

TeachingEnglish  
ELT Research Papers

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**Teachers' engagement  
with published research:  
how do teachers who  
read research navigate  
the field, what do they  
read, and why?**

Graham Hall

In collaboration with



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Teachers' engagement with published research: how do teachers who read research navigate the field, what do they read, and why?

**Graham Hall**

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# Abstract

This project reported in this paper sought to uncover the reported practices and attitudes towards published research of English language teachers who worked in a range of contexts around the world, and who reported reading or being interested in research and research-oriented publications. Aiming to give voice to and learn from these 'research-interested' teachers, the project examined the role of research publications and research-oriented literature in the teachers' professional lives and in the development of their professional understandings and practices. It examined those factors which facilitated or created a barrier to such engagement, and additionally sought to uncover those key areas of research that the teachers saw as priorities, or of particular relevance to themselves. It also explored how, from the teachers' perspective, such research findings might be made more accessible within the field. Ultimately, therefore, the project sought to find out how, from the standpoint of those teachers who are interested in engaging with research and research-oriented publications, the often-problematic relationship between research and practice in English language teaching (ELT) might start to be addressed.



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# 1

## Introduction

The relationship between practice and research, and between practitioners/teachers and researchers, has long been the subject of considerable debate within ELT and related academic disciplines such as Applied Linguistics (e.g., Pennycook, 1989; Borg, 2009; Marsden and Kasprovicz, 2017; Sato and Loewen, 2019). Some suggest that research values ‘scientific’ knowledge over local and contextual knowledge (Pennycook, 1989), and ‘hardly ever’ helps teachers solve classroom problems (Medgyes, 2017: 493). From this perspective, teachers can ‘fare well without being informed about recent advances in language and language-education related research’ (ibid.: 495), and engaging with and trying to implement fully and consistently ideas emerging from academia and research is likely to lead to frustration amongst practitioners (Pennycook, 2004). The suggestion is of an often-parasitical relationship between research and researchers on the one hand and teaching and teachers on the other, in which researchers need teachers far more than teachers need researchers, both as a source of data and as an audience for their findings (Medgyes, 2017).

Others, however, are concerned by what they see as an apparent breakdown in the ‘interface’ and ‘dialogue’ between research and practice within ELT. Whilst recognizing that research is not part of often overworked teachers’ job descriptions, that research can require specific and technical expertise to be understood in its primary form, and that research findings are often ‘hidden’ behind costly publisher paywalls, they suggest that, without such dialogue, teachers are ‘in danger of rejecting evidence *a priori*’ and simply prioritizing their own intuitions (Paran, 2017: 507). From this perspective, ‘building bridges’ between research and practice, and between researchers and practitioners, is important in order that both individual teachers and the profession as a whole can develop.

The debate thus continues in a variety of forums (see, for example, arguments both for and against the relevance of research for practitioners in the pages of publications such as *ELT Journal* (Medgyes, 2017, and Paran, 2017), on Twitter (*#ELTchat*), and in other online discussions such as those hosted by

IATEFL’s research-oriented Special Interest Group, *ReSIG*). Yet there is undoubtedly *some* appetite within the field for the dissemination of research, although this demand is, perhaps, not always for research published in its primary form and/or original format (e.g., journal articles, research monographs), as demonstrated by the popularity of research-oriented ‘mediating’/‘go-between’ publications (Medgyes, 2017; Thornbury, 2019) and the blogs and other online posts of ELT writers and scholars such as Philip Kerr, Jack Richards, Scott Thornbury, Penny Ur, and many others.

However, whilst much work has been forthcoming in recent years around teachers’ own engagement *in* research (i.e., ‘teachers as researchers’; see, for example, Slimani-Rolls and Kiely, 2018; Smith and Rebolledo, 2018), there is relatively little data illuminating the extent to which and how teachers actually engage with research and research-oriented publications, and whether and how such engagement might inform their professional practice. Those studies which exist are relatively localized (e.g., Rossiter et al., 2013; Sato and Loewen, 2019), relate to UK foreign language teaching rather than ELT (e.g., Marsden and Kasprovicz, 2017), or adopt a broad lens through which to focus on teachers’ ‘research engagement’ more generally (e.g., Borg, 2009; 2010).

Consequently, much of the debate surrounding teachers’ engagement with published research and the disciplinary knowledge it may bring to ELT lacks data through which we might understand the ‘technical’ and ‘attitudinal’ issues practitioners identify as facilitating or hindering their engagement (e.g., physical access and time for the former, wanting and needing to read for the latter; see Borg, 2010). In other words, many claims about the relationship between research and practice, and about the relevance or irrelevance of research to teachers, often seem to lack a central component – the voices, experiences, and perspectives of teachers themselves.

This project therefore sought to address this gap and uncover the reported practices and attitudes towards published research of English language teachers who worked in a range of contexts around the world, and who reported reading or being interested in research and research-oriented publications. Aiming to give voice to and learn from these 'research-interested' teachers, the project examined the role of research publications and research-oriented literature in the teachers' professional lives and in the development of their professional understandings and practices. It examined those factors which facilitated or created a barrier to such engagement, and additionally sought to uncover those key areas of research that the teachers saw as priorities or of particular relevance to themselves; it also explored how, from the teachers' perspective, such research findings might be made more accessible within the field. Ultimately, therefore, the project sought to find out how, from the standpoint of those teachers who are interested in engaging with research and research-oriented publications, the often-problematic relationship between research and practice in ELT might start to be addressed.

### **A note on 'research'**

A vast literature within ELT and within related academic fields such as Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and Education seeks to define and outline the key characteristics of research. Most understandings share similarities with Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2007) suggestion that research is systematic; empirical, drawing on observable data or evidence that is necessarily experimental; and self-correcting, in that insights and understandings are updated over time as new information comes to light. Put simply, therefore, research 'is a way of collecting information in order to enable us to reach decisions about future actions, in ways that are appropriate and relevant to these decisions' (Paran, 2017: 501).

Some investigations of language teachers' beliefs about and engagement with research have drawn on these understandings explicitly. Marsden and Kasprovicz (2017), for example, defined research to the teachers participating in their study as 'systematic activity, that goes beyond normal teaching duties, and that aims to shed light on a particular phenomenon. This includes reading reports about research or collecting data, e.g., pupil opinions or achievement, the effectiveness of teaching etc.' (p.617). Others have taken a different approach, offering no definition but instead aiming to establish what teachers themselves understand research to be (e.g., Borg, 2009; Sato and Loewen, 2019) before exploring other elements of teachers' engagement with research investigations and publications.

Like Cohen et al., Paran, and Marsden and Kasprovicz (op. cit.), therefore, this report takes a broad view of research and its key characteristics. This shared understanding underpins the review of key issues, debates and literature which follows (Section 2). Ultimately, however, the project followed Borg (op. cit.) and Sato and Loewen (op.cit.) in building a picture of teachers' engagement with research publications based on teachers' own understandings of what research might be, as can be seen in the research methodology, and presentation and discussion of data in this report (Sections 3 and 4).







# 2

## The relationship between research and practice in ELT: key issues and current debates

The broad and varied field of ELT is often characterized as being in ‘ferment’ (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 254), awash with methodological ideas, techniques and materials which aim to support teaching and learning, and with related debates about the theories, principles and evidence which underpin them. Yet this is not true in all contexts – the popular perspective of rapid and regular change, and of ELT as a particularly innovative enterprise, overlooks the methodological continuities that can be found in many ELT settings and classrooms (Hunter and Smith, 2012), and assumes both a level of interest in and/or access to new knowledge and ideas that does not realistically reflect the professional circumstances and interests of many teachers around the world (Borg, 2010). As Erlam (2008: 253, citing Belcher, 2007) points out, ‘teachers have been teaching languages successfully for millennia’, and might reasonably question the extent to which new knowledge and associated thinking about its practical implications can benefit their pedagogic practice. And yet, without engagement with new knowledge in *some* form (through, for example, reflective and/or problem-solving conversations with colleagues; accessing blogs, videos and other developmental resources online; engaging with Teacher Associations and their associated events and activities; or reading and engaging with professional publications), teachers might rely solely on their personal experiences and intuitions when making pedagogical decisions (Sato and Loewen, 2022). Whilst such decisions can, of course, benefit student learning, they would perhaps be more secure if informed by knowledge and perspectives from other relevant sources.

One source of new knowledge in the field that teachers *might* encounter during their professional lives is research. This might be research which they undertake for themselves as teacher-researchers, perhaps as part of a professional training, education or development programme, or perhaps as a result of their ongoing professional curiosity through approaches such as Action Research (see, for example, Burns, 2010) or Exploratory Practice (see, for example, Allwright and Hanks, 2009). Yet teachers might also encounter research undertaken and subsequently presented by others in research-oriented publications (e.g., books, journal articles, professional magazines and newsletters, blogs, British Council ELT Research Papers such as this), and ELT professional development ‘mediating texts’ such as Hall (2017), Richards and Rodgers (2014) and Thornbury (2017).



## 2.1 Gaps, divides and dysfunction? Images of the research-practice relationship

The relationship between teachers and published research (and implicitly, therefore, with researchers) is often discussed and frequently problematized. Although 'second language (L2) researchers who conduct instructional research, and L2 practitioners who are open to improving their practices, share a common goal; that is, to help students develop their L2 skills in a more effective and efficient way' (Sato and Loewen, 2022: 3), the vast majority of commentaries recognize the 'inconvenient truth' (Korthagen, 2017) of a 'gap' or 'significant divide' (Belcher, 2007) between research and pedagogy which may be 'widening' (Rose, 2019) and, for most, is 'damaging' (Allwright, 2005). Such accounts call for the establishment of 'dialogue' to 'build bridges' or 'pave a path' (respectively, Paran, 2017; Erlam, 2008; and Sato and Loewen, 2022) towards a productive and cooperative future, ending the 'dysfunctions' (Clarke, 1994) of the research-practice relationship.

Although Korthagen (2007) characterizes the research-practice gap as a perennial problem, for many, this problematic state of affairs has developed and worsened as a result of an increasing 'intellectualization' of ELT-related research (Rose, 2019; Sato and Loewen, 2022). Thus, an activity which was once led by practitioners who researched is now dominated by researchers drawing upon psychological, educational, or linguistic theories, who are removed from language teaching itself, and whose research is valued more highly by other researchers than more practically-oriented classroom-based research still undertaken by teachers (McKinley, 2019).

For some, this strengthens the notion of researchers working in an isolated academic 'ivory tower' located 'above' teachers who are consequently disempowered from setting agendas for research, and whose own inquiries and publications are undervalued (Rose, 2019; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; 2012). Yet while many seek to understand, challenge and address this research-practice gap (i.e., 'to build bridges'), others see its consequences in less problematic terms. Noting that as 'academic research' and teaching are two different activities, Medgyes (2017: 492) concludes that they 'move along fundamentally different paths and never the twain shall meet'. Maley (2016) also suggests that attempts to bring research and pedagogy together are misplaced – each have value and legitimacy in their own domain, but 'we should not expect any necessary or close links' between them (p.13), whilst Kerr (2021) wonders whether attempts to bridge

the research-practice gap are largely foisted on teachers by researchers (rather than the other way round), and are consequently unlikely to result in improved relationships between them. Meanwhile, Lightbown (1985), whilst positive about its potential usefulness for practitioners, also emphasizes that 'second language research does not tell teachers what to teach, and what it says about how to teach they had already figured out' (p.182). And it is to this, the expectations of research in relation to pedagogy, that is, the extent to which research might or can inform day-to-day teaching practices, that we now turn.

## 2.2 Research findings and pedagogic 'answers': different types of knowledge?

The discussion thus far has touched on two broad perspectives on the role of research and researchers in ELT. The more sceptical view maintains that the research-practice divide in part results from researchers' 'self-interest' (due to, for example, academic institutional pressures such as 'publish or perish') leading, at its most extreme, to an 'adversarial' and hierarchical relationship between research and pedagogy in the field (Levin, 2013). The more benevolent viewpoint suggests that researchers and teachers share the goal of improving L2 pedagogy and learning and that addressing the research-practice gap is a therefore in the interests of researchers, teachers, and language learners alike. From this perspective, the gap is wide:

*... not primarily because educational researchers are self-indulgent or irresponsible in the kinds of research they do or in the ways that they report it, nor because teachers are unprofessional or anti-intellectual in their approach to practice ... but primarily because the kind of knowledge that research can offer is different to the knowledge that classroom teachers need to use (McIntyre, 2005: 358–9)*

McIntyre (ibid.) thus characterizes the knowledge that teachers draw upon to manage their classrooms and to organize and facilitate students' learning as 'pedagogical knowledge', or 'knowledge how'. This knowledge is pragmatic, usable, and useful, and is valued by teachers for its *practicality* and its feasibility and effectiveness in context (ibid.). According to McIntyre, this contrasts with 'propositional knowledge' or 'knowledge that': this is usually the concern of academic research. Generally located in a broader field of study, such knowledge is valued for its perceived clarity and coherence of argumentation, and for its 'truth', which can be abstracted or in some way generalized. Although

there is a necessary degree of simplification in these descriptions – McIntyre (ibid.), for example, suggests that we might perhaps regard them as points at either end of a knowledge continuum) – they are echoed across the field. Ellis (2001), for instance, suggests that teachers are interested in ‘practical knowledge’ whilst researchers are seeking to develop ‘technical knowledge’; meanwhile, Bartels (2003) contrasts the context-specific pedagogic knowledge of teachers with the abstract and generalized knowledge of research and researchers. Crookes (1997), focusing on research into SLA, similarly argues that teachers require knowledge which is embedded in its social context (i.e., the learning environment of which they are a part) and is thus more specific and practically-oriented; this contrasts with the focus of much research knowledge which seeks to reveal universal processes that are ‘internal’ to the learner.

Acknowledging that there are different kinds of knowledge has a range of possible implications for the ways in which academically-researched knowledge and publications might or might not link to ELT pedagogy. Firstly, there is the reasonable suggestion that not all L2 research *should* consider the research-pedagogy link. As Sato and Loewen (2022) point out, there is a place for scientific and lab-based studies which seek to develop theoretical knowledge about how second languages are *acquired* or *learned*, for example, without focusing on how they are *taught*. Such ‘basic’ (rather than ‘applied’) research (ibid.) may eventually have an indirect impact on the wider field, but this is not its goal. Of course, many ELT research publications do seek to draw out their implications for practice, although the depth and value of this is sometimes variable; ‘Implications’ sections that sometimes appear to be an afterthought or ‘add on’ (Han, 2007: 387) at the end of detailed accounts of research studies are often criticized for being superficial, impractical or even ‘more pretentious than genuine’ (ibid.).

Consequently, McIntyre suggests that conceptualizing the relationship between much research and practice as being ‘indirect’ is perhaps the most satisfactory way of addressing the gap between them, arguing that ‘the best that researchers can generally aspire to is throwing light on issues that are important for practice, and that this is very different from offering complete solutions to practitioners’ problems’ (2005: 363).

