

# 6 Approaches to teacher development

This chapter presents different approaches to teacher development which may be useful to a range of contexts. The chapter opens with **Daniel Xerri's** plenary paper, in which he argues for a shift from externally-driven models of inquiry to more participatory, practice-based approaches that recognise teachers as legitimate knowledge producers. He addresses three fundamental questions to explore how classroom research can become a more inclusive, relevant and transformative practice. **Ana García Stone** and **Richard Smith's** paper reports on the mentoring of teachers engaged in exploratory action research, and more specifically the inherent challenges faced and the strategies that mentors implemented to address these. Cooperative Development, a dialogic and non-judgemental framework, is the topic of our next paper by **Khoa Do**, who argues that it fosters more meaningful professional learning than traditional professional development models. **Jennifer Schumm Fauster** and **Mia Schweighofer** describe how the collaborative redesign of a writing course proved not only developmental for teachers and their teaching, but even more so for their teaching team. Writing from personal experience, **Elizabeth Demine** describes how she turned negative learner feedback into action to develop a personalised teaching improvement plan. She presents three practical strategies that can be adapted to various professional contexts. **Beatrix Price's** focus is on the role of teacher associations (ELTAs) in professional development, and the need for partnerships and collaboration, both within and among ELTAs to help ELT professionals continually adapt and innovate. We close with two papers which report on professional development projects. First, **María Alejandra Soto** reports on a project carried out with primary school teachers in Argentina to raise awareness of the importance of implementing context-appropriate pedagogical practices. **Erica Lindley** then reports on a collaboration between a UK language institution and the Angolan English Language Teachers Association to co-develop tailored resource packages for secondary English language teachers.

## 6.1 Plenary: Teachers and classroom research: ownership, relevance, and conceptualisations

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### Introduction

In contemporary education, a persistent chasm divides academic research from classroom practice. While the production of educational research continues to expand, its influence on teachers' daily pedagogical decisions remains limited (McIntyre, 2005; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). This disconnect is not simply logistical

but conceptual: research is often perceived by teachers as inaccessible, irrelevant or imposed from above (Cain, 2015; Drill et al., 2013). My plenary at the IATEFL Conference in Edinburgh sought to confront this disjunction by reframing research as a professional practice that belongs in the hands of language educators (Xerri, 2025b). In it, I argued for a shift from extractive, externally-driven models of inquiry to more participatory, practice-based approaches that recognise teachers as legitimate knowledge producers. The three pillars of this discussion – conceptualisations, ownership, and relevance – form the analytical backbone of the ensuing piece. Inspired by Carl Sagan’s (1980, p.193) reminder that ‘We make our world significant by the courage of our questions and by the depth of our answers’, this paper is structured around three guiding questions: *What is research? Who owns research? Why do research?* Each of these questions serves as an anchor for exploring how classroom research in ELT can be reimagined as a more inclusive, relevant and transformative practice.

The paper begins by interrogating dominant definitions of research, proposing more inclusive conceptualisations that reflect the complexity of language teaching. It then explores questions of ownership, examining how teachers, learners and school communities can be repositioned as active participants in the production of knowledge. Building on this, the paper considers why research matters for teachers and how it can become a meaningful, empowering and sustainable dimension of their professional lives. Through this progression, the paper supports a cultural and structural shift toward teacher-driven inquiry that is ethically grounded, contextually relevant and pedagogically transformative. This vision culminates in a discussion of the PRAC-TICE Framework, which offers a set of guiding principles for embedding research meaningfully within the lived realities of classroom life.

### **What is research? Definitions and misconceptions**

Research has traditionally been conceptualised through a scientific lens, often emphasising systematic inquiry, hypothesis testing, objectivity and generalisability. These features, rooted in positivist paradigms, have long dominated academic discourse across disciplines, including education (Kerlinger, 1973; Martell, 1988). This technical-rational model views research as a linear process: identifying a problem, formulating hypotheses, collecting data, analysing results and drawing conclusions. While effective in many fields, this model often appears detached from the practical concerns of language educators. As Hanks (2017a) argues, such definitions rarely reflect the lived experiences of teachers or the complexity of classroom dynamics. When these narrow conceptualisations are imposed on teachers, they risk marginalising valuable forms of knowledge that emerge from day-to-day pedagogical practice. In doing so, they uphold a research culture in which only certain methodologies and outputs, usually those published in academic journals, are seen as legitimate.

