Empowering Teachers through Exploratory Action Research
A Project to Promote Inclusive and Innovative Education

The project is a collaboration between American International University—Bangladesh and TESOL Society of Bangladesh, an affiliate of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL). The initiative supports in-service English teachers by creating a supportive environment that empowers them to make choices and decisions about their teaching. The main goal is to drive positive change and improvement in instructional practices and foster confidence in teaching through teacher-research.

The project aims to offer an alternative to the traditional top-down approach in teacher education in Bangladesh. It advocates for continuing professional development (CPD) by emphasizing autonomy, reflection, and empowerment for English teachers. By encouraging teachers to explore their own contexts and practices, the project helps them gain a deeper understanding of their work and enhances their ability to promote their students' learning.

Background

Language is essential for quality and equity in education, especially for minority groups, and advocates for mother tongue-based instruction. Languages such as English are often linked with high economic potential because they are widely spoken and used as a lingua franca for international communication and business. This means that proficiency in English can open up opportunities for individuals to access higher education, better jobs, and increased mobility. Additionally, countries where English is widely spoken or used as an official language often have strong economies, which can further reinforce the association between the English language and economic potential. However, mother tongue-based instruction, especially for minority groups, can help improve educational outcomes and promote equity. While English language education is important, it should not come at the expense of instruction in students' mother tongues. The distribution of the economic potential between languages, big and small, recognizing the contribution of minority languages to various sectors of society is critical for sustainable development. Hence, language education plays a crucial role in the global agenda of sustainable development and the associated goals (SDGs).

Goals

Exploratory Action Research is a practical form of inquiry that empowers teachers to understand their classroom situations and take action for improvement. It was designed for public school teachers facing challenges and emphasizes exploration and practicality. Through this approach, teachers gain a deeper understanding of classroom issues, students' needs, and interests, ultimately strengthening teacher-student relationships and improving student engagement. It fosters an inquiry-oriented mindset, empowering teachers to effect positive change in their teaching practices.

Exploratory Action Research can contribute to the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

1. **Enhance Quality of Education (SDG 4)**
Exploratory Action Research helps teachers gain a better understanding of their classroom dynamics, students' needs, and effective teaching methods. By improving teaching practices and student engagement, it enhances the quality of education. Teachers who engage in this research are more likely to be innovative and responsive to their students' needs, leading to better learning outcomes and a more conducive learning environment.

2. **Reduce Inequalities (SDG 10)**
Exploratory Action Research encourages teachers to explore and address the specific needs of all students, including those from marginalized communities. By focusing on inclusive teaching practices, it helps reduce inequalities in access to quality education and ensures that every student's learning needs are met.

3. **Promote Gender Equality (SDG 5)**
Through exploratory research, teachers can identify and challenge gender biases and stereotypes in the classroom. By creating a more equitable learning environment, it promotes gender equality in education and helps break down barriers that may hinder girls' and boys' educational achievements.

4. **Improve Quality and Relevance of Teacher Training (SDG 4.a)**
Engaging teachers in Exploratory Action Research fosters a culture of continuous professional development. It encourages teachers to reflect on their practices, explore innovative teaching methods, and adapt their approaches to meet the diverse needs of their students. This contributes to improving the quality and relevance of teacher training programs.

5. **Empower Local Communities (SDG 11)**
By understanding their local contexts better through research, teachers can design educational interventions that align with the specific needs and challenges of their communities. These efforts contribute to sustainable development by empowering local populations with education and skills that address their unique circumstances.

6. **Encourage Partnerships (SDG 17)**
Exploratory Action Research often involves collaboration and partnerships between teachers, schools, education authorities, and researchers. By working together, sharing knowledge and insights, and implementing evidence-based practices, these partnerships can effectively contribute to achieving various SDGs related to education, equity, and sustainability.

Exploratory Action Research empowers teachers to be proactive agents of change in the education system, leading to better educational outcomes, more inclusive practices, and greater alignment with the SDGs' principles and targets. By continually improving teaching

practices and promoting innovative solutions, it plays a crucial role in advancing the agenda of sustainable development and contributing to the achievement of the SDGs.

Objectives

The project provides support to teacher educators and academics in mentoring small groups of English language teachers as they conduct classroom-based research projects. The objectives of this project are:

- to establish a framework and environment that allows teachers to experiment with various approaches and ideas
- to enhance their reflective practice
- to make informed decisions about their teaching styles
- to build confidence, and ultimately improve student learning

Exploratory Action Research: Phases and Steps

Classroom-based research commences with teachers posing questions about their classroom experiences, successes, challenges, or issues. It is a reflective process that encourages teachers to assess their own practices and determine what approaches are effective for their students in their specific classroom settings.

Phases and Steps		Activity		Week
EXPLORATION	Plan to explore	Topic identification		1
		Defining exploratory research questions		2
		Data collection tools design		3–5
	Explore	Data collection tools application		6–7
	Analyse and reflect	Analysis of data		8–9
ACTION	Plan (to change)	Action plan design		10–11
	Act	Implementation of actions planned	Evaluation of action plan	12–14
	Observe			15–16
	Reflect	Analysis and conclusions		17–18
SHARING		Poster design		19–20
		Oral presentation		21

Mentors play a vital role in supporting teachers' growth, learning, and transformation. Collaborating with mentors on research projects ensures teachers receive the necessary guidance and assistance as they navigate the process of classroom-based research. Throughout the project, mentors:

- Receive extensive feedback, mentoring, and support from specialists in ELT classroom research in India.
- Enhance their existing mentoring and research skills.
- Establish a network of professional relationships.
- Acquire experience in project management.