Whilst realistic about what academic research, with its focus on single issues and its aim at generality, can actually ‘tell’ teachers engaged in contextually-specific pedagogical decision-making, this is a more limited conception of the research-practice relationship than one which seeks ‘to give me practical advice’ or ‘study something I can use’ (as teachers in Medgyes (2017: 492) and Shkedi (1998: 559) reportedly request). However, it perhaps starts to re-balance the relationship between research and practice and between researchers and teachers, for, as Ellis (2010: 197) notes ‘it is always the teacher who ultimately determines the relevance of SLA constructs and findings for teaching, not the SLA researcher’.

Yet, a number of questions remain. Although construing the research-practice relationship as indirect is in many ways helpful and realistic, is this an understanding which teachers share, and if so, do they have the time (and inclination) to evaluate and make use of research which has ‘only’ indirect relevance to their professional lives? As Millin (2021: n.p.) notes, in this situation:

*how do [teachers] know what research to choose to read? ... How much of a ‘critical mass’ does research need to reach before teachers should pay attention to it? How do they know when it has hit this point? How do they extrapolate from the research to work out how to change their practice?*

Furthermore, does the often-differential status of researchers and practitioners (see above) really support and facilitate the idea that teachers, rather than researchers, can truly assert what are and are not relevant research findings? And, given these concerns, how might practitioners access such research and associated research publications in the first place, and what barriers might prevent them from doing so?

We shall address these more specific questions shortly. Firstly, however, uncovering the extent to which practitioners are reported as reading and engaging with research provides a broad indication of how teachers might perceive the value (or otherwise) of research within their professional lives.

## 2.3 Do English language teachers read research? Some evidence from the field

Both the number of publications deliberating over the research-practice 'divide' (such as those referenced above) and many researchers' and teachers' own professional experiences suggest that 'most teachers are just not terribly interested in research and rarely, if ever, read it' (Kerr, 2021: n.p.). Yet surprisingly few empirical studies have sought to investigate or provide evidence for this broad assessment of the field. Although the results of those which do seem to make for gloomy reading for those who are keen to develop a practitioner-researcher dialogue, the picture is, however, more complex than it might at first appear.

Borg's (2009) survey of 505 teachers from 13 countries found that only 15.6 per cent of participants reported reading research regularly, with 3.8 per cent of respondents reporting that they 'never' read research, and 28.7 percent reporting that they did so only 'rarely'. In Borg's survey, therefore, twice as many teachers read research 'rarely'/'never' than those who read research 'often', Borg finding a weak but significant correlation between the frequency with which research was read and both higher level teaching qualifications and longer teaching experience. A similar situation was uncovered by Nassaji's (2012) survey, in Canada and Turkey, of 410 English language teachers' engagement with research into, specifically, SLA.

Marsden and Kasproicz (2017), reporting on the behaviours and perspectives of 574 foreign language teachers and practitioners in the UK (rather than ELT professionals *per se*), similarly record that over half the classroom teachers and around a quarter of the non-school-based practitioners surveyed had never read an original research report. This was not to suggest, however, that their participants discounted the value of research – over one third of teachers reported reading publications such as magazines or newsletters or hearing about something which mentioned research over the course of a year, with over two-thirds noting that they read reports about research on the internet relatively frequently. Clearly and as already noted, there is more to reading research than reading research only in its original form.

A number of smaller studies and case-studies paint a similar picture of the extent to which English language teachers read research, and their tendency to read original research publications such as journal papers only rarely whilst accessing information about research findings from other sources more regularly. Like Marsden and Kasproicz (*ibid.*), the 47 Israeli teachers in Shkedi's (1998) study read about research via the professional, practical and 'applicative' literature (p.565), with only 3 reporting that they read 'original research literature' *per se*. Meanwhile, some of the 12 Chilean teachers in Sato and Loewen's (2019) study reported barriers and obstacles to accessing original research publications such as academic journal articles (see below for further discussion of 'barriers'). Consequently, they noted how like-minded teachers had shared research findings via online communities, supporting Levin's (2013) assertion that the impact of the internet on the communication of research to a range of interested communities 'cannot be overstated' (p.13). And yet, perhaps due to its relatively recent emergence and its ever-changing capabilities, the links between reading about research online (either through original journal articles or in other mediated formats) have arguably been under-explored aspects of the relationship between research and practice/practitioners.

As this summary indicates, therefore, reading research in its original published form does not seem to be a regular part of many teachers' professional lives. While some access original research relatively often, many more never or rarely do so. However, the reports outlined in this section do not indicate that teachers have *no* interest in published research – rather, many tend to access findings and other insights from research via other channels, including other forms of publication (professional newsletters and magazines) and online (including summaries and links shared within practitioner communities). For those interested in developing the relationship between research and practice, therefore, a key concern is to establish more clearly what types of publications and other modes of communication teachers employ to learn about research, and why they choose *these* publications (rather than reading research in its original published forms). Underlying these issues is a key question to which this review will first turn – why are teachers interested in research and research publications at all?

## 2.4 Why do teachers read (and read about) research?

Although we have noted that most conceptualizations see the relationship between research and practice as being only indirect, many reasonable claims have been made about the way in which research has shaped broad swathes of professional language teaching practice over time. Paran (2017) for example, highlights the role of research in promoting: extended reading; narrow reading and vocabulary development; the use of learners' L1 in supporting L2 learning; teaching students how to listen; the value of task repetition; and the value (or otherwise) and ways of providing corrective feedback. However, reflecting Kerr's (2021) concern that the call for a 'dialogue' between research and practice is in fact driven by academics rather than teachers (see Section 2.1, above), such summaries tend to be put forward by researchers, and often offer broad perspectives on developments in the field more generally rather than specifically addressing why individual teachers themselves read research or find out about research findings.

In fact, teachers report reading research or about research for a variety of reasons, one of the most regularly cited being to *support classroom and other pedagogical decision-making*, particularly when the issues faced are new to them, for example, the rise of online teaching over the last five or six years or, in some contexts, higher numbers of immigrant students in classes (Sato and Loewen, 2019). As we have seen, however, links between research and practical classroom activities or innovations tend to be indirect; consequently, although many teachers report, slightly vaguely perhaps, that reading research is 'useful' or 'improves teaching' (e.g., Nassaji, 2012), few accounts document occasions when practitioners have actually integrated research findings in their teaching (Sato and Loewen, op. cit.; Shkedi, 1998).

However, reading research can provide teachers with **emotional support and confidence** if and when it supports what they already do in practice (Sato and Loewen, 2019). Hall and Cook's (2013) investigation, for example, found widespread use of students' L1 use in ELT classrooms and, in also documenting a clear rationale for it, was reported (in subsequent feedback to the authors) to have reassured many teachers that their own L1-use in class was not straightforwardly 'wrong' and that they were not 'alone' in its considered use in support of L2 interaction and learning.

Many teachers also experience **external or institutional pressures** to read about research, such as directives by ministries of education for teachers to become 'involved with' research, initially through reading (and, in some cases, eventually by undertaking research; Sato and Loewen, 2019), or because it is part of the requirements of their job (Shkedi, 1998; Sato and Loewen, 2022). Although these pressures are often unwelcome when obligatory and not sufficiently supported, reading research voluntarily and from time to time in order **to develop professional knowledge** is also relatively common (Shkedi, op.cit.). Of course, many practitioners undertake **professional and academic qualifications** over the course of their working lives (for example, teaching diplomas and masters-level degrees) in order to expand their professional knowledge and enhance their career prospects, which require them to read research literature.

One suggestion bringing these perspectives together, therefore, is that teachers read research (or can/should read research) as 'critical consumers' (Borg, 2010) in order to develop professionally and to inform their pedagogical decisions (although, as noted above, this latter point is not straightforward). From this standpoint, teachers read in order to 'critique and evaluate research information for themselves' and 'not depend on others' (McMillan and Wergin, 2010: v). However, as Borg (op.cit.) points out, whilst the benefits to individual practitioners and to the development of the field of a 'critical consumers' perspective seem clear, conceptualizing teachers in this way is problematic due to a series of barriers, challenges, and 'erroneous assumptions' (p.410).



## 2.5 Barriers to reading research

Teachers cite a range of issues when reporting what either prevents them from reading research and/or why they choose not to attempt to read research at all. In practical terms, teachers suffer from a **lack of time** to find and read publications, often associated with a **lack of wider institutional support** (e.g., time and finance) for engagement with research publications (e.g., Borg, 2009; Nassaji, 2012; Sato and Loewen, 2019). Some teachers have also suggested that their **colleagues' lack of interest** in research, perhaps stemming from the wider **culture of the institution** they work in, is also discouraging. Most research publications also lie behind costly **paywalls** which present a very significant barrier to teacher engagement (ibid.).

Additionally, the **language and terminology** of research papers is often challenging, whilst teachers are generally not trained to understand research design and ways of analysing data – particularly statistics (Borg, 1998). Consequently, for the teachers in Nassaji's (2012) study, other sources of pedagogical information and insight (e.g., conversations with colleagues, online blogs) are more readily sought out. Beyond this, teachers might perceive research and researched knowledge to be **irrelevant to their 'real world' concerns** and the 'messiness' of complex classroom contexts – research knowledge is seen as being different from the practical knowledge that they wish to make use of (see Section 2.2, above). They may be **sceptical about educational research**, perceiving it either to be 'too scientific' and unable to deal with the complexities of classroom life, or not scientific enough, inferior to research into the physical sciences, and thus lacking in validity (Sato and Loewen, 2022). Shkedi (1998) also notes some teachers' **doubts about the motivations or 'authenticity' of research**, whilst Medgyes (2017) argues that different research publications often present teachers with unhelpful **contradictory conclusions**, further undermining practitioners' belief in the value of reading research. These perspectives suggest that many ELT professionals see research as being in a 'different world' to their own, drawing on a **different discourse** about what kind of knowledge is valuable and how such knowledge should be conveyed (Bartels, 2003; also Gee, 1990), with researchers belonging to a **different community of practice** to teachers (Wenger, 1998). This presents significant attitudinal barriers to teachers' engagement with research publications.

To summarise, therefore, on the one hand, many teachers do not have **access** to or **time** to read published research, whilst on the other, they may **not wish nor need to read** such material (Borg 2010). Thus, unless teachers find good reason and value in engaging with research publications, it is extremely unlikely that the level of engagement outlined above will change significantly. How might this such change be facilitated?

## 2.6 Enhancing teacher engagement with published research

A number of potential interventions have been suggested which might enhance English language teachers' engagement with published research (e.g., Nassaji, 2012; Sato and Loewen, 2019). Institutions are encouraged to provide time within job descriptions, incentives for promotion, and financial support for access to publications and for membership of professional organisations which circulate research newsletters and summaries such as IATEFL – the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (Kerr (2021), however, notably and not unreasonably perhaps, observes that such suggestions are more often than not 'pie in the sky'). The issue of finance is also central to calls for publishers, and where possible researching authors, to allow free/open access to more publications which are often located behind paywalls.

Other suggestions focus more on developing teachers' understanding of the research and research publications they may encounter. 'Mediating texts' aim to fulfil such a function, summarising research findings in accessible forms for practitioners (Thornbury, 2019). So, too, do many ELT courses and events – engaging with research findings is a central element of most teacher training and education programmes (Ellis, 2010), whilst in-service professional development workshops might focus on the implications of specific research papers. Such events are likely to involve familiarizing teachers with the discourse of research publications, in order that, for example, potentially complex terminology and/or dense data reports are made less off-putting and more accessible, and the idea of supporting teachers more generally in their efforts to understand discourse of academic research and publication has been regularly suggested. Yet this approach has been criticised as, ultimately, it requires teachers, rather than researchers, to change their ways of reading, thinking and understanding; continues to position teachers as the consumers and researchers as the producers of knowledge; and maintains the dominance of academic discourses over teacher discourses.

It also does little to address the central charge that the vast majority of research publications simply do not address issues that practitioners are concerned about in ways which they understand (Bartels, 2003); consequently, teachers have little reason to read them.

A more significant way of encouraging teachers to read published research is to fundamentally revise the relationship between practitioners and researchers. Teachers and researchers might work together to set an agenda for research and establish topics of mutual concern (Nassaji, 2012). Teachers could also contribute to the design of 'ecologically valid' studies (Loewen and Plonsky, 2016), in which the researchers fit their research to the classroom rather than adapting the classroom to fit the research (Sato and Loewen, 2019). Consequently, research and research findings are likely to be authentic to their context. Requiring a collaborative mindset, such ways forward would establish new communities or professional networks of teachers and researchers, recognizing each others' complementary skill-sets and knowledge, working together to develop and subsequently disseminate new knowledge (Sato and Loewen, 2022). Here, 'knowledge mobilization' (Levin, 2013) would not be a one-way process from researchers to practitioners, but would recognize 'the interactive and social connection ... between research and practice' (p.2). This perspective thus moves the relationship between teachers and published research beyond ideas of teachers as 'just' (critical) consumers of research (see Section 2.4, above); instead, teachers are integral in the production of researched knowledge and publications. Clearly, however, truly levelling current hierarchies would require significant changes in thinking and working, Clarke (1994) concluding that 'however reasonable it may appear to be, I do not see this happening' (p.18).

Overall, the various suggestions to facilitate or support teachers' engagement with published research are a blend of the practical and the idealistic, and those with significant resource implications for specific ELT stakeholders and those which might be more easily achievable. However, it is notable that although some draw on teachers' voices in localized studies, many have been suggested by researchers who see it as their responsibility 'to pave a path for productive research-practice dialogue' (Sato and Loewen, 2022: 1). It is also notable that accounts of such changes actually occurring and resulting in significantly more teacher engagement with published research are hard to come by!

## 2.7 Justification for this study

Despite the evident focus on the research-practice relationship in ELT, and, in particular, on teachers' engagement with research publications, the vast majority of the discussion is by those engaged in research and/or who work in universities or in teacher education. Thus, significant gaps remain in our knowledge and understanding of practising teachers' own perspectives on research publications, the extent to which they are relevant to their professional lives, their access to publications and/or obstacles to reading them, and, fundamentally, what they want and need from published research (if, indeed, they want anything at all). A global survey of teachers' perceptions and priorities provides a wide-ranging empirical base for further discussion and for the development of a genuinely collaborative research agenda for ELT.





# 3

## Research methodology

### 3.1 Aims and research questions

The project aimed to explore the reported practices and attitudes towards published research of English language teachers working in a range of contexts around the world, and who generally reported reading or being interested in research and research-oriented publications. It sought to uncover the extent to which these teachers access and read research and research-oriented publications; the types of publications they read; the reasons for and obstacles to reading research; and the teachers' own priorities in terms of the particular issues, questions and concerns that they are/would be interested in reading about in research and research-oriented publications. Consequently, the study addressed the following research questions:

- 1 To what extent do the English language teachers<sup>1</sup> report that they read: a) research in its original published form, and b) other research-oriented professional literature?
- 2 What reasons do they give for this level of engagement?
  - a Why do they say they read research?
  - b What do they report as discouraging or preventing them from reading research?
- 3 What topics and issues do the teachers themselves prioritize as potential focuses for research and research publications in ELT?
- 4 How might research publications and findings be made more relevant and accessible to English language teachers?

