

Exploring challenges of graduate TEFL students in reading, conducting, and applying research

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Abstract

Language teachers' research engagement has recently gained significant attention in second language (L2) education. However, the challenges faced by graduate Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) students in Iran during various research stages (reading, conducting, and applying research) remain underexplored. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, interviewing 30 TEFL students (15 Ph.D. and 15 M.A.) from state universities in Iran. Findings revealed that participants experienced stress and demotivation due to the complexities of statistical data and quantitative methodologies, often feeling ill-equipped to handle such content. In contrast, qualitative research was perceived as more approachable. A lack of support from professors exacerbated these challenges, highlighting the need for improved mentorship and guidance. Additionally, students struggled with argumentative writing and felt a disconnect between theoretical research and practical teaching applications. Engaging in action research emerged as a valuable tool for professional development, empowering teachers to address their unique challenges. To create a more supportive academic environment, it is crucial to enhance mentorship and integrate action research into teacher training programs. This approach will enable teachers to engage more effectively with research, ultimately improving their teaching practices and promoting better educational outcomes. Addressing these issues is essential for creating an environment conducive to effective research engagement.

Keywords: Research engagement, research challenges, statistical anxiety, research demotivation, TEFL research

Introduction

Research plays a pivotal role in serving the ‘Knowledge Society,’ which is described as “socially inclusive and aligned with social development priorities” (Kearney 2009, p. 8). As Pandey and Pandey (2015) contend, the primary purpose of research is to systematically explore an issue and discover new insights from existing knowledge. Dörnyei (2007) states that “in the most profound sense, ‘research’ simply means trying to find answers to questions, an activity everyone engages in all the time to learn more about the world around us” (p. 15). Such a perspective is evident in academic research, where potential researchers typically begin with a problem or a need, which can lead to the creation of new theories that have implications for broader contexts, audiences, and disciplines (Mackey & Gass, 2015; Phillips & Pugh, 1998).

In the field of Applied Linguistics (AL), which concentrates on language learning and teaching problems, the centrality of research-related issues has been recently documented (Amini Farsani et al., 2021; Riazzi & Amini Farsani, 2024). A notable stride in this area pertains to bridging the gap between research and teaching, as emphasized by Rose and McKinley (2017) and McKinley (2019), who argue for a more cohesive relationship between research and practice. According to McKinley (2019), we have been witnessing a ubiquitous shift from practitioner-led inquiries addressing real classroom challenges to a focus on empirical studies that often overlook practical concerns. This trend is worth noticing as it underscores an increasing division between researchers and practitioners, usually rooted in complex theoretical frameworks, which can lead to a relatively complete separation between the two groups (Nassaji, 2012; Rose & McKinley, 2017).

This bifurcation not only disengages teachers from research but also encourages an overreliance on personal experience for professional development (McKinley, 2019). To overcome this gap, scholars have proposed several strategies aimed at fostering stronger research-practice connection. Oancea et al. (2021), for instance, emphasize research capacity-building in teacher education, arguing that it must occur across individual, institutional, and systemic levels to be sustainable. In the same vein, Burns and Edwards (2024) highlight the role of action research as a practical means of empowering teachers to systematically examine their own classrooms, thereby integrating theory with practice. Those perspectives suggest that building teachers’ research skills and confidence is key to transforming them from passive recipients of research to active contributors to knowledge in English Language Teaching (ELT). To address the ongoing issues, Nassaji (2012) suggested that researchers collaborate with practitioners by asking questions rooted in classroom realities. This movement is partly highlighted by Borg (2009), who introduced the concept of language teachers’ research engagement, defining it as both “engagement in research” (by actively conducting research) and “engagement with research” (by reading and applying research findings). Recognizing the importance of both forms of engagement can lead to a more integrated approach benefiting all stakeholders (Nassaji, 2012).

Studying research engagement is essential as it can elevate language teachers’ status to “expert knowers about their own students and classrooms” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 16). It plays a pivotal role in contemporary education by enhancing teachers’ professional growth; when practices of reading and conducting research are integrated, educators are better equipped to make informed pedagogical decisions, ultimately improving the effectiveness of second language (L2) teaching and learning (Borg, 2009; Kirkwood & Christie, 2006). This shift has fostered teaching-informed research and research-informed teaching (Rose & McKinley, 2017).

Despite its benefits for the field of AL and its stakeholders, research on English language teacher engagement based on Borg’s work remains scarce. Some studies have examined teacher research engagement within educational institutions across various countries (Ahmed, 2015; Borg, 2009; Gao et al., 2011). These investigations reveal diverse research cultures, indicating

that research engagement yields numerous positive educational outcomes. Consequently, teacher research engagement is a viable and enduring avenue for enhancing teachers' professional development.

While previous studies highlight the importance of research engagement, more local research is needed (Amini Farsani & Babaii, 2019; Borg, 2009). Borg (2007, 2009) stressed the need to explore how language teachers engage with research in their contexts, including their participation, perceptions, and institutional conflicts. Challenges include underrepresented samples (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2012), unclear sample rationale (Borg & Liu, 2013), and limited applicability to other contexts (Borg, 2007). Teachers also face heavy workloads, insufficient resources, and a lack of research skills (Edwards & Burns, 2016; Gao & Chow, 2012). Allison and Carey (2007) noted barriers like lack of time, encouragement, expertise, and misconceptions about teaching and research, contributing to low research engagement.

