

Institution: University of Warwick		
Unit of Assessment: C23- Education		
Title of case study: Enhancing EFL teacher agency, learner engagement and CPD in low-resource classrooms of the Global South		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 1 Jan. 2000– 31 Dec. 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Richard Smith	Reader	01/10/1999–ongoing
Annamaria Pinter	Reader	01/04/2001–ongoing
Ema Ushioda	Professor	01/10/2002–ongoing
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 Aug. 2013–31 July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in the Global South work long hours, with little training, material support or sense of agency, in large-class, low-resource state school settings. Teacher and learner demotivation are frequently reported consequences of this deprivation. Smith, Pinter and Ushioda's research into teacher and learner autonomy has led to the development of an innovative approach to teacher-inquiry and action in such settings termed 'Exploratory Action Research' (EAR). The British Council has adopted this approach in mentoring schemes in Latin America, India and Nepal, engaging 642 teachers in EAR since 2013, with 21,910 primary and secondary school students. This has had a significant effect on teachers' sense of agency and on students' engagement in learning, enhancing conditions for English language learning in some of the least privileged classrooms in the world.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Research since 2000 by Smith, Ushioda and Pinter has brought together concerns about 'learner autonomy', that is, the ability to take charge of one's own learning, viewed as a necessary foundation for the development of intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning, with continuing professional development (CPD) needs in large-class, low-resource school settings in the Global South. Research involving narrative inquiry, observations and interviews produced the following original insights in relation to learning and teaching of English for speakers of other languages:</p> <p><i>Developing young learners' autonomy in low-resource Global South school settings is appropriate, feasible and productive:</i> Most autonomy-oriented pedagogic initiatives and research have taken place in tertiary settings in developed countries and scepticism has been expressed with regard to the appropriateness and feasibility of promoting learner autonomy outside such circumstances, for example in non-western cultural contexts or in work with children. However, Smith – with his (2008–12) PhD student Kuchah Kuchah – showed that a pedagogy of autonomy which engages students in decision-making can paradoxically be a particularly appropriate way to address difficulties of teaching in large classes of more than 200 pupils in Cameroon (3.1). Pinter also countered conventional wisdom in showing that children can take on active roles as co-researchers with teachers, and that this increases their autonomy and motivation (3.2).</p> <p><i>Teacher-learner autonomy is effectively engaged / developed by means of Action Research:</i> During the 2000s, Smith and Ushioda developed an innovative approach to the professional development of prospective EFL teachers at Warwick, showing that action research was an effective means for enhancing student-teachers' autonomy (3.3). The notion of 'teacher-learner autonomy' – the ability to develop appropriate skills knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher in cooperation with others – was elaborated and refined by this research (3.4).</p>		

Exploratory Action Research (EAR) is an appropriate and feasible means to develop teacher-learner autonomy in low-resource, large-class school settings: From 2013 onwards, Smith extended the above insights to in-service CPD programmes for teachers in low-resource classrooms in countries of the Global South, initially in the context of the British Council's Champion Teachers scheme in Chile. In order not to place extra burdens on teachers, Smith developed an approach which came to be known as 'Exploratory Action Research' (3.5), the main aims being development of teacher-learner autonomy and deeper engagement of students in learning. This innovative type of practitioner research distinctively emphasises initial exploration of a problematic situation via incorporation of student perspectives, in line with learner autonomy principles. Effective, contextually appropriate means for engaging teachers in this kind of research were also developed via ongoing action research by Smith and colleagues in Chile (3.6). Innovations included jargon-free explanation, concrete exemplification of research strategies, and development of unstressful means for teachers to share findings. In parallel, research led by Pinter in India (3.7) confirmed the feasibility of children becoming involved in practitioner research alongside their teachers in low-resource primary school settings.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- 3.1 Kuchah, K. & Smith, R. (2011). 'Pedagogy of autonomy for difficult circumstances: from practice to principles'. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 5/2: 119-140.
- 3.2 Pinter A. (2014). 'Child participant roles in applied linguistics research'. *Applied Linguistics* 35/2: 168-183.
- 3.3 Smith, R. & Erdogan, S. (2008). 'Teacher-learner autonomy: programme goals and student-teacher constructs'. In Lamb, T. & Reinders, H. (eds), *Learner and Teacher Autonomy: Concepts, Realities and Responses*. Amsterdam: Benjamins / AILA. ISBN 9781905275311
- 3.4 Ushioda, E., Smith, R., Mann, S. & Brown, P. (2011). 'Promoting teacher-learner autonomy through and beyond initial language teacher education'. *Language Teaching* 44/1: 118-21.
- 3.5 Smith, R. (2015). 'Exploratory action research: why, what, and where from?' In Dikilitas, K., Smith, R. & Trotman, W. (eds). *Teacher-researchers in Action*. Faversham: IATEFL, pp. 37-45.
- 3.6 Smith, R., Connelly, T. & Rebolledo, P. (2014). 'Teacher-research as CPD: a project with Chilean secondary school teachers'. In Hayes, D. (ed.) *Innovations in the Continuing Professional Development of English Language Teachers*. London: The British Council, pp. 111-128. ISBN 9780863557415
- 3.7 Pinter, A. (PI), Smith, R. and Mathew, R. British Council English Language Teaching Research Award: 'Children and Teachers as Co-researchers in Indian Primary English Classrooms' (GBP13,500, Feb.-Dec. 2015).