### 3.2 Research design

The project adopted a mixed-method research design (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Dörnyei, 2007), combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a broad, yet in-depth picture of teachers' reported engagement with and attitudes towards published research. An online survey first collected quantitative data about teachers' practices and priorities from a global sample of ELT practitioners, and, subsequently, qualitative data was collected via a series of semi-structured interviews with teachers who, on completing the initial questionnaire, had volunteered to contribute further to the study; the interviews were also conducted online.

This mixed-method approach drew on the strengths of each research instrument (e.g., questionnaires can be administered efficiently and economically to large and diverse populations; interviews allow for more open-ended and in-depth explorations of issues), whilst also mitigating their limitations when these are conducted in isolation (e.g., potentially superficial answers from unmotivated survey respondents; the time required and sample size limitations of semi-structured interviews). It thus facilitated verification of the project's findings from differing data sources, enabling deeper insights to be gained, through the interview data, into the broad trends revealed by the questionnaire.

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<sup>1</sup>For presentational reasons, the Research Questions at this point of the report refer simply 'English language teachers', rather than 'teachers who were interested in reading research or who reported that research could be of relevance to their day-to-day professional lives' (as outlined in the title, abstract and introduction to this report). More about the participants and their particular profile within the field, with implications for the subsequent analysis and possible conclusions, follows in Section 3.2.



### 3.2.1 The questionnaire

The online survey designed for the first stage of the project drew on key themes and debates within the literature (see Section 2), framing them in a way which linked those more theoretical discussions with the practical experiences and attitudes of participating teachers<sup>2</sup>. Piloted with 20 teachers working in 14 different countries around the world and in differing contexts (e.g., private and state institutions; primary, secondary and tertiary sectors), the questionnaire was subsequently revised in accordance with meta-feedback from the pilot sample regarding occasional question wordings and minor formatting issues. In the pilot study, the average time for questionnaire completion was approximately 20 minutes.

Thus, the final version of the survey comprised 16 multi-part questions, including a range of closed- and a number of open-ended items. Closed questions took the form of Likert-scale items; open-ended items gave participants the opportunity to add written qualitative comments to the quantitative survey data, for example, to develop their views or provide further examples of their engagement (or otherwise) with published research. The questionnaire explored four key aspects of participating teachers' engagement with and perceptions of published research, as follows:

- Part 1 aimed to establish participating teachers' understandings of research. Through a five-point Likert scale question, it asked participants to evaluate the importance, as they saw it, of 19 **Characteristics of good quality research**, evaluating statements such as 'The research leads to new theories'; 'Results are made public'; 'The research is systematic'; 'A large volume of data is collected'; and 'The research aims to address teachers' concerns'.
- Part 2 asked respondents to document **the frequency with which they read research, and the kinds of publications they read** (e.g., academic journal articles, professional newsletters and magazines, research-oriented blogs and websites, and research-oriented teacher development texts).

- Part 3 aimed to uncover the reasons **why teachers might engage with published research**. Participants completed five multi-part Likert-scale questions which asked them to evaluate the importance of research in keeping up with developments or innovations in ELT, and in influencing their classroom practice. It also asked them to evaluate other sources of information and guidance such as conversations with colleagues, attending conferences, and guidance from ministries of education, enabling the project's subsequent analysis to compare the perceived value of differing sources of professional and research-oriented information for teachers.
- Part 4 explored participants' **institutional cultures and possible barriers to engagement** with published research through four multi-part questions. Respondents reported the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a total of 21 statements such as: '(In my institution) Teachers have access to research journals, newsletters and books', 'Time for reading and engaging in research is built into teachers workloads', and 'Teachers talk about the research they have read'; 'Published research is difficult to understand', 'Published research is not relevant to my classroom context', and 'I am not interested in published research'.

The questionnaire concluded with two open questions, the first asking participants to note key topics and issues which they thought ELT research should prioritize, and the second inviting any further perspectives on the relationship between published research and practice in ELT via an 'Additional comments' question. The survey also included 11 shorter questions establishing participants' professional biographies and contexts (e.g., teaching experience, ELT-related qualifications, institutional context), and two questions asking respondents whether they would be willing to participate in the subsequent semi-structured interview phase of the study and whether they wished to receive a copy of the project's final report (i.e., this paper).

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<sup>2</sup>It is important to acknowledge the influence (with his permission) of Simon Borg's (2009) survey exploring English language teachers' conceptions of research on the design of Part 1 of my questionnaire.

Given the aims of the study, the only criteria for participation in the survey was that respondents were practising English language teachers, data being collected by non-probability opportunity sampling. Details of, and links to, the online questionnaire were circulated with the assistance of the British Council, a number of international, national and regional Teachers' Associations, by several online teaching communities, and via my own professional contacts across a range of ELT contexts. The survey was administered and remained open for a ten-week period from mid-February 2020.

### *Profile of the questionnaire respondents*

The questionnaire was completed by 696 English language teachers working in wide variety of teaching contexts around the world, although participants teaching in Europe and Asia at the time that the data was collected comprised the majority of the sample (respectively, 44.2 per cent and 24.9 per cent of respondents).

Most participating teachers worked in state schools/institutions (56.7 per cent of the sample) and, whilst some taught primary-aged learners (6.9 per cent), the vast majority worked with students aged 12–17, 18–23, or 24+ years old (respectively, 24.9 per cent, 42.4 per cent and 25.9 per cent of respondents). Participants' experience of teaching English ranged from 0–4 years (5.7 per cent) to 24 years and above (34.3 per cent), and, whilst just 0.3 per cent of the sample reported holding no relevant qualifications for English language teaching, 13.3 per cent held a Bachelor's level qualification, 52.3 per cent a Master's level degree, and 20.9 per cent a doctorate. Details of the participants are brought together in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Summary of online survey participants

<b>Continent/Global region</b>	Europe: 44.2% North America: 4.8 % South and Central America: 9.4% Africa: 2.9% Asia: 24.9% Middle East: 9.6% Oceania: 4.2%
<b>Sector</b>	Private: 38.4% State: 56.7% Other: 4.9% (e.g., charity and non-profit, military)
<b>Age of learners taught</b>	0–5 years: 0.6% 6–11 years: 6.3% 12–17 years: 24.9% 18–23 years: 42.4% 24+ years: 25.9%
<b>Highest relevant teaching qualification</b>	Certificate: 6.3% Diploma: 6.9% Bachelor's/first degree: 13.3% Master's/second degree: 52.3% Doctorate (PhD): 20.9% No relevant qualification: 0.3%
<b>Years of experience as an English language teacher</b>	0–4 years: 5.7% 5–9 years: 13.2% 10–14 years: 14.8% 15–19 years: 15.5% 20–24 years: 16.4% 25 or more years: 34.3%

Although the cohort of participants in the survey is relatively large, it is important to note the profile of this particular group of teachers, with its orientation towards those working in the state sector, those teaching learners who are secondary-aged or older (rather than primary-level teachers), and those who are relatively experienced and/or tend to possess postgraduate teaching qualifications. Given the vast and diverse nature of global ELT, it is impossible to establish how far this cohort is truly representative of teachers around the world.

That said, in comparison to the indifferent or negative attitudes towards research and research publications that teachers more generally are said to hold (see Section 2), those who participated in this project tended to be relatively positive about reading research and about the potential relevance of research to their own day-to-day professional lives; Table 2, for example, shows the majority of participants disagreed with statements which questioned the relevance of research to practice. The emergence of this particular cohort as participants in the research is understandable, given the time and work pressures most teachers

face, their perceived lack of interest in the topic, and, indeed, their access to the survey in its online format. And yet, while limiting the claims that can be made on behalf of the data, it seems reasonable to suggest that the perspectives of this particular group of ‘research-interested’ teachers are especially interesting to uncover. What lessons can be drawn – for researchers, for institutional managers, and for other teachers – about, for example, how engagement with research publications might support professional development; how some research appears irrelevant to even the most engaged teachers (perhaps due to its focus or presentational style) while other research does not; which research-oriented publications teachers actually read; the barriers teachers experience accessing research and possible ways of addressing these; and the issues that teachers would like to see research focus upon? Thus, the participants in this study provide a particularly informative set of insights into the relationship between research and practice, and between researchers and practitioners.

**Table 2:** Evidence for participating teachers’ general interest in published research

	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither dis/agree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
I am not interested in published research.	<b>49.1</b>	33.0	10.8	4.8	2.3
Reading research is not necessary as my own teaching experience is sufficient.	<b>45.0</b>	38.2	10.4	5.1	1.3
Published research is not relevant to my classroom context.	35.2	<b>40.9</b>	15.9	5.7	2.2
Published research does not see teaching and learning the way I do.	25.1	<b>42.2</b>	26.1	4.5	2.1
Published research is not relevant to my everyday classroom practice.	27.7	<b>45.8</b>	16.4	7.6	2.5
There is no opportunity to implement findings from published research in my school/institutional context.	22.8	<b>42.9</b>	18.8	11.5	4.1
Published research does not provide me with practical advice for teaching.	24.2	<b>36.2</b>	22.7	11.7	5.1

Note: most frequent answer highlighted

### 3.2.2 The interviews

As noted, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore themes within the questionnaire data in more detail. The interviews aimed, firstly, to provide greater insight into the thinking behind teachers' answers to the questions in the survey, eliciting experiences of and attitudes towards engaging with published research more generally. They also aimed to explore in more specific detail the participants' conceptions of 'teacher-friendly' research publications. Consequently, like Rossiter et al. (2013), participating teachers were provided with three research/research-oriented articles prior to the interviews, which acted as prompts and reference points during the discussion. To control for topic familiarity, all three articles focused on the same issue, the use of the learners' L1 in the language classroom, which I also considered to be a 'hot topic' of potential relevance and interest to most teachers working in most contexts around the world. However, the three articles varied in a number of ways, including their length, complexity of language used (including terminology), depth of literature review and number of references, and data analysis (including use of statistics). Thus, Schweers (1999) reported on a small-scale investigation into teacher behaviours and attitudes in the Puerto Rican institution he was teaching in; Copland and Neokleous (2011) drew on transcribed classroom data and teacher interviews to identify the reasons for L1 use in two schools in Cyprus; and Moore's (2013) study, undertaken over a seven-month period, examined Japanese students' use of their L1 as they prepared for oral presentation tasks. Published in *English Teaching Forum*, *ELT Journal*, and *The Modern Language Journal* respectively, all three articles were also freely available via online open-access at the time of the interviews.

The semi-structured interviews took place slightly later than initially planned for the project due to challenges posed by the Covid pandemic, over a six-week period in November–December 2020. The project's global reach meant that interviews were conducted online at distance, and at times suggested by participants living and working in different time-zones around the world. Use of the Blackboard Collaborate platform enabled both video- and audio-interaction, the sharing and, on occasion, annotation of documents (i.e., the three sample article prompts), and the recording of the interviews, which was undertaken with the agreement of all participants. The interviews were subsequently transcribed, and the data anonymised.

Although the interviews aimed to uncover participating teachers' own perspectives on and reported practices concerning their engagement with published research in ELT, we should acknowledge the collaborative and co-constructed nature of such encounters (including, for example, the interviewees' lack of anonymity to me, as researcher, and their consequent navigation of what they might have perceived to be the 'agenda' of the research) may have influenced the data (Mann, 2011).

#### **Profile of the interview participants**

Of the 696 survey respondents, 384 volunteered to be interviewed. Clearly, given that the semi-structured interviews were planned to last 35–45 minutes, it was unrealistic to speak to all who volunteered. Thus, 15 teachers were invited for interview, from a variety of contexts and with a range of professional experiences, with the aim of providing a stratified purposeful sample (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2018) which reflected key criteria in similar proportions to the wider survey population. These criteria were:

- sector (i): primary, secondary, tertiary, and other adult education/language classes
- sector (ii): state or private institution
- geographical spread: by country/global region
- length of English language teaching experience (years)

The 15 teachers were thus drawn from the following contexts/sectors:

- State: Brazil (primary); Malta (secondary); Greece, Iran, Netherlands, Oman (tertiary); Canada, UK (other adult)
- Private: China (primary); Argentina, Mexico, (secondary); Chile, Taiwan (tertiary); Germany, South Korea (other adult)

Although the interview sample sought to represent the wider survey population as closely as possible, countries and educational sectors are not homogeneous, and differences exist between institutions and within groups of teachers. The interviews thus provide illustrative insights, rather than full representation, of the questionnaire data. It is also again worth noting the particular composition of the cohort of participants in this study, and implications of this when answering the study's Research Questions (see Section 4).

### 3.3 Data analysis

The closed questionnaire data were analysed using SPSS Version 26, and descriptive statistics (e.g., mean averages, frequencies and distributions) were calculated for all questions. Open responses to survey items provided a substantial further data-set of 43,300 words, which, together with the interview transcripts, were analysed using Nvivo 11 software. These qualitative data were thematically coded and categorised to find commonalities and contrasts between both the interview participants themselves, and between the interview and the survey data. Such analysis is, of course, an interpretive activity in which the researcher plays an active role in developing understandings of the data (Talmy, 2011).

### 3.4 Research ethics

Ethical approval for the project was received in November 2019 from Northumbria University's Ethics Committee before the questionnaire was circulated and the interviews undertaken. All participants gave their informed consent for their participation. For the questionnaire, information outlining the project's aims and processes, its voluntary and anonymous nature, and the right of participants to withdraw at any time, was included in the introductory text preceding the survey questions. Consent was then assumed on an opt-in basis for those teachers who subsequently and voluntarily completed it. Interview participants were also informed in advance about the aims of the interviews, their anticipated length, and the likely themes for discussion, with also subsequent anonymity and confidentiality noted. Again, participants could withdraw from this stage of the project at any point. As noted above (Section 3.2.1), in order to develop a more balanced and reciprocal relationship between the researcher and participants, all respondents who expressed an interest will receive an e-copy of this final report.





# 4

## Results

This section presents a summary of results in relation to the research questions outlined in Section 3. Findings drawn from the quantitative questionnaire data will be supported by qualitative responses to the open-ended survey questions and by qualitative interview data. Before addressing the research questions, however, we shall look briefly at what participating teachers understand research to be, in order to establish common ground for the subsequent discussion.

### 4.1 The teachers' understandings of Research

Part 1 of the survey sought to uncover participating teachers' own understandings of research, asking them to rate the importance of a range of characteristics commonly associated with 'good quality research'. Table 3 lists their responses ordered according to the percentage of teachers who reported that a characteristic was 'more important'.