In the context of Iran, language teachers' research engagement is closely linked to their time as M.A. or Ph.D. students (Atai et al., 2018; Rahimi et al., 2019). During this period, most students work part-time or full-time as language teachers while remaining highly engaged with research to successfully complete their degrees. However, they face various challenges, including a lack of knowledge and expertise, difficulties in finding participants, and struggles to connect theory with practice, as well as issues related to quality, relevance, and international networking (Amini Farsani & Babaii, 2019; Asaie & Amini Farsani, 2023).

The situation can become increasingly challenging for M.A. and Ph.D. students in the field of AL, particularly due to a movement over the past decade advocating for methodological reform in AL research (Byrnes, 2013; Plonsky, 2017). This movement underscores the necessity for AL researchers to have a solid grasp of robust research design, methodologies, thorough data analysis, and transparent reporting practices to advance the field (Plonsky, 2013, 2014). Such understanding promotes methodological rigor that enables evidence-based evaluations of research quality from multiple perspectives. Amini Farsani et al. (2021) argue that improving methodological awareness in AL research is crucial.

To enhance the quality of Research Methodology (RM) courses within the AL curriculum, it is crucial to consider the perspectives of AL researchers (Asaie & Amini Farsani, 2023). Understanding the attitudes of M.A. and Ph.D. students toward research (such as reading, conducting, and applying it) is essential. Without data-driven insights, instructors may struggle to meet students' needs, hindering their research support. Many students find RM challenging due to its complexities (Ciarocco et al., 2017; Gurung & Stoa, 2020), yet the specific challenges faced by graduate Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) students in RM courses are largely unexplored. Previous research indicates that affective factors significantly hinder engagement, with students often showing disinterest and negative attitudes toward statistical techniques (Addison et al., 2015; Sizemore & Lewandowski, 2009).

In Iran, RM courses are crucial for M.A. and Ph.D. TEFL programs, aiming to equip students with research skills. Despite this, most literature on students' perceptions of research comes from other disciplines. Given the unique nature of AL in TEFL, it is important to understand the challenges M.A. and Ph.D. students face. Daniel et al. (2018) stress examining research conceptions and attitudes to develop academic expertise. Evidence-based studies can help instructors support students in meeting societal demands in an EFL context like Iran. Therefore, this study interviewed 30 graduate TEFL students to explore their research challenges. The research questions are as follows:

1. What specific challenges do graduate TEFL students encounter when reading research articles?

2. What challenges do graduate TEFL students face when conducting research?
3. What perceptions do graduate TEFL students hold regarding the application of research findings into practical teaching?

Literature Review

Challenges of Conducting Research

In the literature regarding the challenges faced by researchers and students in their research journeys, two major trends emerge: challenges related to research incompetencies and those related to supervision issues. Concerning research incompetencies, Bakhshi et al. (2019) examined the complexities of qualitative research within the Iranian higher education system. Their study revealed that the primary reason for the limited development of qualitative research in academic settings is the policies governing higher education in Iran. Furthermore, they noted that the research direction is often influenced by the professional preferences and personal interests of professors, with a predominant focus on the quantitative paradigm, a point also highlighted by Amini Farsani and Asaie (2024).

One specific challenge that students face pertains to quantitative research and statistical literacy (Roever & Phakiti, 2017). Amini Farsani and Asaie (2024) found that most RM courses in state universities in Iran are quantitatively orientated; however, students in AL often exhibit negative attitudes toward statistics, experience anxiety related to their statistics courses, and lack confidence in performing statistical tasks (Addison et al., 2015). Similar findings were reported by Chew and Dillon (2014), who addressed the issue of statistics anxiety among students, particularly in non-mathematical fields. They advocate for innovative instructional methods, such as application-oriented teaching and supportive classroom environments, to alleviate statistical anxiety. Previous studies indicate that these non-cognitive factors can negatively affect learning and conducting research (Finney & Schraw, 2003; Iovu et al., 2015; McGrath et al., 2015). Furthermore, Zhang and Han (2024) confirmed that statistical literacy and confidence remain low among AL research students in China, even when attitudes toward statistics are positive, indicating a global need for improved quantitative research training.

Another persistent challenge involves the theory-practice gap. Nassaji (2012) found that English language teachers recognize the benefits of Second Language Acquisition SLA research but often avoid engaging with it due to complexity and time constraints. Many teachers prefer experiential knowledge over empirical research. This shows the need to make research more accessible and practically relevant through simplified language, classroom-based studies, and stronger researcher-teacher collaboration.

Over the past 50 years, there has been a significant increase in academic publishing (Larsen & von Ins, 2010), with academic publication now recognized as a substantial industry playing a crucial role in the academic community (Hyland, 2016). However, few studies have explored the perceptions and challenges faced by M.A. and Ph.D. TEFL students regarding conducting research. Additionally, graduate students often prioritize publication over scientific contributions (Fatehi & Karimi, 2021; Sajedi et al., 2020), highlighting the urgent need for research in the Iranian context, where publishing is essential for academic advancement (Asaie & Nushi, 2025).