This dominant framing has contributed to a widespread perception among educators that research is inaccessible, irrelevant or intimidating. Teachers frequently express scepticism toward academic research, citing barriers such as theoretical language, paywalled publications, and a lack of applicability to their classroom contexts (Cain, 2015; Drill et al., 2013). Borg (2009) found that many language teachers equate research with large-scale, quantitative studies conducted by university-based experts, reinforcing a belief that research lies beyond their professional remit. Such

perceptions are further entrenched by education policies that privilege externally produced evidence over practitioner-generated knowledge (Mills et al., 2020). This dynamic fosters a sense of alienation from research and creates a research–practice divide that stifles collaboration and innovation. Rather than engaging with research as a transformative and empowering process (Consoli & Dikilitaş, 2021), teachers may perceive it as an external mandate, disconnected from their professional identity and autonomy. While academic research plays a vital role in advancing our understanding of language education, it is equally important to recognise that, for many teachers, the value of research lies in its entanglement with practice, where generating knowledge and achieving a practical end are inseparably linked (Pritchard, 2002).

In contrast to the narrow paradigm that is at times adopted in academia, some scholars in education and applied linguistics have advocated for more inclusive conceptions of research, ones that align more closely with the professional realities of teaching. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993, p.27) describe teacher research as ‘systematic and intentional inquiry about teaching, learning and schooling carried out by teachers in their own school and classroom settings’. This definition emphasises research embedded in context, driven by practitioners’ questions and informed by their experiences. Rather than seeking generalisable truths, such situated inquiry prioritises relevance and responsiveness to local needs. Babione (2015) frames teacher research as an approach that not only deepens pedagogical knowledge but also strengthens professional agency. It stems from teachers being encouraged to conceive of research as consisting of reflective, situated practices (Banegas, 2018; Darwin & Barahona, 2021). These conceptions view research not as a separate endeavour but as embedded in everyday teaching and learning.

Adopting this broader perspective necessitates recognising the political and relational dimensions of research. As Mayed (2025) cautions, ‘without reciprocity, research is just another form of exploitation masked as inquiry and knowledge production’. This statement underscores the ethical implications of extractive research practices, where data are mined from classrooms with little benefit returned to teachers or learners. Instead, research must be reconceived as a collaborative, dialogic activity, one that values trust, mutual learning and shared ownership. Roulston et al. (2005) support this shift, suggesting that research is not inherently about universal claims, but about uncovering meaningful, context-specific insights. In the absence of broader conceptions of research, there is a risk that teachers’ voices are marginalised and their professional knowledge devalued. Hiebert et al. (2023) further reinforce this view by describing scientific inquiry as a continuum, with varying degrees of systematicity and rigour. In classroom contexts, even small-scale, exploratory inquiries can yield powerful understandings when grounded in reflective practice and driven by curiosity (Xerri, 2025c).

Despite efforts to democratise research, many teachers remain excluded from the processes of knowledge validation and dissemination. Epistemic injustice, a concept explored by Fricker (2007), helps explain how teachers’ contributions are often devalued due to structural barriers within academic and policy-driven hierarchies, with educators being wronged in their capacity as knowers. Xerri and Pioquinto (2018) argue that institutional definitions of research frequently disregard the legitimacy of experiential and practitioner-based knowledge. Such exclusion has significant

consequences: it not only diminishes the status of teacher inquiry but also narrows the field's epistemological diversity. Teachers may internalise the belief that they are not 'real' researchers, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of disengagement. Yet as Brew (2001) and Brew et al. (2016) observe, individual conceptions of research are fluid and context-dependent. When teachers are supported in developing their research identities, they can reconceptualise inquiry as both meaningful and accessible, ultimately contributing to a richer, more inclusive knowledge base within education.