**Table 3:** Participating teachers' perspectives on the characteristics of research

Characteristics of 'good research'	Very important/ Important (%)	Moderately important (%)	Slightly important/ Not at all important (%)	Unsure (%)
The researcher is objective	85.5	8.7	3.4	2.5*
Results give teachers ideas for their classrooms	82.5	8.8	6.9	1.8
Results are made public	81.2	9.2	6.4	3.1
The research is systematic	79.2	10.0	9.0	1.9
Practical teaching problems are studied	75.8	13.6	7.6	2.9
The research aims to address teachers' concerns	73.4	13.9	10.2	2.5
Information is collected in classrooms	63.3	19.0	13.7	3.8
Hypotheses are tested	62.7	20.6	13.6	3.2
Results apply to many English language teaching contexts	59.6	19.3	17.9	3.2
The research explains what already happens	56.3	25.5	15.2	2.9
A large number of people are studied	55.3	23.9	19.4	2.3
Information is analysed using statistics	47.9	25.0	22.0	5.1
A large volume of data is collected	45.6	26.9	23.7	3.8
The research leads to new theories	45.5	28.1	23.6	2.8
Experiments are used	45.2	24.8	24.1	5.9

For presentational purposes, the table merges the two Likert responses 'Very important' and 'Important', and, similarly, 'Slightly important' and 'Not at all important'.

\*Note: responses for each characteristic do not always total 100% due to rounding up/down

As Table 3 shows, ‘The researcher is objective’ was the most highly rated characteristic of research, with ‘Results are made public’ and ‘The research is systematic’ also scoring highly. To some extent, therefore, participating teachers tended to conceive of research in ways which align with scientific and/or ‘traditional’ models of research. It is notable, however, that ‘Results give teachers ideas for their classrooms’ was the second most highly ranked characteristic, whilst ‘Practical teaching problems are studied’ and ‘The research aims to address teachers’ concerns’ were also rated highly, as, respectively, the 5th and 6th most important characteristics of research according to the participants. Teachers’ pragmatic concerns when conceiving of research were thus ranked above ideas such as ‘Hypotheses are tested’, ‘Results may apply to many ELT contexts’, ‘A large volume of data is collected’, and ‘Research leads to new theories’.

The findings indicate, therefore, that these teachers tended to understand research as something which can develop their pragmatic, pedagogic knowledge if it is undertaken objectively and systematically (confirming the suggestions outlined in Section 2.2, above). Whilst they recognized the development of propositional knowledge through, for example, theory-building and the presentation of widely applicable findings, these were regarded as less important characteristics of research. Similar conceptualizations were also articulated within the qualitative responses to the open-ended survey questions and during interviews, which, whilst demonstrating a clear orientation towards pragmatic concerns, also noted the role teachers themselves might sometimes take in navigating research findings and publications in order to make sense of it for their own teaching in their specific contexts. For example:

***I want something that is easy to understand or relates to my experience, and is not about discussing the different points of view of researchers. (Iran; survey)***

***[Research should...] respond to real-life teaching problems, rather than ivory tower issues, study real classrooms, learners, and teachers, ... [avoid] poor quality, biased, ideologically-motivated “research”. (Canada; survey)***

***Published research should deal with solutions to the immediate needs of the community in the first place and the needs of teachers, learners and educational centres. (Germany; interview)***

***Research is a tool for teachers to use. (no context provided; survey)***

***I get to make my own judgement call – I’m an adult and I can figure out what this could be leaning toward ... I’m going to bring these new ideas in my classroom and I’m going to watch my students and see ‘oh, does this bear out, you know, accord with what I observed?’ (Canada; interview)***

***I think [the relevance of research to teachers] depends on why the teacher wants to read the paper and who the paper is aimed at... . (South Korea; interview)***

As these perspectives suggest, the ways in which this group of teachers characterize research is closely linked to the ways in which they read and engage with research publications, and it is to this key focus of the project and its four Research Questions that the discussion now turns.



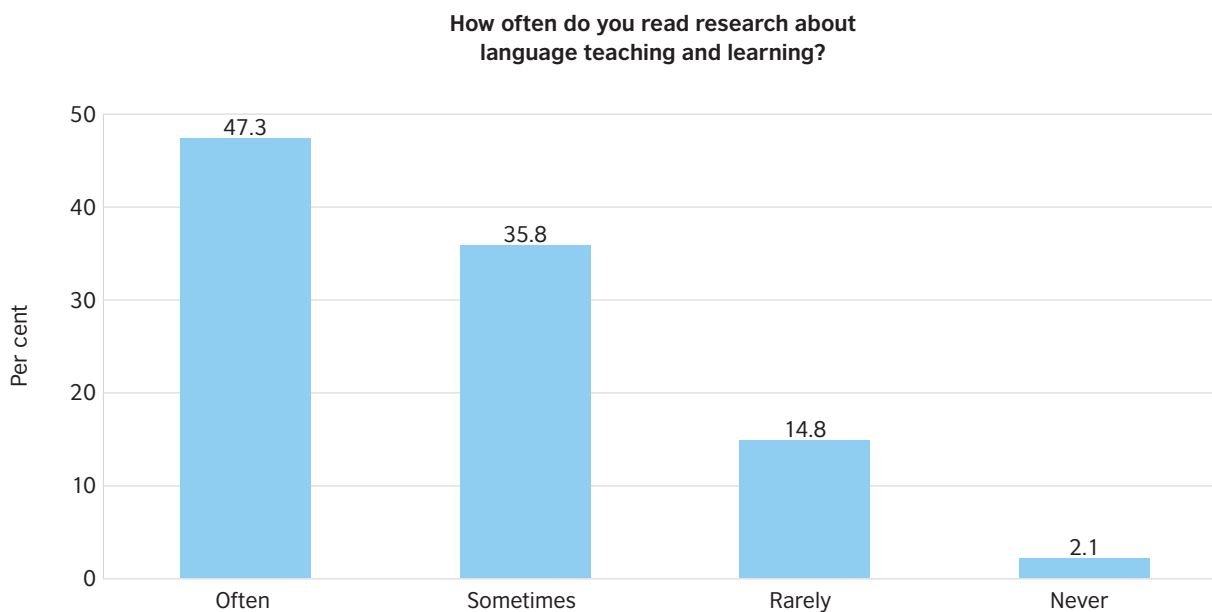
## 4.2 RQ1: To what extent do the teachers report that they read research – in both its original published form and through other research-oriented professional literature?

As Figure 1 shows, of the 696 teachers who completed the questionnaire, 47.3 per cent reported reading research about language teaching and learning ‘often’, with 35.5 per cent indicating that they ‘sometimes’ read research; 14.8 per cent reported ‘rarely’ reading research, while just 2.1% of the surveyed teachers reportedly ‘never’ accessed research-oriented literature about ELT.

It is important to note again (see also Section 3.2.1), therefore, that the teachers participating in this study represent a particular cross-section of the wider ELT profession – that is, those connected to or active within Teachers’ Associations and/or other teaching communities which were made aware of the research, those able to access the survey online, and, importantly, those who had enough interest in the topic to spend time to complete the questionnaire; as we have seen (Section 2.3), there are regular claims within the field that most teachers are not interested in reading research. As we continue to survey the data in this study, therefore, we should note that participants are most appropriately characterized as ‘teachers who read research’ (see also Sections 1, Introduction, and 3, Research Methodology).

Yet what previous studies (e.g., Borg, 2009; Marsden and Kasprovicz, 2017) also found is that whilst many teachers may tend not to read research in its original form, some often engage with research through other types of publication (e.g., newsletters and magazines), online summaries, and so forth. Thus, teachers in this study who reported reading research ‘often’, ‘sometimes’, or ‘rarely’ (totalling 97.9 per cent of all participants) also identified the types of publication they read. Table 4 lists their responses to the question ‘have you ever read about research in...?’, and shows that just over 78 per cent of respondents reported reading about research in, respectively, professional newsletters or magazines (78.9 per cent) and on the internet (78.3 per cent). Academic journals were reportedly accessed by slightly fewer participants (by 70.6 per cent of the cohort), which, in turn, was a higher percentage than those who reported reading about research in teacher development/education books (69.4 per cent). British Council ELT Research Reports were reportedly less accessed, perhaps due to their being a very specific publication type and fewer in number than the very broad categories of ‘newsletters’, ‘magazines’, and ‘journals’.

Figure 1: Reported frequency with which participating teachers read research



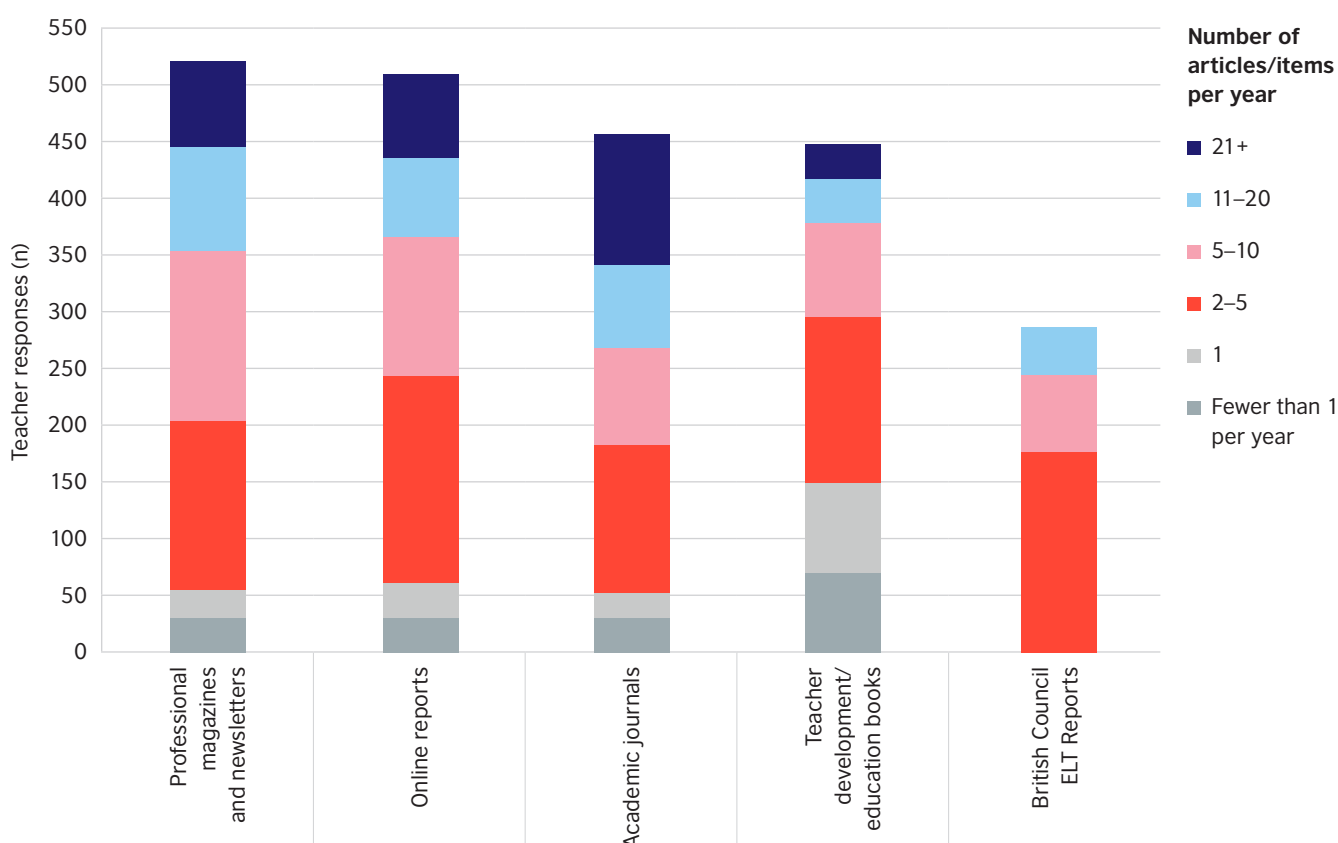
**Table 4:** Types of publication in which participating teachers report reading research or about research

Have you ever read about research in...	Yes (%)	No (%)
... a professional newsletter or magazine? (e.g., IATEFL SIG newsletters, Teacher Association newsletters, IATEFL Voices, English Teaching Professional)	78.9	21.1
... on the internet? (e.g., on a blog or teacher development/education website, in which the author summarises and/or interprets others' research (but does not necessarily report their own research findings)?)	78.3	21.7
... an academic journal? (e.g., ELT Journal, Language Teaching Research, System, TESOL Quarterly) <sup>3</sup>	70.6	29.4
... a teacher development or teacher education book (in which the author summarises and/or interprets others' research, but does not necessarily report their own research findings)?)	69.4	30.6
... a British Council ELT Research Report?	50.8	49.2

For each type of publication that the respondents had reported reading, the survey then asked how frequently they did so ('How many articles about research do you read each year in: professional magazines or newsletters/ academic journals / on the internet ...?'). As Figure 2 shows, the survey found that the differing types of research publications were

reportedly read with relatively similar frequencies by those participants who accessed them – few respondents, for example, read fewer than or only one newsletter, online item, or academic journal article per year, most reportedly reading between 2–10 items, with fewer again reading 11–20 or more than 20 articles per year.

**Figure 2:** Number of articles per year that participating teachers report reading, by type of research publication



<sup>3</sup>While the difference between professional newsletters/magazines and academic journals is generally clear, there are occasional differences of perspective regarding some publications. With its aim 'to link the everyday concerns of practitioners with insights gained from relevant academic disciplines', *ELT Journal* is at times subject to such discussions. However, noting its publication of research articles and its Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) listing, this project sees *ELTJ* as an academic journal, albeit one which occupies a particular place within the field. And, more broadly, SSCI-listing is taken as the boundary between professional newsletters/magazines and academic journals throughout this research. Although the status of *TESOL Quarterly* as an academic journal is less debated (in part, perhaps, due to articles' length and methodological detail), it too aims to publish 'articles on topics of significance to individuals concerned with English language teaching and learning and standard English as a second dialect ... both theoretical and practical'.

(Sources: <https://academic.oup.com/eltj/> and <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/15457249>)

That said and as Figure 2 shows, there was of course some variation in the responses. For example, while 28.8 per cent of the 520 teachers who reported reading about research in professional magazines and newsletters did so 2–5 times per year (the most frequent response from readers of all publication types), 35.9 per cent of respondents who read research reports online (n=507) also reported doing so 2–5 times per year. Yet perhaps the most notable variation in the data is the number of readers of academic journals who report accessing over 20 articles per year (25 percent of the 519 respondents) – an evident difference to the readership trends when compared to other types of publication (e.g., only 14.6 per cent of those who read about research in professional newsletters and magazines accessed over 20 articles per year). Possible reasons for this include the particular profile of the teachers participating in this study, the different reasons participants might have for reading the various types of publication, the nature and focus of the articles published, and so forth; we shall unpack these issues further as the discussion continues.