Note: 3.1-3.4 above are peer-reviewed and have been cited a combined 238 times (Google Scholar 30.10.20). 3.5 and 3.6 are increasingly serving as points of reference for ELT research studies, and have been cited a combined total of 72 times (Google Scholar 30.10.20).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Within mentoring programmes managed by the British Council (Jan. 2014-March 2020), a total of 642 schoolteachers working in low-resource classrooms in Latin America (Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru) and South Asia (India, Nepal) have completed a 4- to 6-month-long Exploratory Action Research project comprising: inquiry into a particular classroom issue of concern; action to ameliorate the situation; and evaluation. An enhanced ability to improve problematic situations for themselves and a better overall understanding of student perspectives are the main benefits reported by teachers, aside from resolution of the particular issues focused on in their projects.

Assuming 30 pupils per teacher in Latin America and 40 in South Asia (these are conservative assumptions, since many teachers have more pupils in their class and/or engaged more than one class in their project), 21,910 pupils have been directly engaged in the improved learning experiences detailed in teachers' reports. Year-on-year, there will be further impact on new cohorts of pupils who will be taught by the same, now more empowered teachers.

Online Open Access video and textual materials produced from the Latin America and South Asia programmes and disseminated worldwide by the British Council have additionally been adopted in various further CPD initiatives in countries including Argentina, China, Ecuador, India, Nepal, Oman, Peru and Sierra Leone, and this has extended the impact of EAR. In more detail, the effects of work to date have been as follows:

Chile (2014–present)

In recognition of Smith's research in the areas of teaching in low-resource classrooms and teacher-inquiry (e.g. 3.1, 3.3), the British Council [BC] invited him to plan, launch and offer ongoing advice on a new 'Champion Teachers' [CT] initiative for state secondary school teachers in Chile. In this context, he developed the Exploratory Action Research (EAR) approach, basing this on his and colleagues' previous research involving pedagogy of autonomy, teacher-learner autonomy and action research (see 3. above). The EAR-based CT mentoring scheme brought 40 six-month-long teacher-research projects to fruition by January 2014, and has been continually supported since then by the British Council, with the Ministry of Education [MoE] Chile increasingly integrating (publicizing and managing) the scheme within its overall CPD offer. Increasing buy-in from MoE is ascribed by Ricardo Contreras, coordinator of Teacher Professional Development for the MoE English Opens Doors Programme [EODP]) to the empowering effect that engagement in EAR has clearly had on participants, who *'were able to realize what was necessary to change [...] [It] promoted more empowerment of teachers [and was] sustainable'* (in 5.1). He added that, according to the Ministry's own evaluations, based on lesson observations,

"This was the only [EODP professional development] programme that provided such strong evidence of classroom impact on teachers' practice. None of the other [EODP] initiatives has provided such clear evidence of that." (ibid.)

Six cohorts of teachers in total have now been mentored to carry out EAR projects on the CT programme in Chile; since August 2013, 164 teachers have completed a teacher-research project, directly affecting at least 4,920 pupils (assuming 30 pupils per teacher, based on the average class size in Chilean state secondary schools). The most frequently mentioned effect of doing EAR, according to a questionnaire and interview based study carried out in 2017, confirmed by thematic analysis of reflective parts of all participants' final research reports, was self-reported overall improvement in teaching, related to the way teachers came to listen more closely to students and became able to engage them better in lessons (5.2). Additionally, teachers gained research skills and developed positive conceptions of research, which they now tended to see as a crucial part of their CPD. Teachers' relationship with students was improved as a consequence of their EAR work and they reported students feeling listened to, better-valued and, consequently, more willing to participate in class. For example Rocio, a participant in 2015, reported in his interview (as cited in 5.2) that

"Students lost their fear into English; now there is more participation during the lesson. [...] I noticed when they work together, they feel more encouraged to talk between them, and they encourage their partners to improve. In addition, they feel important and responsible for their own learning, when they see that the teacher cares about their interests and needs and value his/her work."