Plonsky et al. (2024) highlighted the prevalence of questionable research practices (QRPs) in AL, with 17% of researchers admitting to fraudulent activities. This rate is higher than in other fields, underscoring the need for better research ethics. Common QRPs include not reporting non-significant results and inadequate training in statistical methods. To address these issues, they recommend field-specific guidelines, ongoing ethics training, and re-evaluating statistical practices. They stress the importance of transparency and integrity in research. Researchers

must recognize the pressures of academic publishing, which can prioritize quantity over quality, raising concerns about the true value of research (Asaie & Nushi, 2025). Addressing these challenges is crucial for the integrity and advancement of the field.

Language Teacher Research Engagement

Various terms describe research conducted by teachers, including teacher research, practitioner research, classroom research, and action research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999; Roulston et al., 2005). These labels carry important distinctions; while teacher research often refers to classroom and action research, not all such research qualifies as teacher research, which is exclusively conducted by teachers (Borg, 2009, Ellis & Loughland, 2016). The definition of teacher research should focus on its characteristics rather than its scale, methodology, or the researcher's status (Borg, 2015). Although definitions vary in language teaching literature, several researchers have captured key aspects of the concept. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, p. 22), for instance, define teacher research as "all forms of practitioner inquiry that involve systematic, intentional, and self-critical inquiry about one's work in educational settings," highlighting systematicity, intentionality, and context dependence. Borg (2009) adds that teacher research can be qualitative or quantitative, individual or collaborative, and should be made public. Relatedly, Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) define action research as a reflective problem-solving process led by individuals working collaboratively to improve practices through iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

A significant number of studies have explored teacher research engagement in general education (e.g., Clarke & Fournillier, 2012; Goodnough, 2010; Rust, 2009). However, less extensive examination has been made of teacher research engagement in language teaching. Simon Borg's groundbreaking review of the rapidly expanding literature on Language Teacher Research Engagement (LTRE) in 2009 examined all aspects of this concept. Moreover, this review critically analyzed those aspects in terms of the existing literature on teacher research in general education. His work not only expedited the growth of LTRE research but also shed light on why research remains "a minority activity" among language teachers (Borg, 2009, p. 391). Although that review made a significant contribution to the literature by identifying the conditions that promote engagement with research among language teachers, it was not without limitations as it covered a wide range of studies, did not set a specific time frame for the literature search, and provided little information about the methodologies and theoretical and analytical frameworks.

Looking at the studies done in relation to LTRE, one can find two distinct lines of inquiry. One research line has focused on investigating teachers' attitudes toward research (e.g., Everton et al., 2000; Shkedi, 1998). The message echoed from these studies was that the more understanding teachers have of research conceptions, the more positive impact it can have on their engagement in research. The second line of inquiry, which was significantly influenced by Borg's works, has mainly aimed to explore the concept of research-engaged teachers within educational settings such as schools and colleges (e.g., Borg, 2007, 2008, 2009; Borg & Alshumaimeri 2012; Borg & Liu, 2013; Gao et al., 2011). What can be inferred from these studies is that organizational and institutional factors play a significant role in the extent to which teachers can be research-engaged.

The perception of research among English language teachers remains underexplored. In a study by Borg (2009) involving 505 teachers from 13 countries, findings indicated moderate to low research engagement, primarily due to time constraints, limited knowledge, and lack of resources. Similarly, Borg and Liu (2013) examined 725 college English teachers in China and found that, despite expectations for active involvement, actual engagement was only moderate. This study also revealed a disconnect between teachers' perceptions of expected research activity

and the institutional support available, as well as uncertainties stemming from conflicting views on research purposes and recognition criteria. Additionally, Rahimi et al. (2019) investigated research conception and engagement among M.A. and Ph.D. students and instructors in Iranian L2 education. They found that effective research should address educational problems and be applicable to teaching contexts. In addition, academic writing skills were deemed essential, with expectations for research to be publishable in accredited journals and focused on relevant topics. Engagement motivations often stem from instrumental goals like promotions or degree requirements, while professional development plays a role for some. The study also highlighted tensions in research practices, including pressures to conform to global academic standards and hierarchical demands from instructors on students to publish.

Context of the Study

The Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) in Iran plays a vital role in shaping policies that promote scientific research to enhance the national economy. It encourages universities to align their research with national strategies, such as the 20-Year National Vision and the Comprehensive Science Roadmap. The main goal of research in Iran is to advance knowledge and technology, secure a leading position in the region, and increase contributions to global knowledge production (Amini Farsani, 2017). As a result, M.A. students often feel pressured to publish papers from their theses to improve their chances of Ph.D. program acceptance. This “pressure to publish” (Plonsky et al., 2024, p. 4) is especially intense for Ph.D. students, who typically must publish at least one article in an ISI or Scopus-indexed journal before defending their dissertations, significantly impacting their future career prospects (Asaie & Nushi, 2025).

Method

Before discussing the methodology, a “self-of-the-researcher” note clarifies our perspectives. The lead researcher, a Ph.D. student in AL, focuses on research issues in this field. The second with a Ph.D. in AL, has extensive research experience. This collaboration allows for a thorough analysis of the challenges faced by language teachers/researchers.