Respondents who indicated that they read about research in either professional newsletters and magazines and/or in academic journals (n=594 of the survey’s total of 696 participants) were asked to name up to three publications they read most regularly. Academic journals constituted 56.1 per cent, and professional newsletters and magazines 43.9 per cent, of the 1168 titles participants named. However, as Table 5 shows, the two publications participants reported most regularly reading were *ELT Journal* and *TESOL Quarterly*, academic journals which specifically aim to address the concerns of practitioners (see Footnote 2, above, for further details). These two journals accounted for 30.6 per cent of the total number of publications ‘read most regularly’ by participating teachers. Thus, although we can see that teachers did report reading academic journal articles regularly, these were from these two particular, practice/practitioner-oriented journals.

**Table 5:** Ten most frequently reported publications read by participating teachers

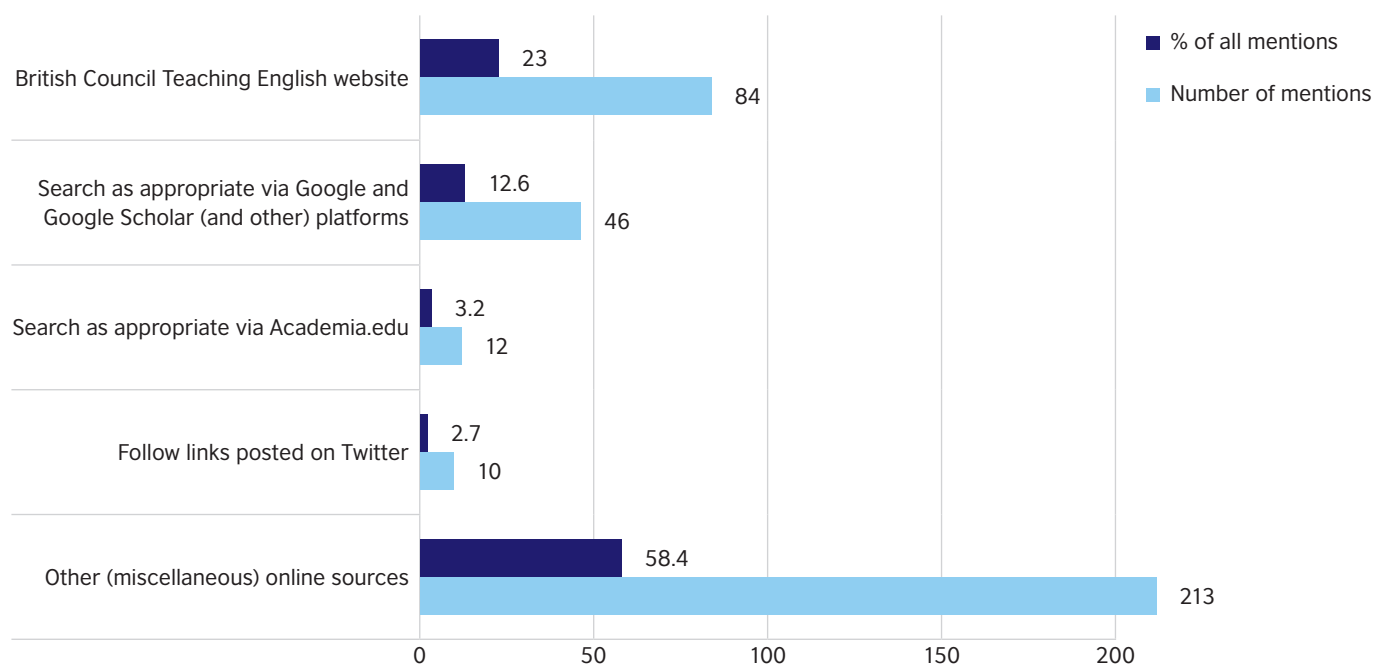
Publication	Type of publication	Number of mentions	% of all mentions
<i>ELT Journal</i>	Academic journal	194	16.6
<i>TESOL Quarterly</i>	Academic journal	164	14.0
<i>National Teacher Association newsletters and magazines *</i>	Professional magazines and newsletters	109	9.3
<i>IATEFL Voices</i>	Professional magazines and newsletters	93	8.0
<i>English Teaching Professional</i>	Professional magazines and newsletters	65	5.6
<i>IATEFL SIG newsletters **</i>	Professional magazines and newsletters	61	5.2
<i>British Council ‘Teaching English’ newsletter</i>	Professional magazines and newsletters	38	3.3
<i>System</i>	Academic journal	38	3.3
<i>Language Teaching Research</i>	Academic journal	30	2.6
<i>Applied Linguistics</i>	Academic journal	25	2.1

\*Note: the analysis has brought together the wide range of publications named by participants within each of these starred categories. Thus, *National Teacher Association newsletters and magazines* includes all publications by TAs in, for example, Argentina, India, Italy, Japan Mexico, Peru, Spain, and South Korea. *IATEFL SIG newsletters* includes all named publications by, for example, IATEFL’s Business English, Pronunciation, Research, and Teacher Development SIGs.

Table 5 also shows that, beyond *ELT Journal* and *TESOL Quarterly*, teachers tended to refer most regularly to a wide range of international and national professional magazines and newsletters. Furthermore, as we have seen (Table 4 and Figure 2, above), teachers drew on a range of alternative sources to find out about research. For example, when identifying specific online sites used regularly to read about research, the British Council’s ‘TeachingEnglish’<sup>4</sup> website was by some way the most frequently mentioned source (23 per cent of 365 participant references to online sites; see Figure 3). Meanwhile, 38.8 per cent of survey respondents identified at least one mediating publication or book series as a regular source through which to read about research.

The perspectives of this survey sample, therefore, add to the key themes and trends identified in the literature. Although the extent to which these participants report reading research is, depending on one’s point of reference, slightly or somewhat higher than some previous studies of teachers’ engagement, it is clear that research is accessed from a variety of types of publications and related sources, most notably, from those specifically written with practitioner interests in mind. But what factors shape and/or limit the extent and ways in which teachers engage with published research? It is to these questions that we now turn.

**Figure 3:** Most frequently reported online sources/sites for reading about research



<sup>4</sup><https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/>

## 4.3 RQ2: What reasons do the teachers give for this level of engagement with research publications – why do they say they read research, and what do they report as discouraging or preventing them from doing so?

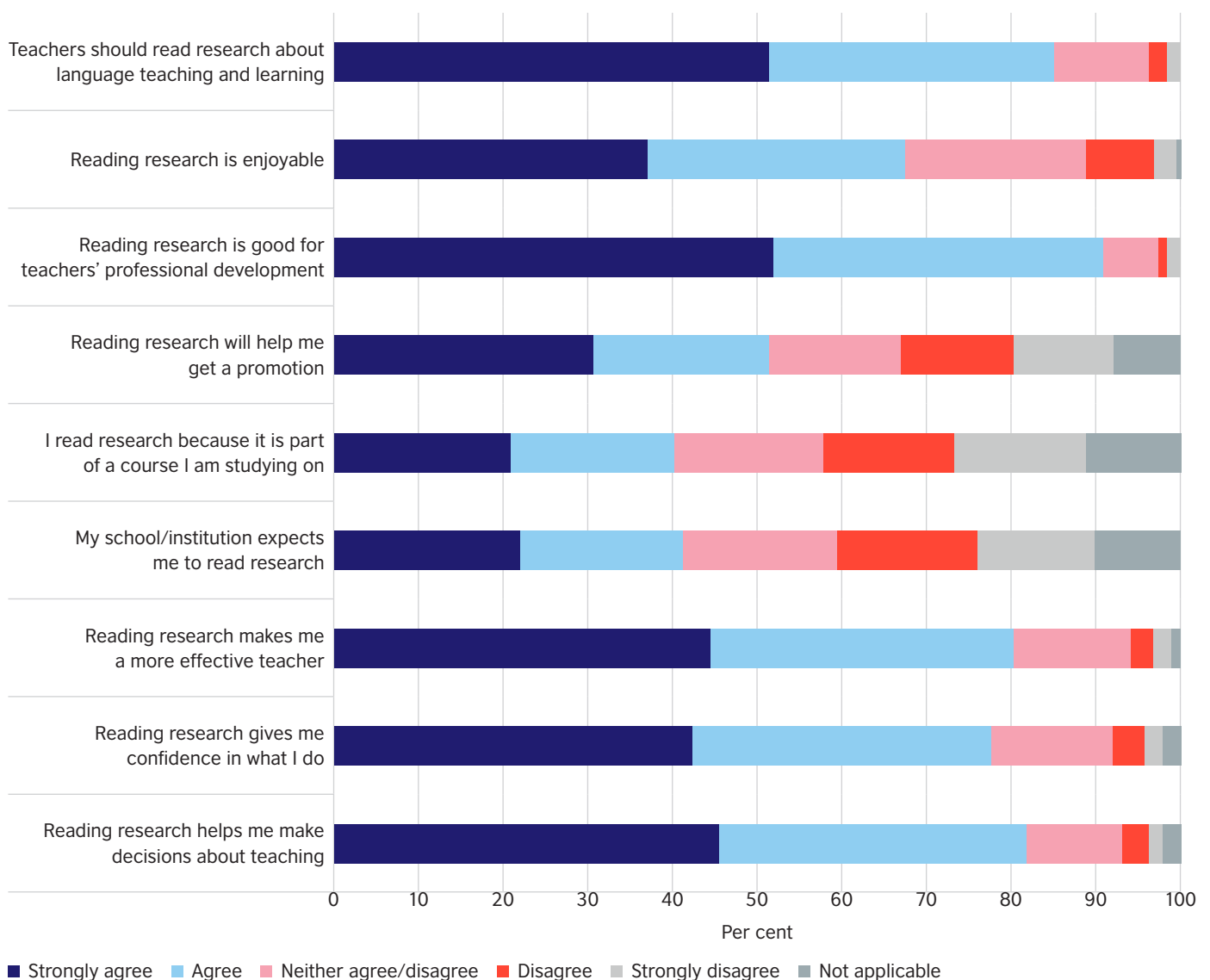
### 4.3.1 Reasons the teachers give for reading research

Drawing on a range of ideas previously suggested within the relevant literature (see Section 2.4) and by participants in the pilot study, the survey explored why teachers might engage with research-oriented publications, asking participants to evaluate a range of possible reasons for reading research. As Figure 4 shows, a significant majority (85 per cent) of the survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the broad statement that teachers ‘should’ read research, some further qualitative responses suggesting a notion of ‘duty’ or ‘obligation’, for example:

*language teachers in general (not just English) have a duty ... Keeping up-to-date by reading about current research practices and findings, and by attending conferences and arranging research-based meetings internally, are essential. (South Korea; survey)*

*Research should be seen as something very much a normal part of a teacher’s work. (Brazil; survey)<sup>5</sup>*

Figure 4: Reported reasons for reading research



<sup>5</sup>It is notable, however, that the Brazilian teacher cited above also commented that ‘time and space within a curriculum should be made so that this can be achieved’, a point we shall return to when examining the constraints on teachers’ engagement with published research.

Unpacking more specific reasons that might underpin this general perspective, while a small majority reported that reading research was ‘enjoyable’ (58.1 per cent), 81 per cent of respondents strongly agreed/agreed that reading research was good for teachers’ professional development. The survey data thus suggests that most teachers participating in this project read research in order to support or develop their teaching, respondents reporting that reading research made them ‘a more effective teacher’ (80.1 per cent); gave them confidence in what they do (77.9 per cent); and helped them make decisions about teaching (81.8 per cent). Further qualitative survey and interview comments emphasised this focus on teaching, and on supporting or validating practice:

***Research papers range from very theoretical towards very practical, I think teachers are more interested in the practical side of the continuum. (Iran; survey)***

***I read to validate a direction I might be leaning in... if I find a paper to support that direction, [it] gives me more momentum and then I might actually go out and start looking for even more research to back me up. (Canada; interview)***

***[if you are] ... short of confidence, then you read papers and it seems that you are not isolated from the ELT world. (Iran; interview)***

***Research helps give teachers ideas and saves some wheel-reinventing, but even the best (i.e. best conducted and reported) research will not necessarily be replicable in your teaching context. (Netherlands; survey)***

Thus, the teachers’ responses do not demonstrate an unquestioning desire to access and engage with all research into language teaching and learning. Taken alongside the types of publications teachers reported reading (see Section 4.2, above), the data suggests teachers seek out research which seems to them to be practically orientated and/or aligns in some way with their classroom context and concerns, albeit not necessarily directly.

These positive perceptions of the links between reading research and more effective classroom practice contrast sharply with participating teachers’ perspectives on more institutional concerns which are sometimes put forward as reasons for teachers’ engagement with research publications; only 19.7 per cent felt that reading research would help them gain a promotion, and less than a third of respondents (32.6 per cent) reported that their school/institution expected them to read research. This suggests that the extent to which schools support teachers’ (i.e., those teachers who are interested) engagement with research publications is potentially problematic, a point noted above (Section 2.6) and to which we shall return shortly.