Teachers collaborate with their mentors to identify classroom challenges and potential solutions related to various aspects, including
- Assessment
- Multilingual education
- Innovation, and ICT
- Inclusive education, and
- Development of 21st-century skills

Mentor Role overview
Individuals are invited to apply for funding to work as mentors with teachers at primary, secondary or tertiary level. Together with your cohort of 10 teachers, you will identify their classroom challenges and support them in identifying potential solutions related to one of the following prescribed themes:

1. Assessing learning
It involves:
- Applying the principles and practice of assessment to design tasks for measuring my learner's progress.
- Utilising a range of different types of assessment and feedback.
- Using assessment at different points in the learning process to monitor my learners' understanding and inform subsequent teaching.
- Defining appropriate assessment criteria and/or apply assessment criteria consistently.
- Analysing learners' errors and providing constructive feedback.
- Engaging learners in self and peer assessment and develop their self and peer assessment skills.
- Preparing learners for formal assessment.
- Administering, grading and keeping records of assessment.
- Sharing assessment data appropriately with parents, guardians, and learners, and others.
- Reflecting on the effectiveness of the assessment of learners' progress.

2. Using multilingual approaches
It involves:
- Recognising and valuing the multilingual nature of societies, schools and classrooms.
- Using pedagogical strategies that encourage inclusive education within a supportive multilingual learning environment.
- Being aware of beliefs about speakers of other languages and how they can impact on establishing and maintaining an inclusive learning environment.

- Assessing individual learners in a manner that takes their linguistic background into account.
- Giving my learners appropriate opportunities to use their home languages to support and demonstrate their understanding of learning content.
- Making pedagogical choices that respect and capitalise on my learners' linguistic diversity.
- Reflecting on how effective my implementation of multilingual approaches is in promoting learning.

3. Integrating ICT
It involves:
- Developing effective strategies for locating appropriate digital content.
- Following guidelines for e-safety.
- Evaluating the potential effectiveness and appropriacy of digital content, tools and platform for achieving desired learning outcomes.
- Using technology in the production of teaching and learning materials.
- Setting up activities that support learning by exploiting appropriate digital content, tools and platforms.
- Developing effective strategies for resolving potential technical issues.
- Using technology for administrative tasks in accordance with data protection guidelines.
- Promoting autonomous learning by exploiting digital content and technologies inside and outside of the formal learning environment.
- Promoting collaborative and participatory learning by exploiting online communities, tools and platforms.
- Reflecting on the effectiveness of my integration of ICT into the teaching and learning process.

4. Developing 21st-century skills
It involves:
1. Developing an awareness of and proficiency in critical thinking and problem solving, critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and communication, creativity and imagination, citizenship, digital literacy, student leadership and personal development
2. Selecting appropriate methodologies and resources for introducing, developing and evaluating my learners' skills in the above areas
3. Demonstrating the value and importance of 21st-century skills to and for my learners
4. Reflecting on my strengths and weaknesses in relation to my own proficiency in 21st-century skills and my ability to develop my learners' proficiency in these areas

5. Inclusive teaching and learning
It involves:
- Recognising and valuing diversity among my learners in relation to areas
- Using pedagogical strategies that encourage inclusive education within a supportive learning environment.

- Supporting my learners in identifying, addressing and assessing realistic individual learning goals based on reasonable adjustment.
- Being aware of my beliefs and how they can impact on establishing and maintaining an inclusive learning environment.
- Assessing individual learners in a variety of ways that allow them to demonstrate the progress they are making.
- Treating all my learners equitably and with respect.
- Developing positive attitudes towards diversity in my learners.
- Involving parents, learners and other relevant individuals in creating an inclusive learning environment.
- Reflecting on how inclusive my learning environment is and taking steps to improve it.

Mentors will also receive extensive feedback, mentoring and support from classroom research specialists.

Major Project activities

Induction Workshop:

During the induction workshop for newly appointed mentors, they are introduced to the fundamental principles and practices of action research. This leads to engaging discussions about their expectations for their mentees and their projects. The workshop also explores the mentor's role and the essential qualities and skills needed to effectively support their mentees. Experienced mentors from a previous cohort share their insights, providing valuable knowledge about their successes, challenges, and lessons learned.

Mid-Year Seminar:

The mid-year seminar is open to education professionals, pre-service teacher trainees, and post-graduate students. It offers a platform to delve into the mentor's role and its significance in supporting teacher researchers. A panel discussion features experienced mentors sharing their experiences and learnings from mentoring teachers, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of the mentor-mentee relationship. The seminar also includes presentations from the current cohort of mentors, highlighting the situations that arise when mentoring first-time teacher researchers during the initial stages of their classroom-based research projects.

Dissemination Events:

Dissemination events focus on showcasing the research conducted by teachers and mentors to the Bangladeshi educational community. During this day-long event, mentors host a plenary session where they reflect on their learnings and challenges while supporting teachers in their small-scale classroom-based research projects. Each mentor and their teachers also present their research projects and findings at individual stalls, promoting knowledge sharing and collaboration.