different approaches were prioritized for participation in the study. Lastly, the mentors focused on the teachers' reflective practices. Teachers who regularly engaged in self-reflection and critically assessed their teaching methods were more likely to benefit from the conducting EAR. Overall, the selection process aimed to identify teachers who were genuinely invested in their development and capable of maximizing the impact of the training. After the selection process, this study involved seven secondary schoolteachers from various regions in Thailand who actively participated in the EAR project during the year 2022. Table 1 presents details related to the participants of this study.

Table 1. Demographic of research participants

No.	Participants	Years of teaching	Gender	Province
1	Participant 1 (P1)	8	Male	Chiang Mai
2	Participant 2 (P2)	14	Female	Chiang Rai
3	Participant 3 (P3)	24	Female	Nakhon Ratchasima
4	Participant 4 (P4)	30	Male	Chainart
5	Participant 5 (P5)	15	Male	Rayong
6	Participant 6 (P6)	10	Female	Nonthaburi
7	Participant 7 (P7)	29	Female	Trang

Data collection and analysis

For this study, a semi-structured stimulated recall interview was utilized to collect data. This method focused on understanding participants' perspectives regarding their experiences as trainees conducting EAR. Semi-structured stimulated recall interviews are particularly effective for exploring teachers' experiences because they encourage reflection on specific events and interactions during the training process (Dempsey, 2010). The questions were constructed based on discussions among the researchers, trainers, and mentors. Trainers and mentors provided detailed descriptions of the entire training program to help researchers gain a comprehensive understanding of the teachers' experiences. The researchers took notes on the various stages of the training and identified potential events that could lead to changes in teachers' practices. Subsequently, the researchers constructed interview questions and validated them with the trainers and mentors to ensure they accurately captured the relevant aspects of the training experience. This collaborative approach not only enhances the clarity of the questions but also enriches the data collected, allowing for deeper insights into the teachers' transformative experiences during the training.

The interviews were conducted in March 2023 via Zoom. The language used was Thai with Thai schoolteachers and English with a Filipino teacher. The length of the interview was 30 to 40 minutes long. Transcriptions were obtained from the interview and translated into English for further investigation. This was partly necessary so that one particular researcher of this study could understand the content of the interview as he is Vietnamese. In order to obtain systematic interpretation of how teachers have changed, thematic analysis was used to analyze interview data. In this case, transcriptions from the seven interviews were compiled, coded, mapped, interpreted, and concluded (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). When the teachers were interviewed, two main common themes emerged as growth in conducting classroom research and growth in teaching. After that, sentences which are related to the set themes were collected. A second round of categorization was conducted to better understand how EAR has helped teachers to grow. Each researcher conducted their own thematization and met for cross checking to ensure consistency of the coding.

FINDINGS

The aim of this research was to investigate the changes in schoolteachers after participating in the EAR program. Data from semi-structured interviews revealed the positive changes participants have noticed regarding their teaching and conducting classroom research. However, some challenges also emerged. The key themes that emerged from the analysis include growth in classroom research, growth in teaching, and the challenges encountered during the training.

Growth in classroom research

Perspective towards conducting classroom research

The results from the interview revealed that the perspectives of all participants have changed after having experienced EAR. Prior to the exposure to EAR, the term research usually terrified the teachers because they thought it would be similar to a five-chapter thesis that they had experienced during their graduate studies or conducting pre/post-test research. However, their attitude towards conducting classroom research has become more positive. EAR engages with the teachers to carefully identify issues, paving the path for exploration and actions. This process fosters a profound sense of accomplishment upon study completion, which makes the classroom research doable for the teachers.

Excerpt 1

“I admitted that I did not like research. In my head when I hear the word research, it is all about presenting to the management team or committee for their approval. To me everything in the classroom is about the research and EAR confirms my thoughts.” (P7)

Excerpt 2

“I wanted to overcome the fear of doing research as I had quite a bad experience doing a thesis for my master’s degree. It was overwhelming and I wanted to quit, as I felt that there was a high expectation from my advisor, but luckily, she supported me throughout. When I joined this project and learnt the process of doing EAR and conducted my own classroom research, my thought towards the classroom research has changed.” (P2)

Reinforcement of using qualitative tools

In addition, teachers expanded their familiarity with qualitative research tools, a domain with which they previously had limited exposure. Many reported that they tended to engage in quantitative research, particularly concerning pre- and post-test studies. However, EAR is different. For data collection during exploratory cycles or for evaluating interventions, qualitative instruments such as interviews, focus-group interviews, questionnaires, reflective journals, and classroom observations are typically employed (Rebolledo & Smith, 2016). This exposure enhances their comprehension of qualitative research paradigms and associated methodologies.