#### 4.3.2 Comparing research publications and other sources of information in the teachers’ professional lives

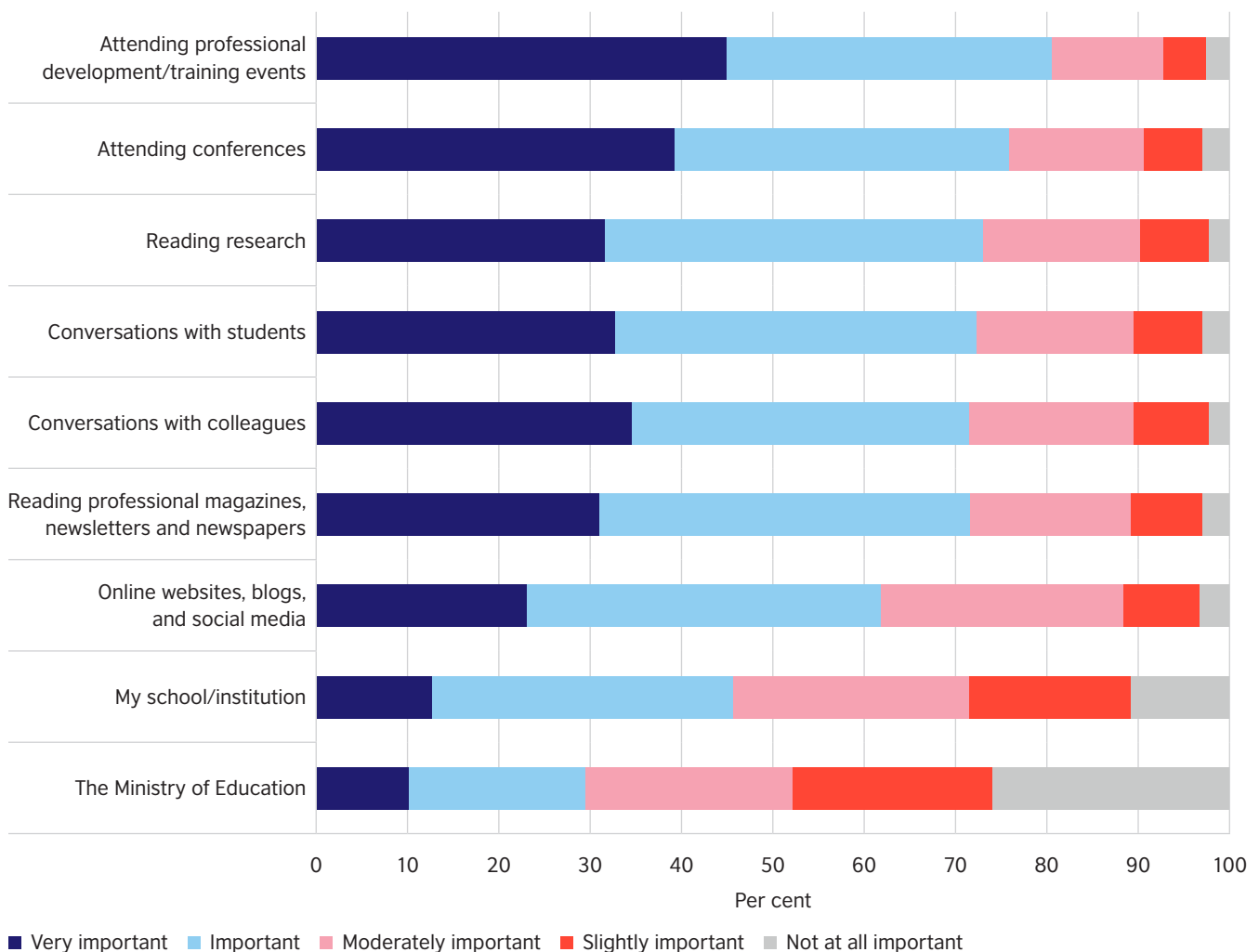
Although the vast majority of teachers who completed the survey saw reading research as important for their professional development (see above, 4.3.1), engaging with published research is, of course, just one element of a wider range of developmental activities that teachers may engage in (see Section 2’s introductory discussion). Others include attending conferences or professional development/training events, speaking to colleagues and/or students, and so forth, and to treat ‘reading research’ as an isolated activity is to lose sight of this broader picture. The survey thus sought to establish the place of reading research relative to other sources of information teachers might access in order to learn about developments and innovations within the field (more generally), and to address classroom challenges and difficulties (more specifically).

Figure 5 thus shows the value participants placed on differing sources of information which helped them learn about innovations in ELT. Overall, while 72.9 per cent of the teachers regarded reading research as either a ‘very important’ or ‘important’ way of keeping up with developments in the field, attending professional development/training events and attending conferences were regarded as more significant (respectively, 80.6 and 76.1 per cent of participants reporting these to be ‘very important’ or ‘important’). Meanwhile, conversations with students, conversations with colleagues, and reading professional magazines/newsletters/papers were all seen as being similarly important to reading research (72.4, 71.8 and 71.8 per cent of respondents reporting that these activities were very important/important sources of information). It was perhaps surprising that ‘only’ 61.7 per cent of survey participants considered online sources of information such as websites, blogs and social media to be very important or important (particularly, perhaps, given that details of the survey were circulated largely via online communities who might be expected to be particularly engaged with web-based sites, see Section 3); participants’ schools/

institutions and ministries of education were not seen as particularly important by most participants. Beyond those activities specifically referenced in the survey (and illustrated in Figure 5), a number of other ways of keeping up-to-date were suggested by respondents, including observing other teachers, participating in a professional mentoring scheme, and, in particular, teachers engaging in research projects of their own – which is increasingly focused upon in the field of ELT, but which lies beyond the focus of this project (see Section 1, Introduction).

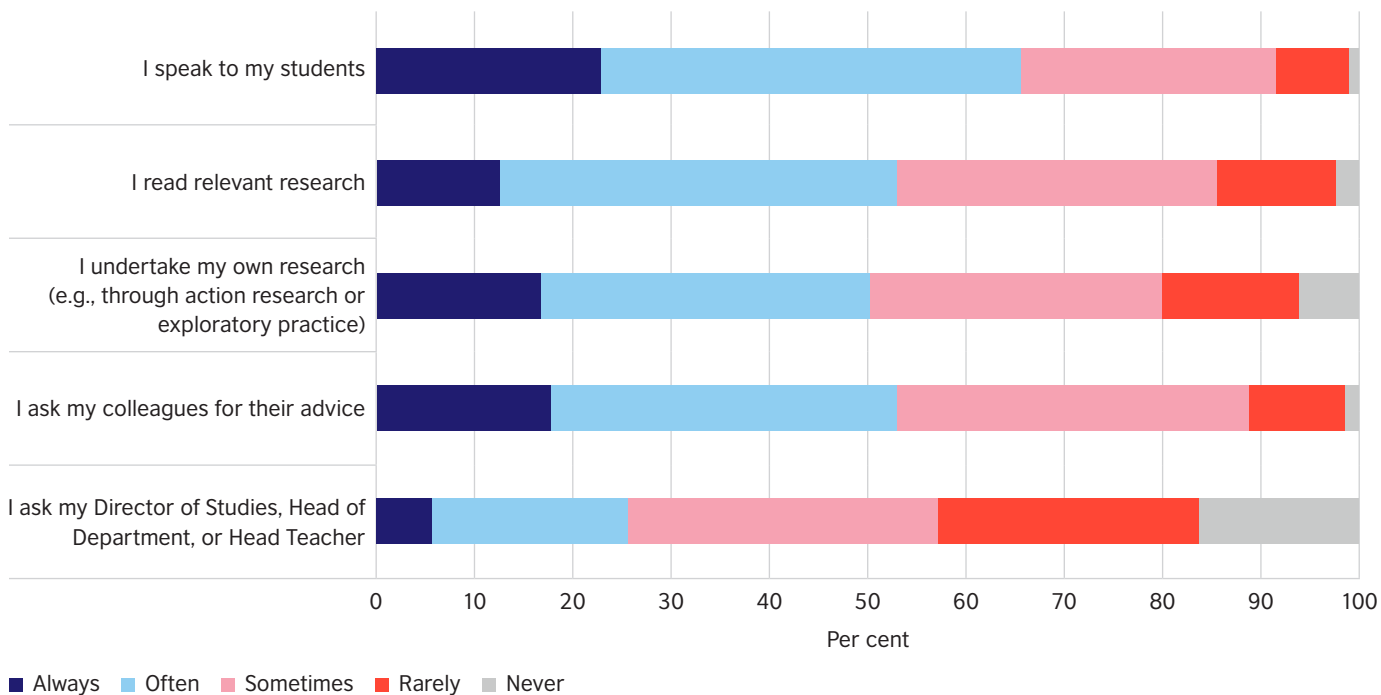
The survey data also indicates that participating teachers saw a role for published research when reflecting on or addressing challenges or difficulties within their classrooms. Although the most frequently sought source of help, support and ideas came from teachers’ own students (65.6 per cent reporting they ‘always’ or ‘often’ spoke to their students when challenges arose), 63.2 per cent of teachers said they always or often read relevant research (see Figure 6 for a detailed breakdown of the data for these and other sources of support which teachers might access).

**Figure 5:** Reported importance of differing sources of information in keeping up with developments and innovations in ELT





**Figure 6:** Reported importance of differing sources of information for addressing classroom challenges or difficulties



For participants in this study, therefore, engaging with published research is seen both as a way of keeping in touch with general developments across the field of ELT and, to a slightly lesser extent, as a possible source of ideas and information to help them address practical classroom challenges. However, whilst reading research *is* regarded as valuable by respondents (who, as noted, constitute a specific group of ELT teachers who are particularly interested in the role published research might play in their professional lives), it is notably only one element of the wider range of possible developmental activities they engage in. One or two other sources of information are regarded as slightly more important or are accessed slightly more often. Particularly interesting, perhaps, is the importance ascribed to professional development events and conferences in keeping track of developments and innovations within ELT, as it is at such events that both research findings and implications for practice are often summarised through presentations and workshops. This raises interesting questions about the ways in which research and ideas for practice drawn from research might be most effectively disseminated and made accessible to ELT practitioners, issues to which we shall return in Section 4.5, and made more pressing by the barriers to reading research that teachers often face. It is to these difficulties that we now turn.

### 4.3.3 What prevents the teachers from reading research?

A range of possible barriers to reading research were explored. These ranged from concerns around the accessibility of research both in terms of the way research is presented in writing (e.g., the use of terminology or the sometimes challenging nature of academic discourse) and concerns about, for example, physical availability and cost, to the extent to which institutional/school policies, practices and cultures supported or encouraged participating teachers to engage with research publications. The survey therefore asked participating teachers to indicate the extent to which a range of specific issues prevented them from reading research, or from reading more research than they did at the time of completing the questionnaire.



A number of initial insights emerge from the survey data. For example, as Figure 7 shows (column 1), the majority of respondents identified a **lack of time** as a preventing them from reading research; 66.0 per cent of the sample agreed with this perspective, many very strongly, and just 20.0 per cent disagreed. Similarly, the **cost of accessing published research** (column 3) was also seen as a barrier by many participants, albeit to a lesser extent with 49.2 per cent agreeing that it prevented them from reading research, whilst 36.7 per cent disagreed. Interestingly, fewer of this group of teachers identified issues surrounding the way in which research is presented in writing as a particular problem, at least in this survey data (see below for more discussion, however). For example, just 26.5 per cent and 26.4 per cent respectively of participants reported that **difficulties in understanding published research** (column 2) and the **terminology** used (column 4) prevented them from reading research publications.

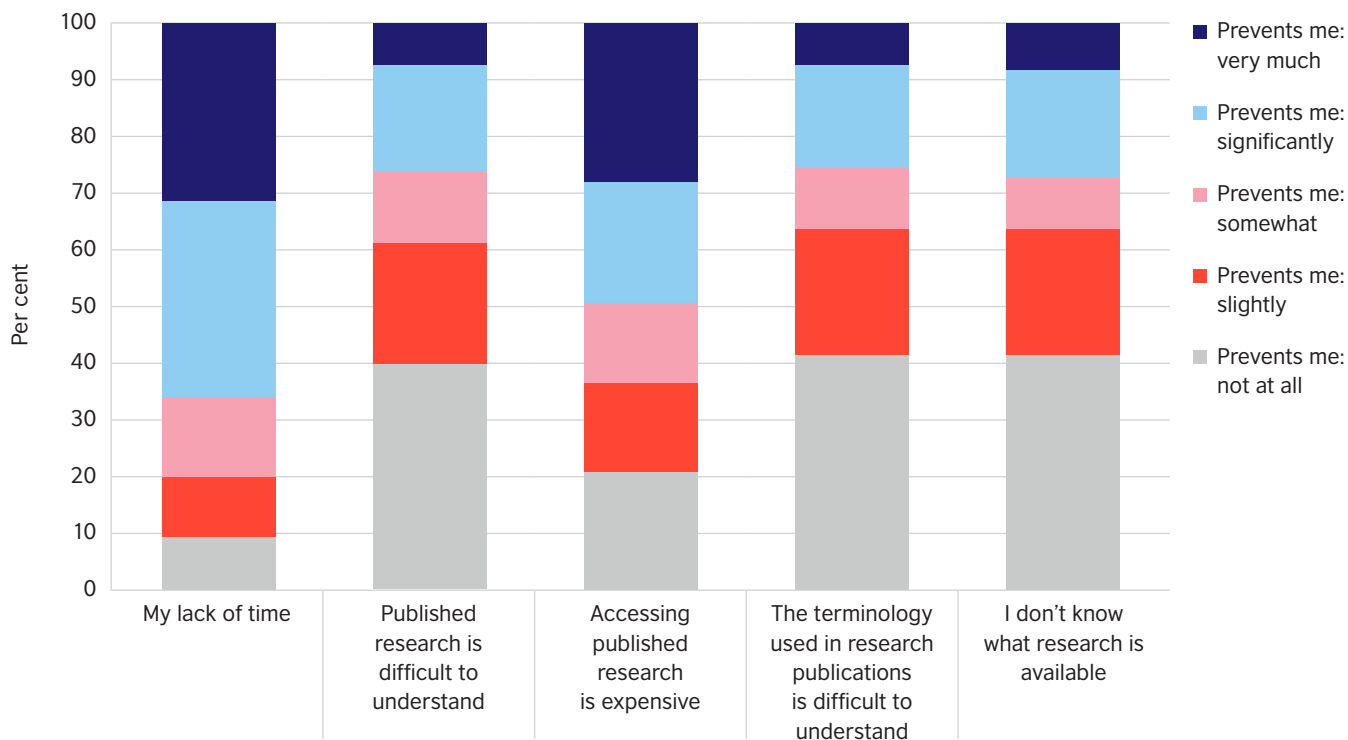
The overview provided by these quantitative responses seems to suggest, therefore, that participating teachers saw the main barriers to reading research as broadly ‘institutional’; in other words, issues such as lack of time and concerns about high access costs, which reflect teachers’ working conditions and pay, seemed to be more significant than the presentation of the research *per se*. Indeed, time and expense also emerged as key themes within the participants’ qualitative survey and interview responses, for example:

**Teachers of English are often on poorly paid, or short, contracts. (Spain; survey)**

**Theoretical research can be interesting but finding time to sit, read and digest a research paper is difficult. (Malta; survey)**

**Appreciation from the institute ... [and] ... workload are the barriers. (India; survey)**

Figure 7: Reported barriers to reading (more) research



Furthermore, some participants also noted the extent to which institutional barriers to reading research shaped the wider culture and attitudes towards reading research within staffrooms and amongst similar groupings of teachers. From this perspective, those who are interested in reading research may feel they lack a community of like-minded peers with whom they can share their ideas, reflections and enthusiasms, due in part to culture of, and support offered by, the institution in which they teach. For example:

***One common barrier ... relates to the micro-culture of a particular school or sub-set of teachers. If nobody in the group reads research, and if there is no suggestion from managers that this would be a good thing for teachers to do, they are unlikely to even think of reading research report. (survey; Germany)***

Although this perspective offers important insights into the barriers to reading research, it is somewhat problematic as it potentially places responsibility for the 'research-practice gap' on institutions and/or even on individual teachers, thereby implicitly suggesting that in order to narrow this gap, either institutions and/or teachers will need to change (assuming change is desirable! See also Section 2.6). Yet putting the onus to change on teachers seems unreasonable, given the challenging constraints most work within. Meanwhile, as Kerr (2021: n.p.) argues, in most schools, 'suggestions for institutional support (e.g., time release and financial support for teachers) are just pie in the sky', and arguing that that schools can and should take responsibility for 'narrowing the gap' is simply unrealistic.