To explore participants’ experiences, a qualitative descriptive study was conducted. This method provides a genuine interpretation of students’ experiences through open-ended responses, aligning with the naturalistic approach of qualitative descriptive research. Unlike other methodologies, it allows for a focused analysis of participants’ perspectives (Sandelowski, 2000).

Participants

Thirty TEFL students, who were also English language teachers, participated in this study. The sample consisted of 15 M.A. and 15 Ph.D. students from various state universities across Iran. We employed a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling methods to select our participants. The sampling frame was based on a pre-existing document of TEFL higher education statistics prepared by the Institute for Research and Planning for Higher Education (Amini Farsani & Babaii, 2019). This document included information on the number of post-graduate TEFL students, their university affiliations, gender, and other bio-data. To ensure a manageable and homogeneous sample, we excluded students studying in privately-funded academic institutions. We focused solely on government-run universities due to their strict admission regulations and the presence of more top-ranked students. Participants were approached through direct communication with their respective universities, where we collaborated with faculty members to identify eligible candidates. We specifically targeted students who met our

selection criteria: those who had published in or submitted at least one research paper to refereed journals, either individually or in collaboration with their professors, or who were co-authoring publishable papers based on their theses or course projects. The M.A. participants had either graduated or were working on their theses, while the Ph.D. participants were in their first, second, or third semesters. Further details about the participants are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. *Characteristics of the students/researchers (N = 30)*

Characteristic	N	Percent
Gender		
Male	6	20
Female	24	80
Teaching experience		
10+	5	16.7
7–9	11	36.7
4–6	12	40
1–3	2	6.7
Context of teaching		
School	5	16.7
Freelance/institute	16	53.3
Both	9	30

Data Collection

Since our goal was to explore challenges of research engagement from different aspects, we chose to conduct semi-structured interviews to achieve that goal. As such, we first designed the first draft of interview questions by drawing on relevant literature (Asaie & Amini Farsani, 2023; Borg, 2009; Nassaji, 2012; Onwuegbuzie & Wilson, 2003). The initial draft of the questions was reviewed by three experts in AL to ensure content relevance, clarity, and appropriate wording. Based on their feedback, the questions were revised, with four questions being modified, one added, and two removed. The revised questions were then pilot-tested with two M.A. and Ph.D. students not involved in the main study to assess their clarity, relevance, and validity. Further adjustments were made based on this pilot test feedback (see the Appendix for the interview questions). Two main reasons guided this approach: first, participants with experience in research paper writing provided valuable insights into the publishing process; second, the participants were concurrently enrolled in university courses, limiting their time for publishing, which could influence their attitudes toward conducting research. Potential participants were contacted through Telegram and invited to join the study. Upon their agreement, they received a Google Meet link through which the interviews were conducted. These interviews, conducted in Persian, participants’ first language, lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. The interview sessions were recorded, and the audio files were uploaded to MAXQDA software for detailed analysis.

Data Analysis

We utilized MAXQDA software (version 2020) to analyze the open-ended responses. Our coding process included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, following the framework outlined by Ary et al. (2019). During the open coding phase, we used MAXQDA to flexibly create categories (Burnard, 1991), generating as many codes as necessary (Burnard, 1991, 1996; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) until we achieved a thorough categorization. This phase was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data. In the axial coding phase, we reorganized and grouped specific codes into higher-order categories within MAXQDA. This process aimed to merge similar, broader categories and reduce the total number of codes (Burnard, 1991; Dey, 1995; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). Throughout our analysis, we engaged in iterative coding, revisiting the data and codes multiple times to refine our categories and ensure they accurately represented the participants' responses. To mitigate researcher bias, we implemented several strategies. First, we maintained a reflective journal throughout the analysis process to document our thoughts and potential biases, ensuring transparency in our interpretations. Additionally, we sought feedback from colleagues during coding discussions to challenge our assumptions and enhance the rigor of our analysis. We focused on identifying patterns within the data to understand and reveal the underlying reasons for these patterns (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The aim was to identify general statements about relationships and underlying themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). In the selective coding phase, we integrated the categories to form a comprehensive and meaningful representation of the data. To ensure the dependability (Cohen et al., 2018) of our findings (similar to reliability in quantitative studies), we had another coder analyze six interviews (20% of the data). The agreement rate between coders was 0.86, confirming the consistency of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

We emphasized ethical considerations during data collection and analysis. Before each interview, participants were informed about the research objectives and assured of their privacy and confidentiality. All participants provided written consent. We fostered a comfortable environment for open sharing by maintaining a friendly tone throughout the interviews. Measures were taken to ensure anonymity, and we focused on accurately presenting participants' views to reduce misinterpretation and bias.

Results

The main themes of the study align with its objectives and are grouped into three primary categories: a) challenges in reading research articles, b) challenges in conducting research, and c) challenges related to the applicability of research. Each theme is described in detail in the following subsections.