He also affirmed, like many of the teachers, that he had *"learned to trust my students' abilities and never underestimate them"*, while in her interview Vilma, another 2015 participant, said:

"I learned if I have a problem in the classroom, the first thing I have to do is to analyze my teaching practice and take into account my students' feelings and opinions."

According to respondents overall, students' levels of motivation, enjoyment and engagement in class had all increased. (ibid.)

Published case studies based on teachers' final reports (5.3) have also demonstrated the significant depth of impact of EAR, often evidencing a change to a more empowered mindset on the part of the teachers concerned, as well as a marked improvement in relationships with students. For example, for Mauro the approach increased self-belief in capacity for change:

"[Exploratory Action Research] lights a spark in the darkness of the system; it lights a spark in the mentality of the people who do not want to change; and it lights a spark in the school by making people believe that they own the changes that can be made in any learning environment."

Another teacher, Camila, highlights the importance of an improved awareness of students' needs:

"We need to stop focusing on our concerns and pay more attention to our students' concerns. As a result of this project, I feel that I am more empathetic."

Peru, Mexico, Colombia (2017–present)

British Council confidence in the successful impact of the CT scheme in Chile led to expansion of the scheme in 2017 to Peru, with EAR continuing to be the promoted approach. 94 Peruvian teachers completed a project in the three years 2017–19, with direct impact on more than 2,820 pupils. BC Peru's own comparison of cohort entry and exit data (reported in 5.1) provides evidence of an increased sense of agency to bring about positive change among participants.

Perceptions of the value of the approach among BC administrators were further demonstrated by the fact that in 2018 the scheme was extended to Colombia and Mexico, with 119 projects having been completed in total in the two years to 2019, reaching a further 3,570 pupils. Forming a core part of BC strategy and policy on support for state sector EFL teachers' CPD in Latin America, the scheme was projected to expand further to Argentina and Uruguay in 2020–21 (this has been postponed due to the Covid-19 crisis) (5.1).

With no end in sight yet for the programmes, the total number of teachers who have been mentored to complete EAR projects across Latin America between 2013 and 2019 has now risen to 377 (selected from among 1,361 teachers who have been reached by initial workshops). Assuming 30 pupils per class, this means that 11,310 pupils have been directly affected by their teachers' engagement in EAR, with improvements reported in individual project reports submitted. According to an overall thematic analysis of all 2013–2018 reports (reported in 5.1), not only do teachers note specific improvements in their teaching, they also commonly mention a deeper change in mindset towards a greater sense of being able to address the problems they face (which we theorize with reference to 'teacher-learner autonomy' or 'teacher agency') and enhanced relationships with pupils (these findings are confirmed in case studies for Peru and Mexico (5.4), as well as Chile (5.3). For example, for Angela (Peru),

"This experience has been one of the most meaningful lessons I have had during my career. I learned to be more patient in terms of not anticipating answers or actions before listening to my students' needs."

And for Ana (Mexico),

"EAR proved to me that the opportunities for creating a positive impact on our teaching environment are there. We just have to be curious enough to explore the issues we're facing in our classrooms. [...] Maybe the solution to a problem is right in front of your eyes, and if not, you can always carry out more research."

Due to this kind of deep impact, the overall effects of the CT intervention can be assumed to be long-lasting, reaching (via continuing improved practice) much larger numbers of pupils during the remainder of teachers' careers than have been attested to date.

India and Nepal (2017–present)

There has been, in parallel with the Latin American expansion of the CT programme, an impact on BC policy in the South Asia region, contributing to the establishment of two separate Action Research Mentoring Schemes (ARMS) in India and Nepal.

As a result of Smith's advice, both ARMS programmes have adopted the EAR approach but with some modifications arising, specifically, from a 2015 project led by Pinter which engaged 20 teachers and 800+ pupils as co-researchers in Indian primary English classrooms (3.7 above). This 2015 initiative provided evidence (reported in 5.5) of children highly valuing the opportunity to voice their views and become better able to learn for themselves, while teachers reported a better and less hierarchical relationship between pupils and themselves, and deeply changed views of children's capabilities – again, these can be assumed to be long-lasting effects.

In 2017–18, 65 Indian teachers completed projects with more than 2,600 pupils (see 5.6), and, in 2017–20, 180 Nepali teachers completed projects with 7,200+ pupils (see 5.7). Content analysis of all 2017–2019 Nepal teacher-research projects (see 5.7) reveals that a perceived lack of student motivation and engagement was the main area in which teachers used EAR to make a positive difference. Overall evaluation reports based on these individual reports combined with mentor and teacher feedback (5.6 and 5.7) indicate that, aside from resolution of specific problems, the main impacts of the scheme have been that teachers develop greater rapport with their learners; learn to appreciate student opinions; become more active and responsible; and acquire a more empowered attitude and an enriched sense of professionalism. For example (from one mentor's report): *'My mentees have learnt to find and diagnose their [classroom] problems'* (cited in 5.7).