It is not surprising, therefore, that participating teachers went beyond these understandings in the perspectives they shared via the qualitative survey and interview data, presenting a more nuanced picture in which the institutional constraints on teachers intertwine with the often-demanding characteristics of much published research, and indeed, with the sheer volume of research and research-oriented publications available. Many participants emphasized the challenges of the initial search for research that was particularly appropriate or useful for their teaching context, for example:

***the biggest problem is selecting the research that is the most relevant ... With the proliferation of ideas and publications, that is increasingly hard to do. (survey; Spain)***

***not all research is equally useful. (survey; Netherlands)***

Others doubted more explicitly the value of there being so much research with a potential claim on their attention, and, consequently, the value of many individual research publications that teachers might encounter in their search for something relevant:

***I feel there are far more people out there writing about education than necessary, and trying to find something useful is like fishing in a lake that is doubling as a dumping ground. Finding anything of any value is a tedious task. (survey; Japan)***

***[Research is] how progress is made, but it doesn't need all these competing newsletters and editorials and blogs trying to 'make it accessible' ... This engenders resistance, whereas it should engender interest and feelings of being supported. Overall, in summary, we need a massive reduction in the amount of it that gets hurled in our faces, otherwise we can't sort what's relevant to us from the rest. (survey; South Korea)***

Furthermore, once teachers had finally managed to identify publications of interest from the volume available, reading these papers and articles could often demand of their readers more than could be comfortably accommodated; as a Canadian teacher pointed out, for example:

***Teachers are very busy with marking and lesson planning and sometimes ... when research [papers are] too long they might not even start reading. (interview; Canada)***

Here, whether a teacher reads research depends not only on the time they have available but also on whether reading a particular publication is worthwhile given its length and the consequent effort required to read it. Other participants noted similar issues:

***Research mustn't be too long – edible chunks are easier to digest. A series of short articles is easier to fit into a busy schedule. (survey; France)***

***Keeping research to a maximum of three pages ... would make them most easy to digest for busy teachers. (survey; Japan)***

Meanwhile, although many participants reported relatively few problems with 'the language of research' in the quantitative data, the complexity of many papers was noted, particular in relation to those teachers whose first language is not English. For example

***We know that they have to use that language in a way but in fact it makes it difficult to access, difficult for practitioners who access it. It is a special genre as we know but that makes it difficult for the general population that actually needs this kind of research. (interview; Greece)***

***The final conclusions from the research should be concise and well written in language understandable to the average teacher who is not a native speaker. (survey; Poland)***

Clearly, the discussion above suggests that even teachers who are generally positive about reading published research and *do* seem to overcome most barriers to engaging with research publications perceive complications and challenges as they first seek out and then read material which they find relevant and useful. Consequently, many have clear views about both how research might be brought more in-line with teachers' needs and interests, thereby reducing the challenges of the initial search for relevant material. And they also hold a range of perspectives as to how research findings and their associated practical implications might be more effectively presented or disseminated within the field. Implicit in these perspectives are the ideas that:

- the research agenda(s) for ELT might draw more on teachers' perspectives and priorities (i.e., *teachers might contribute slightly more in setting the agenda*)
- *researchers, rather than teachers*, might need to reconsider the ways in which their publication and dissemination practices meet the needs of and constraints on a practitioner audience (if, that is, teachers are an audience which researchers are interested in reaching; as noted in Section 2.2, this is quite reasonably sometimes not the case).

It is to these two issues that our discussion of the data now turns, uncovering the participating teachers' own priorities for research in ELT to focus upon, before examining their perspectives on how such research might more effectively be presented and disseminated within the field.

#### 4.4 RQ3: What topics and issues do the teachers themselves prioritize as potential focuses for research and research publications in ELT?

When identifying their own priorities for ELT research, participating teachers first identified, in broad terms, the kinds of research they were interested in reading before noting more specific topics or issues within English language teaching and learning which they thought research should focus upon.

Table 6 thus illustrates a clear tendency for the vast majority of teachers who participated in this study to be ‘very interested’ or ‘interested’ in published research which focus on ‘teaching/practice’, ‘practical teaching problems’ and ‘ideas for using in the classroom’ (91.2 per cent, 89.8 per cent, and 88.0 per cent respectively). And although slightly fewer participants reported being ‘very interested’ or ‘interested’ in research focusing on classrooms in

more general terms (e.g., which ‘aims to explain what takes place’ (83.8 per cent), or provides ‘accounts of what happens in everyday lessons and classrooms’ (72.6 per cent) ) rather than addressing specific teaching problems or practices *per se*, it is clear that this groups of teachers’ general preference was towards research with a strong classroom or practice-focused orientation. It is also evident that far fewer teachers were particularly interested in research which, for example, is experimental, tests hypotheses, or undertakes statistical analysis and/or examines large volumes of data. These perspectives align with findings identified earlier in this report, building upon the reasons for reading research reported by teachers (Section 4.3.1), and illustrating why respondents reported reading most regularly certain publication types and titles (i.e., professional newsletters and magazines, and academic journals with an explicit focus on practitioner concerns such as *ELT Journal* and *TESOL Quarterly*; see Section 4.2).

**Table 6:** Participating teachers’ reported interest in research publications with differing focuses, aims and/or goals

	Very interested / interested	Moderately interested	Slightly / not at all interested	Unsure
Accounts which / in which ...	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
... focus on teaching/practice	91.2	5.6	1.4	1.8
... practical teaching problems are studied	89.8	5.3	2.8	2.1
... suggest ideas for using in the classroom	88.0	6.6	3.2	2.2
... aim to explain what takes place in classrooms	83.8	10.7	4.5	1.0
... research is undertaken by teachers investigating their own classroom/ context	80.5	11.9	5.0	2.6
... results apply to many English language teaching contexts	78.2	12.5	6.6	2.7
...what happens in everyday lessons and classrooms	72.6	15.4	11.0	1.0
... focus on experimental research	60.3	25	14.5	0.2
... a large number of people or classrooms are studied	59.5	23.5	15.0	2.0
... test hypotheses	51.5	27.1	18.7	2.7
... focus on theory/theories	50.1	24.8	24.3	0.8
... examine a large volume of data	42	27.9	27.1	3.0
... use statistical analysis	39.2	28.7	28.7	0.4

This table draws together participant perspectives via their Likert scale responses to 13 statements. It should be acknowledged that the statements are not mutually exclusive (e.g., studies ‘of practical teaching problems’ can lead to suggested ‘ideas for using in the classroom’, a ‘focus on theories’ can underpin research ‘involving a large volume of data’ and can aim to ‘explain what takes place in classrooms’). For presentational purposes, the table merges the two Likert responses ‘Very Interesting’ and ‘Interesting’, and, similarly, ‘Slightly interesting’ and ‘Not at all interesting’.

Subsequently, participants were asked to identify up to three specific areas which they felt that ‘research related to ELT should focus upon’. In response, 509 respondents made more than 1,200 suggestions. And, although these priorities were unsurprisingly wide-ranging given the number of teachers and their varied professional contexts and experiences, a series of common themes and shared priorities concerning research related to ELT emerged. These ranged, for example, from a focus on teaching **the language** to focusing on **classroom actions and activities** and **online learning**; and from an orientation towards to **learners** and an interest in **psychological processes** in language learning to the context and **conditions for teachers and teaching**. While a number of more **theoretical interests** were noted, some areas of current academic research and publication were notable by their absence.

#### 4.4.1 Teaching language skills and structures

Around one-third of respondents made some reference to the teaching of **language** in their priorities for research, and, interestingly, the majority of these references focused on **skills**, some teachers referring to ‘all 4 skills’ (i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking), others highlighting one or two of these areas in particular. Those references to writing were generally framed in terms of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP), whilst ‘speaking’ tended to be linked to the wish to read more research into the development of spoken fluency in the classroom, and also to ‘pronunciation’. Surprisingly, perhaps, only 22 respondents (4 per cent of respondents) prioritized research into vocabulary or vocabulary teaching, whilst only 63 teachers (12 per cent) suggested that focusing on **grammar** or **grammar teaching** was a key research priority. Responses concerning research into grammar teaching generally reflected particular concerns or interests (‘e.g., ... in EAP contexts’, ‘... with young learners’), although some teachers were interested in research which sought to clarify the very practical issue of whether, and how far, to focus explicitly on grammar in the classroom, what kinds of grammatical knowledge are useful in language learning and so forth. That said, in terms of the data as a whole, this was prioritized by relatively few teachers.

#### 4.4.2 Classroom management, actions and activities

Unsurprisingly, given what we have already learned about the teachers’ attitudes towards published research, issues related to ‘the classroom’ emerged as a key theme within the data (referenced by 23.6 per cent of participants). Within this broad categorization, a number of more specific interests emerged, including **classroom management**, the management of **learner behaviour**, and the effective **organization of in-class activities** – particularly small-group work which several participants characterized with reference to communicative activities<sup>6</sup>. Again, these suggestions were often made with reference to the specific contexts in which participants worked, most notably in connection to teaching large classes and mixed ability groups; to specific age groups, in particular younger learners; and with regard to ‘underprivileged learners’, migrants and refugees, and those with low levels of literacy. While 4.3 per cent of respondents made reference, in very general terms, to ‘effective methods’, more specific interests included the potential use of the learners’ L1 in the classroom, including **translanguaging and bi- and multi-lingual classrooms** (prioritized by 7.6 per cent of participants) and issues around **error correction/ corrective feedback** (5.9 per cent).

#### 4.4.3 Online technologies and technology-mediated learning and teaching

The role of online technologies in ELT was identified as a significant research priority by 17 per cent of survey participants. Some were interested in finding out more about how technology might facilitate **blended approaches to learning**, whilst others prioritized, for example, **distance learning**. The potential of **apps and social media**, both within and beyond the classroom, was of interest. Although data for this project was collected online (see Section 3), which raises the possibility that participants could have a particular interest in or access to technology, a significant number of responses indicated a degree of skepticism or caution about technology-mediated teaching/learning, and the prioritizing of research in this area was not an uncritical call for teaching tips and techniques, but, often, a request for an evaluation of practical approaches. This focus may also have been influenced by the timescale for this research, with data collected during the COVID-pandemic, when many teachers were experiencing online teaching for the first time.

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<sup>6</sup>Although, for the purposes of this discussion, key themes are being dealt with in turn, there are clear overlaps between several suggestions, for example, this (Section 4.4.2) focus on group-work and communicative activities, and the teaching of spoken fluency in Section 4.4.1.



#### 4.4.4 Other practice-oriented issues

A number of further practice/pedagogy-oriented research priorities were noted by significant numbers of respondents. Interest in **testing and assessment** ranged from teacher-designed classroom testing to the implications of international tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, including their effects on prior learning (i.e., test preparation and washback) and their value to students aspiring to study in English-dominant Higher Education institutions. Similarly, the use and teaching of **literature in ELT** emerged as a focus for a number of participating teachers. Whilst some made general references to 'teaching language through literature', the majority asked for more research into 'teaching [English language] literature to adolescents/teenagers', presumably reflecting the interests of the sizeable number of teachers within the field working in state-sector contexts in which literature remains a central element of the 'English' subject curriculum, and which are arguably often overlooked by much current research. Meanwhile, a sizable number of teachers (17.7 per cent) prioritized **intercultural communication / competence** as a key area of interest. Several linked this to their interest in migration and multiculturalism (including multilingual classrooms, see above) and to world Englishes, whilst others focused on practicalities such as its assessment, and links between intercultural communication and the role of literature in the classroom. Beyond these three major areas of teacher interest, however, many other practical/classroom-oriented focuses for research were suggested by just a handful of participants, for example, the implications for the classroom of learners' visual and aural impairments; teaching low L1 literacy learners; cooperative learning; task-based instruction; understanding the reasons for and addressing plagiarism; and teaching '21<sup>st</sup> century skills'.

#### 4.4.5 Learner motivation, autonomy and independence

One of the most significant priorities for research noted by participating teachers was **learner motivation** (suggested by 16.7 per cent of respondents), often noted alongside the topics of **learner autonomy** and **learner independence**. While many references were somewhat general (e.g., 'motivation'), several respondents made specific links to in-class motivation, thus asking for research into how teachers might address 'low-motivation students', who learn English 'as part of a wider curriculum' or who may not 'value languages'; again, such views possibly seem to reflect the priorities of secondary level participating

teachers. Other individual responses asked for more research into the links between learners' motivation and mental health and motivation for reading for writing, whilst a number of participants linked motivation to broader interests in **learner psychology**. As well as being linked to motivation, autonomy and independence regularly co-occurred in responses alongside technology and the management of mixed level classes. Other research priorities that were each mentioned by just a few respondents included learner/learning strategies, learners' backgrounds and identities, and learners' differing responses to different types of classroom activities (e.g., to group and individual work, to textbook activities and content, and so forth).

#### 4.4.6 About teachers

Although all the research priorities outlined so far have clear implications for teaching and for teachers' pedagogic practices, there were fewer calls for research about teachers *per se*. Interestingly, however, themes which were shared by significant numbers of respondents included **teachers' working conditions** and, to slightly a lesser extent, **teacher motivation**. While some linked their or others' lack of engagement in or with research to poor pay and conditions within their survey responses (see also Section 4.3.3), several wrote explicitly of the need to prioritize investigations into teachers' working conditions over issues relating to continued professional development (CPD), one participant arguing 'that this is left to advocacy groups is wrong, wrong, wrong' (Ireland, survey). Furthermore, it seems reasonable to suggest that many of the significant number of calls for research into 'teacher motivation' are actually referring to teacher **demotivation**, which is likely, of course, to be in part linked to teachers' working conditions and the associated problems of teacher **burnout and wellbeing** (also noted as research priorities by a number of survey respondents). It is worth noting that, alongside survey participants' requests for investigations into these under-researched areas, some did prioritize more widely explored topics such as **teacher development**, but perhaps to a lesser extent than the range of current published research in the field might lead us to expect.

#### 4.4.7 Other issues ... and absences

The discussion so far provides an indication of the kinds of topics about which significant numbers of participating teachers would like to read more research. Inevitably, given the total number of suggested priorities within the survey responses, many other topics were mentioned, albeit relatively infrequently. For example, **discourse**, **pragmatics** and **corpora** were noted by two teachers each; **SLA Theory** was mentioned six times (although, of course, many of the priorities above can be connected to or draw upon research into SLA); as we have seen, neither teacher nor learner *identity* were reported as particular priorities within the data (four references in total)<sup>7</sup>; and, as outlined above, issues around the **teaching of grammar** and **teacher development** were referred to, but perhaps surprisingly rarely.

It is important to remember, of course, that the reported perspectives are those of this particular group of participating teachers; the responses of another group of language teaching professionals would most likely have produced data with some differences in emphasis (for example, it seems possible that a cohort more involved in teacher training and education might prioritize more obviously research into language teacher development, teacher knowledge and teacher identity). It should also be noted that, with a limited number of exceptions (e.g., teacher working conditions, teaching learners with visual and/or aural impairments), research into most of the areas identified by participating teachers has actually been undertaken and published; what seems to be at stake is the perceived relevance and accessibility of that research to these teachers, or, put another way, its perceived orientation towards pedagogic practice. Clearly, to ask teachers to identify priorities within a survey of this type is a relatively blunt instrument, leaving open issues with regard to the way ideas are expressed by participating teachers and their subsequent interpretation within the resultant data. Furthermore, listing priority areas in this way is very different to formulating a specific research question to explore via a specific investigation. Meanwhile, to rely solely on the perspectives of teachers in the formulation of a research agenda for ELT does remove the potential insights and key focuses that others (i.e., researchers) might bring to the classroom (see also Section 2, Introduction).