Challenges in Reading Research Articles

Participants frequently reported negative feelings associated with quantitative or statistically dense articles (see Table 2), which is close to the term “statistical anxiety” (a phenomenon well-documented in prior research) (Chew & Dillon, 2014; Zhang & Han, 2024). This anxiety is often tied to “academic literacies” (Lea & Street, 2006), where disciplinary conventions (e.g., statistical reporting) create barriers for students unfamiliar with quantitative paradigms. For example, one M.A. student stated, “Reading articles rich in statistics gives me stress, as I don’t understand them well.” This anxiety was compounded by feelings of incompetence, as many participants expressed a lack of sufficient research knowledge or competency, with this code being mentioned 18 times. These two codes were highly interrelated; participants

often articulated that their difficulty in understanding quantitative articles stemmed from their perceived inadequacies in statistical knowledge, leading to stress and demotivation.

Table 2. *Negative feelings about reading research articles*

Code	N	Percent
Yes, if the article is quantitative or has advanced statistics	19	33.3
Yes, because of lack of knowledge or competence	18	31.6
Yes, because of my professor	7	12.3
No, if the article is qualitative	5	8.8
Yes, if the purpose of the article is unclear	5	8.8
I normally do not have negative feelings	3	5.3

Another related code was the absence of negative feelings when reading qualitative articles, mentioned five times in the interviews. Participants found qualitative research easier to understand than quantitative research. One Ph.D. student noted, “Reading qualitative research is enjoyable for me. It is easy to understand without using numbers, which reduces my stress significantly because I feel like I am engaging with material that I comprehend and can even apply while teaching.” Conversely, participants reported stress and demotivation stemming from professors’ unavailability and lack of support during the research process. One M.A. student, who was halfway through writing her dissertation, shared, “I was reading a quantitative article and wanted to ask my professor for help with the statistics, but he did not respond to my email.” When asked about specific sections they struggled with, most participants identified the methodology section as the most challenging, particularly in quantitative articles (see Table 3). This difficulty often led to feelings of demotivation. A first-year-Ph.D. student remarked, “Reading the methodology section is highly challenging for me, especially in quantitative articles. Those that use advanced statistics can be demotivating, causing me to stop reading or skip to the discussion and conclusion sections.”

Table 3. *Challenges while reading specific sections of research articles*

Code	N	Percent
Methodology (quantitative articles)	23	54.8
Literature review	7	16.7
Results (quantitative results)	6	14.3
Discussion	4	9.5
No specific part	2	4.8

Closely related to this code was the results section of quantitative articles, where participants expressed difficulty understanding the numbers, contributing to their stress and demotivation.

An M.A. student stated, “While reading research articles, I cannot understand anything beyond descriptive statistics, and the results section of quantitative articles is highly challenging for me.” Some participants also struggled with the literature review and discussion sections, noting that these often reference other studies without in-depth discussion. They felt that fully grasping the authors’ messages required reading the cited articles, which was demotivating due to the perceived heavy workload.

We further asked participants about specific methodological features they found challenging. As shown in Figure 1, the most difficult feature was the use of quantitative designs and statistics. One Ph.D. student, who was writing an end of the term paper, remarked, “Whenever I see numbers and statistics, I get confused as I cannot understand and interpret the results. It doesn’t matter whether the design is experimental, survey, or correlational; I always get confused, which is very demotivating.” Another Ph.D. student, who had already published an article, added, “The term ‘experimental designs’ makes me cringe. There are too many things to check to understand the results, and it often leads me to ask, ‘So what?’ It’s really demotivating.” Additionally, participants reported confusion with complicated mixed-method designs that emphasized quantitative paradigms. An M.A. student, who was preparing to defend her dissertation, noted, “When complicated mixed-method designs are used, I get confused as I don’t understand the procedures followed by the researcher.” Lastly, participants expressed demotivation when faced with large samples or complex sampling techniques, feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of data collection. One Ph.D. student said, “Whenever I see that the sample is quite large, I get demotivated thinking about all the data collection challenges.”

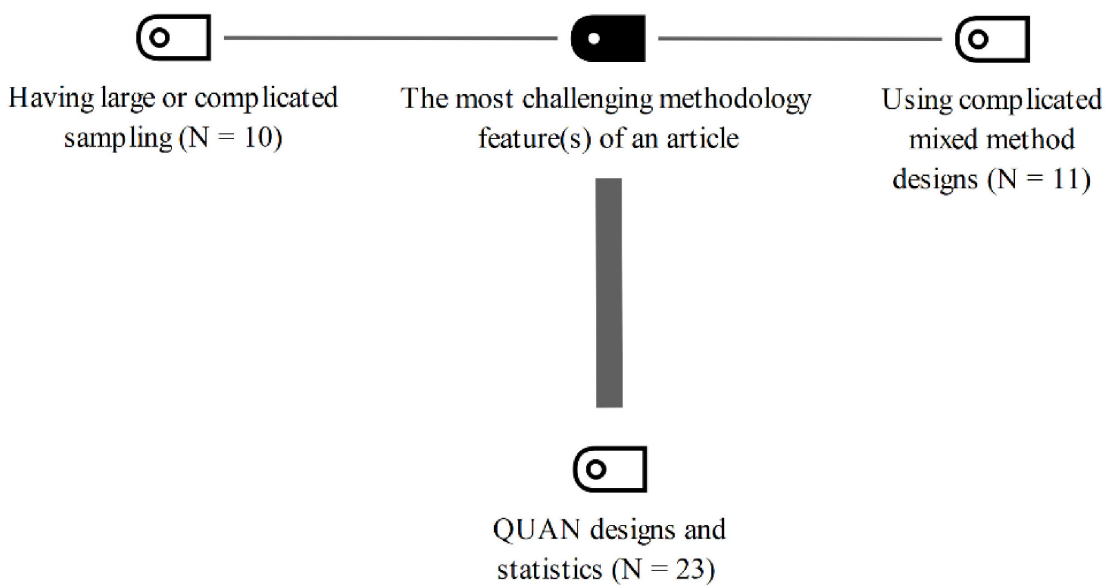


Figure 1. *The most challenging methodology feature(s) of an article*

Note. Line thickness indicates frequency.