Excerpt 3

“I learned about writing reflective journals when I was studying for my master degree. It is not new to me, but I hardly write it as I am usually very busy with work. But when doing EAR, one of the tools to collect data for my exploratory stage was a reflective journal, and I realized how useful it was for me to know better about teaching and learning in the classroom.” (P3)

Excerpt 4

“We, teachers, are always asked to do classroom research. Mostly, I have done quantitative research, like pre and post-test and analyzed if there’s any improvement in students from the scores. But after I learned about EAR, it used qualitative data to analyze what was going on in the classroom. This way, teachers got to see the real problem and were able to find solutions for it. Not assuming what happened in the classroom.” (P4)

Opportunity to disseminate research

Upon the completion of the EAR study, the teachers are able to disseminate their findings, albeit in a format distinct from academic research articles. The writing style in EAR publications tends to be less formal, focusing primarily on documenting the actions and outcomes of the EAR process, without necessitating an extensive review of existing literature. This format facilitates a straightforward reporting of the study’s procedures and findings. Consequently, the structured and accessible nature of EAR publication encourages teachers

to share their work, as it aligns with their perceived capability to contribute to the scholarly discourse.

Excerpt 5

“What I liked about this training is that I can write about my work and share it with other teachers. The writing style and the format are not like academic research which makes it easier for me to write. So, this is my first time writing an article in English.” (P6)

Excerpt 6

“It is like writing a report...no literature review. When I knew about the format of writing, I felt so much relieved that I did not have to worry about reading lots of past papers to write the literature review. This encouraged me to write so other teachers could see what I did in my classroom.” (P5)

Growth in teaching

No more making assumption

All participants in this study mentioned that EAR is helpful to understand the real problems in the classroom. They stated that their classroom research was usually conducted from the assumption of the teachers that there was a particular problem in the classroom. Through the exploratory cycle, the participants had to plan to collect data to analyze real issues in the classroom before the action stage. This shift from assumption-based to evidence-based decision-making enhances the overall effectiveness of teaching strategies. The participants were able to explore challenges, identify root causes, and develop targeted solutions. This depth of problem-solving contributes to a more dynamic and adaptive teaching environment, allowing for continuous improvement and refinement of instructional methods.

Excerpt 7

“I have been a teacher for a long time and the Ministry of Education (MoE) tried to encourage the teachers to do classroom research. The word ‘research’ is quite scary so the MoE asked the schoolteachers to write a one-page report of research they did in the classroom. The teachers would think about the problem in the classroom and look for the solution by themselves

(or from the Internet and make some changes). As EAR has two cycles, and when I completed the first cycle, I really understood the problem in my classroom, and I understood my students and myself as a teacher. It is not about my assumption anymore.” (P3)

Excerpt 8

“The real problem doesn’t come from our own thinking, but the real problem must come from our actual search. EAR helps me avoid making assumptions about issues in the classroom.” (P1)

Moving towards student-centered approach

More than half of the participants revealed that the adoption of EAR often resulted in a transformation of lesson planning towards a more student-centered approach. Teachers were more aware of the needs and learning styles of their students, tailoring lesson plans to enhance engagement and comprehension. This student-centered focus serves not only to improve the quality of instruction but also to foster a more inclusive and participatory classroom environment. Moreover, the participants reported an improvement in their relationships with their students. They expressed the view that the process of collecting data during both the exploratory and action stages facilitated more meaningful conversations with their students. This engagement, in turn, led to a deeper understanding and knowledge of their students, going beyond their previous levels of familiarity. Furthermore, it fosters a more conducive rapport with the students.

Excerpt 9

“I think that exploratory action research is a way for us to step back and to look at the process of teaching. My students could not remember vocabulary from the previous class. I just thought it was their learning styles or their ability, but after exploring the issue in the classroom, I found out that it was from me. I didn’t give the students enough time and activities to practice. I planned on what I would do in the class and implement it for a few weeks. I could see my students’ improvement. Their vocabulary retention moved up from 10% to 30% up to 60%.” (P5)

Excerpt 10

“After I completed EAR research, my relationship with my students was better. Before I felt that they did not get involved much in the class. To find out about this problem, I interviewed my students and recorded my class. I got to talk to them, I understood them better, and I saw how I taught. I looked for ways to make students engaged in the classroom and implemented it. I could see that they participated more during the lesson.” (P2)

Challenges encountered during the training

Although the participants highlighted numerous benefits of joining the EAR project, they also encountered several challenges during their involvement.