In sum, conceptualising research in a way that resonates with teachers' experiences is fundamental to bridging the research–practice divide. Definitions rooted in academic abstraction must be complemented by more relational, practice-oriented models that validate classroom inquiry. Recognising teaching itself as a form of inquiry and the classroom as a legitimate site of research challenges traditional hierarchies and empowers educators to become knowledge producers rather than passive consumers (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2017). By broadening the epistemological scope of research to include reflection, dialogue and situated action, ELT moves closer to a model of inquiry that is not only rigorous but also relevant, ethical and transformative.

### **Who owns research? Expanding research participation**

The question of research ownership is central to ongoing debates about educational inquiry. Historically, research has been the preserve of academics and policymakers, with teachers positioned primarily as subjects rather than producers of knowledge. This asymmetrical relationship reflects broader power dynamics in education, where theoretical knowledge is often valued over practical wisdom (Gore & Gitlin, 2004). As a result, research is frequently 'done to' teachers and their classrooms, not conducted 'with' or 'by' them. This tradition has reinforced a deficit model that views practitioners as passive recipients of externally validated knowledge. Yet, as De Costa et al. (2022) argue, failing to involve teachers in shaping research agendas perpetuates a research–practice divide that undermines both educational relevance and impact. The assumption that research expertise resides solely in universities excludes diverse forms of practitioner knowledge and impedes the development of a genuinely collaborative research culture.

In recent years, alternative models of research ownership have gained traction, particularly those advocating for teacher-led inquiry. Action research, exploratory practice and other forms of practitioner research have emerged as powerful frameworks for reclaiming the agency of language educators in the production of knowledge (Borg, 2013; Hanks, 2017a; Smith, 2022). These approaches challenge the notion that research must conform to academic standards of validity and instead validate context-sensitive, practice-informed insights generated by teachers themselves. When teachers engage in research that they design and implement, they develop deeper understandings of pedagogy, learner needs, and classroom dynamics (Borg, 2010; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2015). Such engagement also enhances teachers' professional identities, shifting their roles from implementers to reflective practitioners and change agents. Anderson (2024) suggests that this kind of situated inquiry can disrupt hierarchical structures and contribute to more democratic forms of knowledge production in language education.

A particularly promising development in the democratisation of research is the

formation of research–practice partnerships (RPPs). These collaborations, typically between schools and universities, aim to co-construct research questions, methodologies and outcomes that serve both academic and practical purposes (Friesen & Brown, 2023; Hadar & Baharav, 2025). RPPs are characterised by mutual respect, shared power and sustained engagement, distinguishing them from one-off consultancy models (Korhonen et al., 2024). They also prioritise problems of practice identified by educators, ensuring that research is rooted in classroom realities (Xerri & Block, 2024). Tiippana et al. (2024) argue that if implemented properly such partnerships not only foster teacher autonomy and collaboration but also generate findings with greater pedagogical relevance. However, sustaining RPPs requires institutional support, including time allowances, professional development, and recognition of research as legitimate professional work. Without these supports, the promise of shared ownership may remain aspirational rather than transformative.

An even more radical reimagining of research ownership includes learners as co-researchers. Building on traditions of participatory research, scholars such as Pinter (2023) advocate for child-inclusive inquiry models where learners take active roles in identifying issues, collecting data and interpreting findings. This approach acknowledges the epistemic contributions of learners, fosters their agency, as well as nurturing their cognitive, affective and social engagement (Angelöw & Psouni, 2025). Even though the approach can also be successfully implemented with adult learners (Hanks, 2020), teachers' inclusion of children in classroom inquiry challenges the adult-centric norms of traditional educational research, proposing instead a continuum of participation that includes learners as consultants, collaborators or co-investigators. When children are positioned as legitimate knowers, the boundaries between teaching, learning and research begin to blur, creating a more holistic educational experience. While logistical and ethical challenges must be carefully managed (Schweiger, 2024), the inclusion of learner voices in classroom research signals a broader commitment to equity and relational responsibility when forging research partnerships (Popa et al., 2023).