Wider international adoption of Exploratory Action Research (2016–present)

The above work in both Latin America and South Asia has led to the production of three practical handbooks which have all been published online in open access form (in 2016–20) by the British Council (5.8). Together with 5.1, 5.3, and 5.4, these incorporate insights from the impact activity in Latin America and South Asia and serve as resources for further CPD initiatives. The materials have been disseminated globally by the British Council via its popular TeachingEnglish [sic] website (approx. 8m users annually), and e-newsletters for teachers (41,000 subscribers) and teacher educators (22,500 subscribers). The resources in question have been downloaded a total of 24,947 times (British Council statistics (5.9), as of July 2020).

As a result of production and dissemination of these materials, the overall approach to teacher-research for low-resource contexts has had a broader international impact. For example, a five-week online course on EAR, the 'Electronic Village Online' (EVO), organised by TESOL with support from several national teacher associations, ran each year from 2017 to 2020, with over 800 participants in total. Evaluation on the basis of questionnaire data and teacher-research reports (e.g. 5.10) shows that participants came to perceive a lack of resources and lack of teacher-research training to be less of a barrier than they previously had thought. As a result of these and other initiatives to widen impact, EAR has been taken up as an in-service CPD strategy in mentoring schemes in Argentina (Ministry of Education, Province of Buenos Aires), India (All-India Network of English Teachers), Nepal (Nepal English Language Teachers Association; Tribhuvan University), Oman (Centre for Preparatory Studies, Sultan Qaboos University), Peru (Department of Education, Municipality of Lima) and Sierra Leone (Ministry of Education/BMB Mott Macdonald/Cambridge Education/DFID), and as a pre-service training approach in teacher training colleges and universities in Argentina (La Plata University), Chile (Concepcion University), India (Gauhati University), Israel (Arab College of Education, Haifa), Nepal (Kathmandu University), Peru (San Agustin University), Turkey (Cağ University).

The work with the British Council has therefore had a significant impact in the areas of empowering teachers, engaging students and positively influencing CPD approaches in several Global South education systems worldwide. As the British Council's Regional Education and English Academic Lead for South Asia concludes, 'The EAR approach developed by Dr Smith has proved to be an effective, localised means of professional development and one which will continue to inform our work with teachers across the region' (5.11).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1 'Champion Teachers: findings in Latin America'. Internal 2021 British Council Chile report incorporating thematic analysis of teachers' research reports and participant testimonials.
- 5.2 'Impact and sustainability of the Chilean Champion Teachers programme after five years'. Internal 2017 British Council Chile report incorporating questionnaire and interview findings.
- 5.3 Rebolledo, P., Smith, R. & Bullock, D. (eds) 2016. *Champion Teachers Chile: Stories of Exploratory Action Research*. London: British Council.
- 5.4 Rebolledo, P., Bullock, D. & Smith, R. (eds) 2018. *Champion Teachers Peru: Stories of Exploratory Action Research*; Rebolledo, P. & Bullock, D. (eds). 2020. *Champion Teachers Mexico: Stories of Exploratory Action Research*. Both, published by British Council.
- 5.5 Pinter, A., Mathew, R. & Smith, R. 2016. *Children and Teachers as Co-researchers in Indian Primary English Classrooms*. London: The British Council.
- 5.6 'Action Research Mentoring Scheme (India), 2017–18'. Internal 2018 British Council report, incorporating and summarizing feedback from mentors.
- 5.7 Action Research Mentoring Scheme (Nepal), 2017–18, 2018–19, 2019–20. Internal 2018, 2019 & 2020 British Council reports, incorporating and summarizing feedback from mentors.
- 5.8 *Children and Teachers as Co-researchers: A Handbook of Activities* (Pinter & Mathew, 2016); *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018); *Mentoring Teachers to Research their Classrooms: A Practical Handbook* (Smith, 2020). British Council.
- 5.9 Email message and attachment from the TeachingEnglish website manager, British Council, 30 July 2020.
- 5.10 Sağlam, A.L.G. and Dikilitaş, K. (eds). 2018. *Stories by Teacher Researchers in an Online Research Community*. Faversham: IATEFL.
- 5.11 Email testimonial from the British Council Regional Education and English Academic Lead – South Asia, 13 July 2020.