Challenges in Conducting Research

In the interviews, participants identified the most challenging phase of conducting research, with the methodology section emerging as the most difficult aspect, as shown in Table 4.

Notably, supervisory support gaps exacerbated these challenges, echoing Byars-Winston et al.’s (2015) findings on mentorship’s role in mitigating research anxiety. One M.A. student lamented, “My professor is rigid and unapproachable... I outsourced the methodology section because I couldn’t ask for help.” This reflects a tension between “research as practice” (Borg, 2009) and institutional demands for quantitative rigor, a disconnect also noted by Amini Far-sani and Asaie (2024). Similarly, difficulties in writing discussion/literature review sections highlighted gaps in argumentation skills, supporting Abdollahzadeh et al.’s (2017) findings on Iranian EFL learners’ struggles with academic persuasion.

Table 4. *Challenging sections of conducting research for students*

Code	N	Percent
Methodology and data analysis	19	35.8
Discussion	15	28.3
Literature review	13	24.5
Data collection	6	11.3

Challenges in Applying Research

Participants’ split views on research applicability echoed Nassaji’s (2012) theory-practice divide. As shown in Figure 2, those who found research useful often engaged with actionable, classroom-focused studies, reinforcing Hargreaves’ (1999) argument that relevance drives engagement. For example, an M.A. student mentioned: “Articles on formative assessment gave me practical tips.” Others, however, perceived research as overly theoretical, citing discursive barriers (e.g., jargon) that alienate practitioners, a critique aligned with McKinley’s (2019) call for more accessible research dissemination.

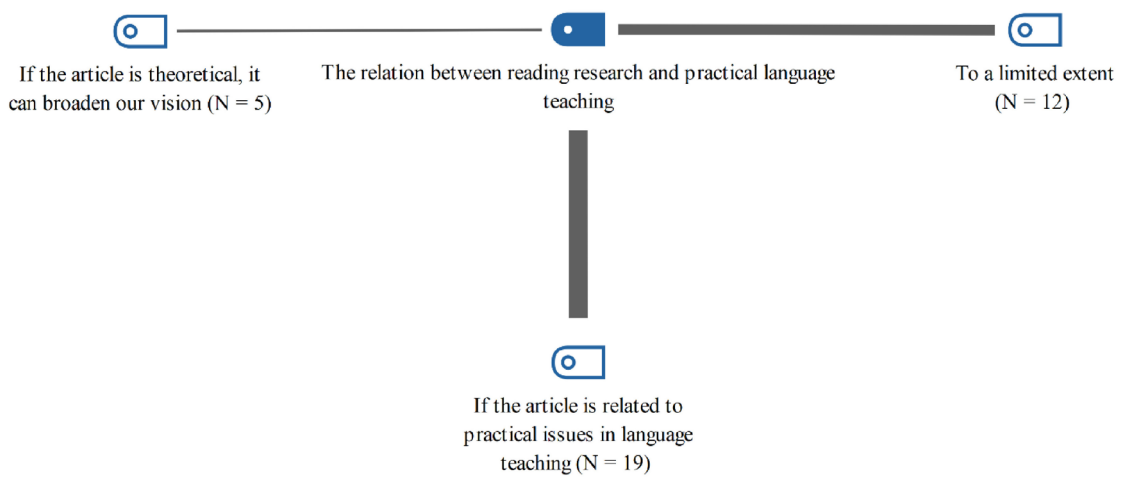


Figure 2. *The relation between reading research and practical language teaching*

Note. Line thickness indicates frequency.

Finally, we asked participants if conducting research has improved their language teaching. As shown in Figure 3, many indicated that action research positively impacts their teaching. A Ph.D. student, who also taught young EFL learners, shared:

During the third semester of my master’s program, I wrote an essay on a practical issue related to teaching skills, focusing on providing feedback. I noticed a student consistently dropped the verb ‘be’ in her speaking. I conducted a mini-research project to find the best solution, trying four techniques from the literature over two sessions, then analyzing my data and writing the report. The whole process was enjoyable and educational for me.

Some participants acknowledged that while conducting research can enhance language teaching, its effectiveness depends on the researcher. A Ph.D. student noted, “If the researcher conducts research solely to improve their academic status, secure a promotion, or fulfill a task, it won’t enhance their teaching.” A few participants felt that conducting research has minimal impact on language teaching, arguing that research and teaching are not closely connected. One Ph.D. student who was rather fed up with the heavy load of theoretical content of her courses stated, “I believe current studies often miss real problems. I conducted a mixed-methods study; while my knowledge in that area improved, it did not affect my language teaching.”