Expanding the ownership of research requires more than methodological innovation; it demands a shift in the cultural values that underpin educational inquiry. Recognising teachers and by extension their learners as credible knowledge producers involves rethinking who counts as a researcher and what counts as research. As Kathleen Graves (as cited in Xerri, 2018) points out, the core elements of research – curiosity, criticality and the pursuit of understanding – are accessible to all educators, not just those with advanced degrees or university affiliations. Extending research participation thus involves creating inclusive infrastructures: accessible training, mentorship, institutional support and recognition, and dissemination channels that elevate teacher-led inquiry (Li & Li, 2025; Xun & Barkhuizen, 2025). When teachers are trusted to lead classroom research projects, when their insights are disseminated alongside academics' publications, and when their work is valued within professional development systems, the field moves closer to a genuinely participatory research culture. Such a transformation not only redistributes epistemic power but also enriches ELT with diverse perspectives and contextually grounded knowledge.

### **Why do research? Relevance, impact, and empowerment**

Understanding why language teachers engage in research or why they refrain from it

requires attention to both the perceived relevance of inquiry and its potential impact on their professional lives (Xerri, 2021). Although policy and academic discourse often promote research as essential for evidence-informed practice, many teachers find it disconnected from the realities of their classrooms (Cain, 2015; Medgyes, 2017). Research outputs are frequently written in abstract or technical language, which limits their accessibility and practical applicability (Bartels, 2003; Rosman & Merk, 2021). In addition, tangible barriers such as time constraints, limited institutional support, and restricted access to resources further discourage teacher involvement (Drill et al., 2013; Luu et al., 2017). Consequently, research is often perceived as a theoretical endeavour, lacking immediate relevance to classroom challenges. This perception not only reduces teachers' engagement with research but also deters them from conducting their own inquiries. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle: when research is viewed as irrelevant, it is less likely to be read, used or undertaken, thus widening the gap between research knowledge and everyday educational practice.

Despite these obstacles, research can be a powerful tool for teacher learning and professional development. Practitioner inquiry enables educators to interrogate their assumptions, make sense of classroom challenges, and develop contextually relevant solutions (Babione, 2015; Borg, 2013). When conducted from within the classroom, research becomes a reflective practice that fosters deeper awareness of learner needs and pedagogical effectiveness. Leuverink and Aarts (2021) found that teachers who engaged in research experienced shifts in professional identity, becoming more autonomous and confident in their decision-making. Similarly, Andrew (2020) observed that action research in TESOL programmes enhanced teacher agency and instructional responsiveness. Rather than positioning teachers as passive consumers of evidence, practitioner research frames them as producers of knowledge, professionals capable of critically shaping their practice through inquiry (Xerri, 2025a). In this way, research becomes not only relevant but essential to effective teaching.

Research engagement also contributes to broader institutional and systemic impact. Teachers who share their findings through presentations, publications or peer collaboration help build a knowledge base rooted in authentic classroom experiences (Cárdenas, 2025; Mertler, 2024). This form of knowledge mobilisation enhances the relevance of educational research by grounding it in practice (Anwaruddin, 2018). Moreover, it disrupts the hegemony of top-down policy interventions that often fail to account for local conditions. As teachers document and disseminate their inquiries, they challenge dominant narratives about what constitutes valid knowledge and whose voices matter. Banegas and Consoli (2021) illustrate how initial teacher education programmes that integrate practitioner research foster a sense of purpose and criticality in early-career educators. These benefits extend beyond individual teachers, strengthening professional communities and creating spaces for collective learning. When teachers see that their research can inform not only their own practice but also contribute to institutional improvement, their engagement with research becomes both more meaningful and sustainable.

Importantly, engaging in research empowers teachers to act as advocates for change. By systematically examining issues such as learner inequity, curriculum limitations or assessment practices, educators can generate evidence that supports pedagogical

reform and social justice goals (Feldman, 2025; Lammert, 2023). Research thus becomes a form of activism, enabling teachers to resist deficit-based narratives and contribute to educational equity (Merino & Holmes, 2006). Kaçaniku (2024) highlights how a problem-solving approach to research in teacher education empowers preservice teachers to tackle real-world challenges with confidence. This aligns with the broader conception of inquiry as a values-driven and transformative endeavour, one that connects professional growth with a commitment to improving learners' educational experiences (Dana et al., 2025; Xerri, 2017). Through inquiry, teachers not only learn about their practice but also reimagine what that practice could be. This vision positions research not merely as a technical activity but as a moral and relational responsibility embedded in the daily lives of schools (McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Pierre, 2024).