Being unfamiliar to EAR

While EAR is not a novel concept in the global context, it is new to the participants. Only one participant reported having heard of it previously, although they had never implemented it. Some participants stated that they understood each step after attending the tutorial webinars; however, when it came to implementation, they were uncertain and required guidance from a mentor. They also expressed that if they were to undertake the process independently without mentorship, some expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to do so effectively.

Excerpt 11

“Some steps can be time-consuming. For example, identifying the issue in the classroom and formulating research questions for the exploratory stage takes time. I had to explain my classroom context to my mentor, and she would ask more questions to understand my context, which helped me get through the first step.” (P6)

Excerpt 12

I enjoyed working on EAR, but I need more training to feel confident in doing it on my own. At the moment, I think I could manage, but I’m not sure. Having a mentor or a group of experts in EAR would be very helpful. (P1)

Difficulty in time management

All participants reported difficulties in managing their time while participating in this project. As part of their involvement, they were required to meet regularly with mentors to seek advice on the EAR initiative and update their progress. Moreover, the participants considered the timeline of the project as being a little too short. They explained that their schedules were already demanding, as their responsibilities extended beyond teaching to include accompanying students for activities, organizing and attending meetings, and participating in other school-assigned projects or training sessions.

Excerpt 13

“So, the main problem of implementing EAR mainly revolves around time and the schedule of a teacher, because like we have to balance between doing the research and also like completing our assignments from the school as well.” (P5)

Excerpt 14

“With my hectic schedule and the timeline of the project, I was quite tensed. I am not sure if I should continue doing EAR. I find it hard to do everything at once. But I managed to have it finished at the end.” (P7)

Challenges in tool development

Many participants indicated a greater familiarity with quantitative tools, as their previous classroom research had often involved pre- and post-tests. For some, the use of qualitative tools in classroom research was a novel experience. While they expressed excitement in learning new methods of data collection, they encountered challenges in designing instruments such as questionnaires and interview questions.

Excerpt 15

“This was my first time using qualitative tools to collect data, and I am not sure how to formulate the questions. I am not sure whether my questions would cover what I wanted to find out. So, I made a list of my questions, and

then, together with my mentor, we looked at them together and selected the ones that were most suitable for my study.” (P6)

Excerpt 16

“I need to formulate my own questions for the questionnaire to suit my research, as I can’t copy from what is available online. I’m also not sure about how many questions are enough. I came up with too many, but my mentor helped me decide which ones to include.” (P7)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate several significant changes in teachers’ perspectives and practices after participating in the EAR program. While the program benefits teachers in classroom research and pedagogy, it also revealed challenges that teachers faced while integrating research into their teaching practice.

One of the most prominent outcomes of this study is the significant shift in teachers’ attitudes toward conducting classroom research. Prior to their involvement in EAR, most teachers viewed research as a highly formalized, academic process, which seem to have discouraged many schoolteachers from engaging in research. This perception is rooted in their previous experiences with conducting research for advanced degrees or performing standardized pre- and post-test evaluations. In contrast, EAR has introduced a more practical, teacher-friendly approach that breaks down research into manageable steps, focusing on classroom-specific issues. This shift mirrors Smith’s (2015) findings, which highlight EAR’s ability to facilitate “gradual development” (p.39) in teacher-research, fostering professional growth and reflection.

While this shift in perception is undoubtedly positive, it also raises questions about how prior professional development programs may have failed to address teachers’ needs. The success of EAR in overcoming this resistance suggests that there is a critical need for future professional development to adopt more practical, teacher-centered approaches to research. In addition to changing attitudes toward research, the EAR program exposed teachers to qualitative research methods, an area with which they were previously unfamiliar. Teachers who had primarily conducted quantitative studies using pre- and post-tests gained new insights into data collection techniques such as interviews, reflective journals, and classroom

observations. As noted by Rebolledo and Smith (2016), these tools offer deeper insights into classroom dynamics that quantitative methods often miss. With the help of the webinars during the training and the support from the mentors, the teachers were able to understand the use of qualitative tools. This helps participants expand from a narrow focus on quantifiable results to a more comprehensive understanding of classroom dynamics.

Despite their growing interest in qualitative tools, participants encountered challenges in designing effective instruments for data collection. This difficulty shows the importance of continuous support and training in qualitative research methods, especially for teachers who are new to this approach. Mentorship played a critical role in overcoming these challenges, as mentors helped participants refine their tools and ensure alignment with research questions. These findings highlight the importance of sustained mentorship and training to help teachers build confidence in their qualitative research abilities.