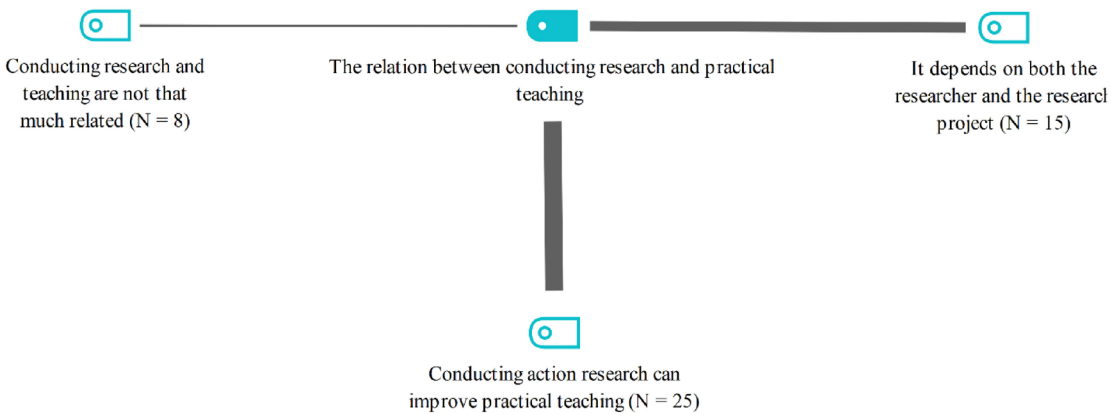


Figure 3. *The relation between conducting research and practical language teaching*

Note. Line thickness indicates frequency.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to explore the challenges faced by graduate TEFL students in engaging with research from three perspectives: reading, conducting, and applying research. To achieve this, we interviewed 30 students (15 M.A. and 15 Ph.D.) studying at Iranian state universities, all of whom were also language teachers with research experience. The findings revealed that most students encountered significant difficulties when reading quantitative research articles, primarily due to a lack of foundational knowledge of research methodologies. Many participants specifically reported challenges with the methodology and results sections of these articles. These struggles align with the concept of academic literacies (Lea & Street, 2006), which highlights how disciplinary-specific conventions (e.g., statistical reporting

in AL) create barriers for students transitioning into research communities. The participants' difficulties reflect a gap in their socialization into the epistemological norms of quantitative AL research, underscoring the need for explicit pedagogy around methodological literacy.

Conversely, qualitative research articles tended to elicit more positive responses from participants, who found them easier to understand and less intimidating, thereby fostering greater engagement. This distinction indicates that the format and presentation of research findings significantly influence teachers' willingness to engage with research. This preference may also stem from qualitative research's alignment with teachers' practitioner identity (Edwards et al., 2023), which prioritizes narrative and contextualized knowledge over abstract statistical analysis.

Our results indicated that a primary challenge students encounter is a negative attitude toward statistics, also noted by Chew and Dillon (2014). Many participants viewed statistics as a daunting subject, often associating it with complexity and difficulty. This perception can lead to disengagement and reluctance to engage with statistical concepts, ultimately hindering academic progress (Roever & Phakiti, 2017). The negative perception of statistics is particularly prevalent among students in AL, where there tends to be a greater emphasis on quantitative research methodologies (Amini Farsani & Asaie, 2024). Consequently, these students may struggle to appreciate the relevance and applicability of quantitative research to language teaching, as indicated by Nassaji (2012). We believe that the limited practical application of statistical concepts in their fields of study contributes to their inability to recognize the significance of quantitative research, resulting in demotivation to learn.

Statistics anxiety is linked to negative attitudes toward statistics. Our findings show that graduate TEFL students experience high levels of anxiety in reading and conducting research, which can reinforce such negative attitudes. This anxiety stems from various factors, including classroom environment, teaching methods, self-concept, and prior math experiences (Chew & Dillon, 2014). A lack of confidence in statistical skills contributes to both negative attitudes and anxiety (Zhang & Han, 2024). Many students doubt their competence in quantitative tasks, leading to stress and demotivation, often due to insufficient training in math or statistics. Additionally, inadequate instruction can hinder understanding of statistical concepts, particularly when teaching strategies do not connect theory with practical application. While Amini Farsani and Asaie (2024) found that quantitative research dominates state university RM courses in Iran, our results suggest that such courses objectives are not fully met.

Among the notable sources of stress identified in the interviews was the lack of appropriate mentorship. Better mentorship in practice could involve structured peer-mentoring programs pairing senior and junior students to demystify research processes and faculty training on inclusive supervision practices (e.g., regular check-ins, culturally responsive feedback) to bridge power imbalances (Lee, 2008). In the interviews, participants expressed frustration over unresponsive or unapproachable supervisors, which exacerbated their feelings of isolation and confusion when navigating complex quantitative research. This lack of accessibility hinders educators' ability to develop their research skills and deepen their understanding of relevant literature (Byars-Winston et al., 2015). In this context, Zhang and Hyland (2021) emphasized the importance of language used in supervisory interactions; inclusive and supportive language can soften authoritative tones, fostering a sense of partnership. They highlighted the need for cultural sensitivity and for supervisors to consider diverse student backgrounds. Ultimately, fostering a collaborative supervisory environment aids in the development of research skills and empowers students to navigate their research journeys with greater confidence.