To realise this potential, research must be designed and disseminated in ways that speak to the needs and capacities of language teachers. Practical relevance must trump theoretical abstraction; collaborative methods must replace extractive designs; and professional learning must be integrated with inquiry processes (Cordingley, 2015; Darwin & Barahona, 2021). As Mercer and Xerri (2018) argue, when teachers voluntarily investigate their own questions, research becomes a process of discovery, not compliance. Creating time, space and institutional recognition for research activities is essential if teacher inquiry is to flourish. So too is building a culture of trust and dialogue where diverse voices are respected and supported. This applies as much to institutions as it does to ELT as a field. Ultimately, the question is not whether language teachers should conduct research, but how educational systems can better support them to do research that matters to them, to their learners and to the communities they serve.

### **Practical pathways: enabling classroom research**

To make research truly empowering for educators, it must become practical, participatory, and woven into the fabric of professional life. The PRACTICE Framework proposed in my IATEFL plenary – describing classroom research as practical, relational, accessible, collaborative, teaching-driven, integrated, community-oriented, and empowering – offers a blueprint for institutional, cultural and professional change (see Figure 6.1.1).

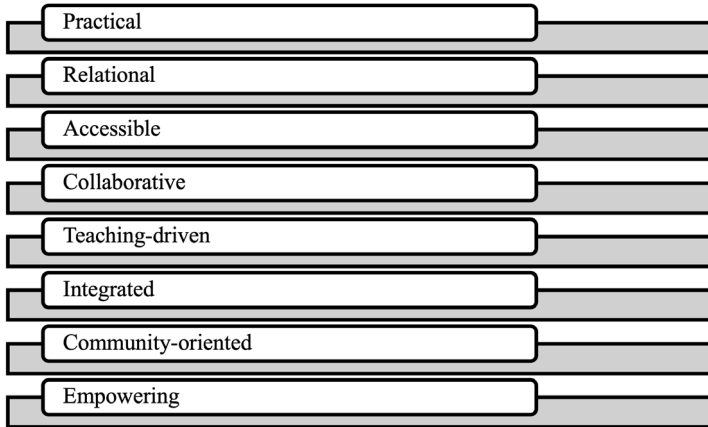


Figure 6.1.1: *The PRACTICE Framework for classroom research*

The PRACTICE Framework begins with a recognition that research should address real-world challenges encountered by teachers in their unique contexts. This requires supporting teacher autonomy in defining research questions that emerge from practice rather than from external agendas (Bahrami & Gao, 2025; Webb & Mumford, 2025). When teachers investigate issues such as learner motivation, language development, or assessment fairness, the outcomes are not only more meaningful but also more actionable. Such relevance reinforces the view of research as a practical means to understand and improve teaching and learning, not as an academic exercise detached from the classroom.

A second key dimension of this framework is relationality. Research cannot be reduced to the mere collection of data; it is an ethical process grounded in relationships, with learners, colleagues, communities and knowledge itself (Allwright, 2003, 2005). Teacher inquiry thrives in environments that foster trust, mutual support and respect for practitioner wisdom (De Costa et al., 2022; Gutierrez, 2019). Research communities within schools, teacher education programmes, or teacher associations can provide spaces where educators engage critically and collaboratively with each other's work. These spaces not only enhance research capacity but also challenge epistemic hierarchies that traditionally marginalise practitioner voices (Fricker, 2007; Xerri, 2022). When teachers and learners co-construct knowledge in trusting, dialogic environments, the outcomes are more inclusive and representative of the realities of educational practice (Hanks, 2025).

The accessibility of research is another vital consideration. Research language, formats, and dissemination practices often alienate teachers, reinforcing the perception that research is not for them (Rosman & Merk, 2021; Williams & Coles, 2007). Making research accessible involves using clear, jargon-free language and offering diverse modes of engagement, such as podcasts, infographics, blogs and collaborative workshops. Platforms like TESOLgraphics demonstrate how simplifying research findings without diluting their rigour can help bridge the gap between scholarship and practice (Sato et al., 2024). Moreover, access must be literal as well as conceptual: open-access

publishing and publicly funded repositories should be promoted to ensure teachers are not excluded by paywalls. Accessibility also implies that teachers themselves have the tools, training and support needed to conduct and disseminate research, requiring investment in professional learning and mentorship (Dikilitaş & Bostancıoğlu, 2019; Fürstenberg, 2024). When these factors are present, classroom research is a more accessible practice for language educators (Marsh & Deacon, 2024).