That said, however, this summary of teachers' priorities above goes some way to providing an initial, tentative teacher-led agenda for research and subsequent research publications. Interested teachers reading this report may find topics which they also prioritize, as well as areas which may differ from their particular interests (via areas included and/or those omitted). Meanwhile, it may serve as a prompt for reflection and, hopefully, action for researchers. Yet if (further) research in these areas is to be undertaken and published, how might resultant projects, findings and implications be most effectively made accessible to teachers? It is to this final question that we now turn.

#### 4.5 RQ4: How might research publications and findings be made more relevant and accessible to English language teachers?

Although the teachers who contributed to this project were generally positive about research and research-oriented publications, the difficulties and frustrations they experience when engaging (or trying to engage) with published research have also become evident over the course of the discussion. Thus, their insights into how some of these challenges might be addressed often build upon themes already seen within this report, alongside a range of further proposals which arise from the teachers' own particular experiences and position(s) in the field. There are, as ever, evident connections between the emergent themes and suggestions now summarised.

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<sup>7</sup>It is possible, however, that ideas and agendas which broadly related to 'identity' are implicit in participants understanding of, for example, 'intercultural communication' and 'the multilingual classroom'. If so, these understandings unfortunately cannot be unpicked within the data.

### 4.5.1 Physical availability: cost and access

Given that the cost of accessing research publications had already been highlighted by participating teachers (Section 4.3.3), it was unsurprising that many argued that far more research needed to be published on a **reduced fee or cost-free (for readers) Open Access** basis. Journals (i.e., their publishers) and researchers themselves tended to be conceptualized as the agents of this process:

***Publishers should make all information accessible free online or at least online for very little cost. (survey; Japan)***

***Publish in reputable open access journals. (survey; Peru)***

Consequently, while a few participants focused on how their institutions might support access to research – in terms of **time, subscriptions** to research journals, and **encouraging a culture of engagement** – the overall focus on publishers and researchers rather than schools probably reflects teachers' tacit acceptance that asking for institutional solutions is, as Kerr noted (2021; see Section 4.3.3), unrealistic.

Whilst the ways in which journals do business and/or the pressures that academic researchers face to publish in particular, often pay-walled journals, are unlikely to change at any point soon, a number of teachers called for researchers to ensure that **pre-print drafts** were more regularly made freely available via institutional websites (e.g., Northumbria University's 'Research Portal' site) and online sharing services such as ResearchGate.net. Wider knowledge and use of such sites would seem to be a reasonably straightforward way for teachers to access research publications, and thus, as a teacher in the Philippines noted, 'to democratize access to knowledge' (survey response).

### 4.5.2 Internal accessibility: readership and the 'discourse of research'

We have already seen (Section 4.3.3) that the way research is presented in writing can be challenging for teachers:

***Academic research has its own language and rules, so it can seem out of reach to the teacher in the classroom. (survey; Turkey)***

Consequently, one participant (of 485 respondents to this survey question) suggested that teachers should become more adept at reading research, but argued that individual difficulties had structural causes in that the low status often ascribed to teachers meant that they were not trained or empowered to engage in useful higher status activities, such as engaging with research:

***We have to change teacher education ... The problem isn't the researchers. It's how the Anglophone world sees English language teaching professionals. The problem is courses like the CELTA. (survey; Australia)***

The vast majority of teachers who focused on this issue, however, suggested that teacher engagement was more likely if the language and discourse of research publications was made more 'teacher friendly' (many respondents, survey and interviews). An emphatic few suggested that:

***researchers should write with teachers in mind. If you I think that if you are writing anything related to education, anything that should be happening in a classroom, you cannot forget about the teachers (interview; Chile)***



Most, however, recognised that teachers and researchers are audiences with differing needs and purposes for reading. Consequently, many participants suggested that two versions of research publications should be prepared, in particular the version, currently perceived as neglected, written for teachers:

***the scholarly one intended for university lecturers and other researchers and a concise one written in simple English that briefly sums up not only the research but also the benefits/results/ any positive outcomes that may result as a direct/indirect consequence of the research (survey; Malta)***

Clearly, this is a challenge for any researcher/ authors on a number of levels. Firstly, it places significant and, for some, possibly unrealistic time demands on authors; equally, we should acknowledge again that not all researchers intend their research to reach a teacher audience; see Section 2.2). Secondly, it requires researchers to know what teachers are looking for within a publication, which in turn might require more ***cooperation with teachers or for researchers to become more integrated with teaching communities:***

***maybe instead of showing papers to your colleagues who are also working on other research papers researchers should maybe have a group of teachers who give feedback. (interview; Chile)***

***researchers need to become a part of the teaching community. These two groups are so often separated and there is little collaboration between the two. They should intermingle on many different levels. Research often stays in the academic abyss but researchers have to make efforts to simplify their findings and get them into the hands of teachers. (survey; United States)***

Thus, whilst many 'micro-level' suggestions were also forthcoming for teacher-oriented publications (e.g., ***reduce jargon; less discussion of methodology; discuss findings at the start rather than near the end of a paper; shorter overall length*** etc.), several participating teachers recognised the substantial challenge to researchers of writing and making findings accessible for teachers. As the respondent from the United States cited above also noted:

***How to do this? That's difficult because I don't know the challenges facing researchers but I would say it needs to be a cultural change. In other words, researchers need to be ok with turning down the academia bit in order to create engaging content (available on the internet or at events) that teachers can digest quickly and apply easily. (survey)***

#### 4.5.3 Collaborative approaches: before, during and writing-up research

Clearly, therefore, the extent to which teachers are likely to engage with published research goes beyond concerns about publications' cost and discourse to issues of teacher-researcher understanding and collaboration. Echoing Nassaji (2012) and Sato and Loewen (2019; see Section 2.6), several participants suggested that ***collaboration*** between teachers and researcher, possibly as ***co-researchers*** from the inception of a project to the presentation of its findings, was central to ensuring the accessibility and relevance of subsequent research publications, for example:

***Form partnerships with practitioners ... who can add the "classroom experience" part to the research (as team-work theoretician/researcher and classroom practitioner). (survey; Poland)***

***Collaborating with teachers ... by a longer process of development of activities in partnership with teachers. (survey; UK)***

#### 4.5.4 Teacher-researcher communities and interfaces

Partnerships between researchers and teachers are likely to become both more regular and more sustainable if, as a number of teachers pointed out, collaboration is not limited to single or specific projects, but rather 'shared communities' (survey, Spain) and 'interfaces' (survey, India) are developed and maintained over longer period of time, based around shared concerns and expressed in mutually understood language. Thus:

*it is not necessarily the technical 'how's [the research] going' or 'how do I write'. It's the wider context of bringing the two parties together in the way that they talk about each other and the way they communicate with each other. (interview; Germany)*

In practical terms, many participants suggested researchers who are interested in orienting their work towards practice and practitioners should simply find opportunities to: **talk to teachers; work with or participate in teachers' groups; attend and present at teacher-oriented conferences; initiate and/or take part in discussions with teachers (face-to-face or online)**. And, while many researchers already engage in these kinds of activities, the confirmation that many practitioners find this useful rather than potentially intrusive is valuable.

#### 4.5.5 Sharing findings: workshops, conferences and social media

A theme running throughout this discussion is that the teachers reported that they were more likely to access and engage with research if it is disseminated via alternatives to the traditional journal article. Effectively summarising the views of many participants, a teacher from Canada commented:

***Publish it in more creative ways, not just in dusty old texts and journals. Publish an info graphic instead, one that teachers could print off and put on a wall. Or publish a video, or an art instalment. In the field of education, qualitative research rules, and that type of data lends itself to all sorts of creativity in terms of presenting/ disseminating it to the public in various mediums that can have a learning impact.***

Alongside **face-to-face workshops** and **taster talks, videos, webinars** and other forms of **social media presentation** (including simply publicizing a forthcoming or current publication) were highlighted by participants, whilst suggestions for written texts included **1,000–2,000 word summary articles** (see 4.5.2, above), and contributions to teacher magazines and blogs (including online platforms such as **The Conversation** in which researchers are required to combine, in the site's own words, 'academic rigour with journalistic flair'; <https://theconversation.com/uk>).

#### 4.5.6 Summaries, digests and collections

As we have seen, many teachers who participated in this study found identifying research that was relevant and useful to them challenging, given the volume of publications available. Whilst researcher engagement with the suggested outlets for sharing their work noted above (4.5.5) could go some way to bringing relevant material more easily to teachers' attention, a substantial number of respondents proposed the establishment of a wide-ranging research directory or series of research digests which teacher could access. Clearly, organizing and regularly updating **centralized directories of research** is extremely challenging, although a few participants noted York (UK) University's online *OASIS (Open Accessible Summaries in Language Studies)*; <https://oasis-database.org/about>) resource, which aims to bring together one-page summaries of articles published in peer-reviewed journals<sup>8</sup>. Several teachers also pointed out the potential role professional bodies and organisations might play, a teacher from the Netherlands, for example, noting that:

***Professional bodies and/or management are vital in helping busy teachers to become aware of relevant research. Searching from scratch is time-consuming and will never be everybody's top priority ... Facilitating this as part of ongoing training would be valuable. (survey)***

The range of suggestions for making research more accessible to practitioners emerge from this project's deliberate attempt to focus upon 'research-interested' teachers' own views, and the vast majority of responses focus on actions that researchers and publishers might (or, as most respondents conveyed, 'should') undertake. In other words, participating teachers generally felt that, in order to bridge the research-practice 'gap', the onus for change lies with researchers, rather than with teachers. Clearly, researchers might respond to this in a number of possible ways. Firstly, academics and researchers experience their own job-related pressures, and it is not necessarily straightforward to write more frequently for a teacher audience and/or less frequently for a researcher audience. Furthermore, whilst some proposals are relatively straightforward and practical (e.g., discussing findings with teaching communities online via, for example, Twitter or Facebook), others are arguably more idealistic, requiring more deep-seated and sometimes structural changes within the field (e.g., the extent to which access to research truly becomes Open Access). Additionally, a lot of the suggestions have already been adopted by some within the research community – although perhaps with not enough consistency or with enough publicity. Finally, and importantly, the teachers' insights are perhaps implicitly underpinned by a sense that research can and should guide classroom practice more closely than most researchers' are likely to recognize; there remains a differing expectation as to what research is for and can achieve in terms of shaping practice. Despite these caveats, however, these ideas offer practical ways ahead for those researchers who are interested in engaging more fully with teachers, and, ultimately, in bridging the gap between research and practice.

<sup>8</sup>Previous wide-ranging directories include the British Council's own Directories of UK ELT Research, 2005–12; <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/directory-uk-elt-research-2005-2012>







# 5

## Summary

This project set out to contribute to the long-standing debate around the relationship, or gap, between practice and research in ELT. It focused in particular on how and why teachers might (or might not) engage with published research, and sought to explore and learn from the experiences and perspectives of ‘research-interested’ teachers working in a range of contexts around the world. The study uncovered teachers’ own perceptions of what constitutes a research agenda which is relevant to them, and their insights as to how research and research findings might be made more available and accessible to practitioners. Unpacking the various assertions and occasional over-generalizations that have often been made about English language teachers’ attitudes towards and engagement with research publications, the findings thus add detail and nuance to the wider discussion.

The study found that, while still a minority within the profession, significant numbers of English language teachers are interested in reading about or learning from research. This is not an uncritical acceptance of all research *per se*, however; these ‘research-interested’ teachers tend to be interested in research which seems to them to be practically oriented and aligns with their classroom concerns. Research is primarily read to inform, develop, or confirm teaching practices.

Teachers thus have clear ideas as to what areas of research they would find interesting and relevant, and these clearly depend on an individual’s professional context. Whilst a teacher-led research agenda has clear overlaps with much work in applied linguistics and other academic fields related to ELT, differences in focus and/or emphasis include a reported desire for more research into: the management of learners and learning groups in the classroom; the use, challenges and difficulties of online technologies in language learning; the role of literature in ELT; learner and teacher motivation (and demotivation); and teachers’ working conditions.

For the teachers in this study, certain research and research-oriented publications were viewed much more positively and accessed more often than others, professional newsletters and magazines being the most frequently read, alongside online blogs and summaries. Of the range of academic journals dealing with issues related ELT (and/or language teaching and learning more generally), two were identified as being particularly relevant – *ELT Journal* and *TESOL Quarterly* (other academic journals were reportedly accessed infrequently). This was due to these publications perceived focus on practice (i.e., on ‘pedagogical knowledge’ or ‘knowledge how...’) rather than on ‘propositional knowledge’ (or ‘knowledge that...’); and they were identified as being written for a practitioner audience.

Unsurprisingly, ‘institutional’ concerns such as cost, time and workload were seen as significant barriers to engaging with published research. However, the relevance and accessibility of publications (including academic discourse norms such as the length of papers, the focus on research methodology, over-use of terminology etc.) were of equal concern to most participants in the project.

Reading research was also seen as just one pathway towards professional development, and was part of a broader range of activities which included conference and workshop attendance, other forms of professional training such as webinars and online discussions, and conversations with colleagues and students. Thus, research publications are just one in a ‘marketplace’ of competing sources of new ideas and development for teachers. Consequently, teachers’ insights for enhancing the accessibility of research findings for practitioners tended to move away from ideas of teachers simply reading ‘traditional’ journal articles, and instead focused on innovative and creative ways of presenting findings through spoken presentations, short written summaries, posters, online forums and so forth, with research projects developed within a truly collaborative framework in which teachers and researchers cooperate to set research agendas, collect data, and co-author and disseminate findings.

Not all applied linguistic and educational research, perhaps, needs to have an overtly practical orientation (although some participants in this study would disagree!), and not all researchers need to seek out opportunities to talk to, work with, and write for English language teachers. Yet for those who do aspire towards greater levels of teacher engagement with their research, the implications of this study seem clear. Working both within but especially beyond 'the academy', researchers might find new and genuinely collaborative ways of talking to and working with teachers in ways which do not place additional burdens on teachers' working lives. Emergent research agendas would seek to recognise and address teachers' practice, problems and puzzles, with findings shared and disseminated in ways which are accessible and appealing.

Whilst there is clearly an element of idealism here, these possible ways ahead do not seem impractical or impossible. That said, they do raise questions about the nature and purpose of, and the audience for, research, requiring new ways of thinking, particularly for researchers but also, perhaps, for teachers. However, by listening to and building upon the views of the 'research-interested' teachers' who participated in this study, we may be able to develop a more satisfactory relationship between research and practice, and between researchers and teachers, within ELT.



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