Another key finding was the challenges teachers face in the literature review and discussion sections of academic articles. Many participants reported difficulties in writing these sections

due to a lack of persuasive argumentation skills. Abdollahzadeh et al. (2017) noted a significant gap between linguistic competence and argumentation skills among Iranian graduate EFL learners. Rahimi et al. (2019) also highlighted the importance of academic writing skills for M.A. and Ph.D. students. This gap underscores the need for instructional strategies focused on developing sound, well-reasoned arguments in academic writing. By fostering critical thinking skills, we can enhance students' abilities to construct and articulate their arguments effectively. As demonstrated by Demissie et al. (2025), integrating digital tools like Google Docs into writing instruction can lead to significant improvements in student engagement and writing quality, reinforcing the need for similar approaches in TEFL contexts.

Moreover, the divergent participants' perceptions regarding the relevance of research articles to their teaching practices is important. Some participants felt that reading research articles directly related to practical language teaching enhanced their effectiveness in the classroom. However, others noted that such readings often did not significantly impact their teaching, citing a disconnect between theoretical frameworks and classroom realities. This perspective aligns with Nassaji (2012), who pointed out that the complex language used in academic articles can be inaccessible, making it challenging for practitioners without extensive research training to apply theoretical insights practically.

Additionally, many participants acknowledged challenges in applying research due to the complexity of academic language and perceived disconnects between theory and practice, there were also notable instances where TEFL students successfully integrated research into their teaching. Several participants shared experiences where they adapted techniques from research articles to enhance their classroom practices. One participant noted, "I implemented a formative assessment strategy I learned from a research article, and it significantly improved my students' engagement and performance." This suggests that while barriers exist, there is also a willingness among some participants to bridge the gap between research and practice. Factors contributing to successful application included having access to research closely related to their teaching context and receiving encouragement from mentors to experiment with new strategies derived from research findings.

Finally, the interviews revealed that conducting qualitative research positively influences language teaching. Many participants reported that engaging in action research improved their practices. One participant described a mini-research project aimed at addressing a specific linguistic issue, highlighting the increased research engagement that emerged. Borg (2009) noted that the main reasons for conducting research include improving teaching, solving problems, and professional development.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges Iranian graduate TEFL students face in engaging with research. The contribution of this study lies in its in-depth examination of the specific challenges faced by TEFL students in Iran, highlighting this multifaceted landscape of research engagement within this context. By revealing the disconnect between theory and classroom realities, this research adds to the existing literature on language teacher research engagement, emphasizing the importance of contextual factors in shaping teachers' experiences and perceptions. Moreover, while prior works have highlighted general research challenges, our findings uniquely identify statistical anxiety as a critical obstacle specific to quantitative research engagement in this context. Participants' aversion to statistical content, rooted in gaps in methodological training and self-efficacy, extends current understandings of why language teachers disengage from research, particularly in settings like Iran, where quantitative paradigms dominate research methodology courses (Amini Farsani & Asaie, 2024).

Although the challenges of applying research were prevalent among many participants, it is crucial to recognize that some TEFL students found ways to apply research effectively in their teaching. By highlighting these instances, we can foster a more nuanced understanding of research engagement in TEFL contexts. Enhancing mentorship and providing targeted support can further empower teachers to translate research insights into practical applications, ultimately improving educational outcomes. Furthermore, engaging in action research proved to be a powerful tool for professional development, enabling teachers to address their unique challenges and enhance their practice.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of our study. First, our small sample size, drawn exclusively from state universities, constrains the generalizability of our findings. The experiences of students at private universities may differ significantly, raising important questions about how varying institutional contexts shape academic journeys. Additionally, the reliance on self-report data may introduce biases, as participants might not fully disclose their challenges or may perceive their experiences differently. Future research could benefit from larger and more diverse samples, incorporating quantitative or mixed methods to uncover additional dimensions of research engagement. Exploring the interplay between institutional type and student experiences could enhance understanding of the factors influencing thesis writing, enriching the discourse on academic support mechanisms. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could provide insights into how research engagement evolves over time and the long-term impacts of mentorship and training on teachers' professional development.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Have you ever felt demotivated or stressed out while you were reading a research article (demotivated or stressed from the amount of work you must do if you want to conduct a similar study)?
2. While reading a research article, which part or parts (introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion) are the most stressful or demotivating for you? Why?
3. When conducting a research study, which section(s) (e.g., introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, conclusion, and/or references) are the most stressful or the most difficult or time-consuming for you? Why? (Please rank them if you find more than one section challenging).
4. Which methodology feature(s) of an article demotivates or stresses you out the most (having a large sample, using advanced statistical tests, using mixed research or complicated designs, and/or having multiple stages of data collection, etc.)?
5. Which sections of a research article do you find more related to language teaching (introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and/or conclusion)? (Please rank them if you find more than one section relevant).
6. To what extent do you think reading research articles can improve your teaching practice?
7. Do you think conducting research studies can improve your teaching skills? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?