Effective classroom research is inherently collaborative, thriving on shared inquiry and dialogue among educators, learners and other stakeholders. When teachers engage in research alongside colleagues, learners, school leaders or families, they co-construct knowledge that reflects multiple perspectives and addresses real educational concerns (Donohoo, 2013). Collaboration fosters professional dialogue, reciprocal learning, and collective responsibility for improving practice and learner success (Dyanti & Gqoli, 2025; Vangrieken et al., 2015; Wullschlegler et al., 2025). It also enables a more holistic understanding of teaching and learning by drawing on diverse voices and lived experiences. At the same time, classroom research is fundamentally teaching-driven. It emerges from the questions, dilemmas and goals that arise in day-to-day classroom practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Borg, 2013). This form of inquiry is motivated by a desire to improve specific aspects of pedagogy, whether related to learner engagement, assessment strategies, or instructional techniques. Because it is shaped by teachers' own professional knowledge and contextual understanding, it remains highly relevant and responsive to classroom realities (Dana et al., 2025).

To realise its full potential, classroom research must also be integrated into the broader professional structures of educational institutions and into teachers' existing practices. When inquiry is embedded in professional development, curriculum design, teaching and learning, and school improvement initiatives, it becomes a sustained and valued aspect of professional life rather than an added burden (Cordingley, 2015; Hanks, 2017b). Institutional support such as mentoring, protected time, and formal recognition reinforces its legitimacy and impact (White, 2020). Importantly, classroom research is also community-oriented, grounded in the social, cultural and linguistic contexts in which learning takes place (Gibbons et al., 2021). By involving learners, families and local stakeholders in the research process, teachers promote a more democratic and inclusive form of inquiry (Hanks, 2025). This orientation ensures that research responds to collective needs and fosters educational transformation that is both context-sensitive and socially meaningful (Groothuisen et al., 2019; Vermunt et al., 2023). In this way, classroom research not only enhances individual practice but also contributes to broader, community-rooted change.

Finally, for classroom research to be truly transformative, it must be empowering. This entails trusting teachers to shape educational knowledge, valuing their expertise, and creating opportunities for them to influence policy and practice (Oancea et al., 2021; Shieh, 2021). Empowerment also involves confronting systemic inequalities that exclude certain teachers, especially those in under-resourced or marginalised contexts, from participating in research (Anderson, 2023). Equity-oriented initiatives must ensure that all teachers, regardless of location or institutional affiliation, have access to the support and infrastructure needed to engage in inquiry if they are willing to do so. Empowerment means seeing research not only as a process but as a stance, one that affirms the professional dignity of teachers and their right to

make informed, reflective and just decisions about their work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Through such a vision, the PRACTICE Framework becomes more than aspirational: it becomes a practical agenda for reimagining the role of research in ELT.

## Conclusion

Reclaiming research as a teacher-owned, context-sensitive and transformative practice is not simply a pedagogical adjustment; it is a political and epistemological reorientation. The discussion across this paper has shown that redefining research in ways that resonate with language educators' lived experiences is key to bridging the gap between theory and practice. Dominant definitions must be challenged by more inclusive, relational and reflective conceptions of inquiry. Ownership must extend beyond university academics and policymakers to include language teachers and learners, so that doing research is also appreciated as a form of in situ knowledge co-construction that serves the purposes of professional learning, improved learner outcomes and social justice.

The PRACTICE Framework offers a viable pathway for embedding research meaningfully into everyday teaching. If research is to genuinely support language education, it must be made by and for those closest to the learning process. This means trusting teachers, investing in their capacities, and creating structures that validate and amplify their insights. Ultimately, classroom research should not be viewed as a supplementary activity or elite pursuit but as a fundamental aspect of teachers' professional identity. By reimagining research in this manner, we move closer to an educational landscape in ELT where inquiry is not the exception, but the norm, and where every teacher can choose to be a researcher in their own right.

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