Apart from that, the dissemination of research findings empowers teachers to grow and be more confident in conducting EAR. Instead of focusing on the extensive literature reviews, EAR publications focus on the practical outcome. This accessible and straightforward format of EAR publications enable teachers to disseminate their work more easily, which fosters a culture of reflective practice and collective growth. Sharing these findings, whether through formal presentations at conferences, informal discussions among colleagues, or publications, enhances the collective knowledge within the teaching community. This aspect of EAR not only raises the visibility of teachers' research efforts but also fosters a culture of collaboration and shared learning, scaling up research-informed practices.

EAR's impact extends beyond research practices to teaching methods, promoting a shift toward more student-centered approaches. By focusing on evidence rather than assumptions, teachers are able to identify specific classroom issues and tailor their instruction accordingly. This aligns with Serin's (2018) assertion that involving students in research fosters mutual understanding and improves teacher-student relationships. This student-centered focus, driven by the exploratory cycles of EAR, enhances students' engagement and performance.

While EAR's focus on real classroom issues is a positive step and the benefits of evidence-based practice are clear, it raises a few concerns. Teachers reported that the exploratory phase of EAR, in which they collected data to identify classroom problems, was

time-consuming and required significant support from mentors. This suggests that EAR's success may need continuous mentorship and institutional support.

Time management emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing participants in the EAR program. Teachers reported that the demands of their regular teaching duties, combined with the additional responsibilities of participating in the EAR project, left them feeling overwhelmed. The timeline of the project was tight, as it required teachers to balance research activities with their existing workload. Although teachers were enthusiastic about EAR, their enthusiasm was limited by their busy schedules. This suggests that future projects of EAR or similar programs should take teachers' time constraints into account. They should offer flexible timelines and additional support to help teachers fully participate without feeling overwhelmed.

IMPLICATION

The training model of EAR holds significant implications for teacher professional development within the educational sphere of Thailand. The implementation of EAR as a model for teacher training signals a transformative addition to current professional development strategies. This cycle of learning about EAR, conducting research, and presenting results fosters a comprehensive growth experience for teachers, equipping them with research skills while also contributing practical knowledge to the teaching community.

The presence and support of mentors throughout the EAR process are crucial. They ensure that teachers can navigate the challenges of classroom research without feeling lost or isolated. This level of support aids in the successful implementation of EAR and assists the professional development experience by offering personalized feedback and guidance. Currently, there is a reliance on international mentors in mentoring Thai teachers in conducting EAR. Although EAR is not new in Thailand, finding local mentors to support local teachers remains challenging. Recognizing the importance of mentorship, there is a clear need to cultivate a pool of local mentors skilled in EAR. These local mentors would provide relevant support to teachers, understanding the specific educational context of Thailand.

Beyond the teacher training, it is a vision to establish a robust EAR community. Such a community would facilitate ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and mutual support among teachers engaged in classroom research. By leveraging collective classroom wisdoms, the

community could drive innovation in teaching practices across different subjects and educational levels.

CONCLUSION

The EAR program has clearly brought about positive changes in the participants' approaches to both research and teaching. It has demystified the research process, encouraging teachers to engage with classroom research in a more approachable and practical way. Additionally, it has introduced participants to qualitative research methods, which enhance their ability to analyze classroom issues in depth. However, the program has also exposed several areas for improvement, particularly in terms of time management, tool development, and the need for continued mentorship. Addressing these challenges will be key to ensuring that teachers not only continue to engage with EAR but also develop the confidence and skills to conduct research independently, thus fostering a culture of continuous improvement in teaching practices.

THE AUTHORS

Rachanee Dersingh completed her PhD in Linguistics from Chulalongkorn University. She is currently a lecturer at the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, teaching both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. She engages in training schoolteachers to undertake Exploratory Action Research. Her research interests include language choice, language maintenance, linguistic landscape, and translanguaging.

Khoi Tan Minh Vuong is currently a Master's student of Applied English Studies. His research interests include teaching writing, teacher's professional development, and applied linguistics for language teaching.

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APPENDIX

Questions for semi-structured interview

1. What did you think about exploratory action research before and after the training?
2. What experience did you gain after the training?
3. What do you think about those experience?
4. How has the EAR benefitted you in relation to your own CPD?
5. Have you seen anything different in your teaching? If yes, what are they?
6. What did you find difficult in the process? How did you solve it?
7. If there is a scale of one to five, where means not ready at all and five means totally ready, how ready are you to conduct another EAR on your own? Why or why not?