



Small but mighty

Every one of us is a teacher-researcher, we just didn't know it. As educators, we come up against anomalies and beguilers all the time – those students or classes that don't fit the stereotype or do things in a way we'd like or expect (something I believe is magnified in the multicultural classroom). Opportunities to carry out research these days has probably increased too, as neurodiversity and learning styles become more varied and understood, and a more diverse range of people join the ELT classroom. While trying to find the best way to help Renata retain vocabulary, learn the skills necessary to manage Maud's behaviour or bring young Shun out of his shell, we are presented with an opening to do some research. Should these findings of small sample sizes (anything from one learner to a few classes) be shared?

Should they be trusted? Can they be applied beyond the immediate context? And are they valuable in shaping pedagogy and theory?

While small sample sizes are often dismissed in academic circles for their lack of generalisability and statistical power, in ELT they may offer insights that are both meaningful and actionable. They are especially common in action research, exploratory practice and practitioner inquiry – approaches that prioritise local relevance over broad claims. Rather than attempting to replace large-scale studies, small-scale classroom investigations serve a different function: they help teachers make sense of their own contexts ('Is it the learner profile that's changed or me?!'), test out hypotheses in real time ('Who will retain more information if I get half the class to take notes and the

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advocates conviction, clarity and collaboration in classroom research.

other to close their eyes and just listen to this text?'), and refine their pedagogical choices based on first-hand observation. As such, these mini-research projects should not be overlooked as valid and relevant delvings into our own little petri dishes of learning.

This article explores the pros and cons of using small sample sizes as evidence for a hypothesis in ELT research. It examines why small-scale research is so prevalent in our field, the kinds of insights it can offer and the limitations that must be acknowledged. Finally, it offers strategies for making the most of small-sample studies without overstepping their evidential reach and encourages the reader to reach out to other educators across the globe to share their insights and case studies or projects without prejudice.

Why small samples are common in ELT

Small sample sizes are the norm rather than the exception in ELT classroom research. There are several reasons for this, most of them practical. Time constraints are a major factor: many ELT teachers interested in research are doing so alongside a full teaching load, most often without dedicated time or funding. Conducting research with the classes we have is usually the most viable approach.

Access is another limitation. Most learners are more than happy to take part in a study in class, but, beyond that, teachers won't be privy to data collected from multiple schools or contexts. As a result, their participant pool is often limited to whoever is already in their classroom. In many cases, this leads to studies based on one to thirty or so learners. This is of little consequence, as the type of big data schools often gather is not directly relevant to the teacher's experience and is often gathered in the form of questionnaires or surveys, which are often completed unwillingly, ignored or misunderstood and don't offer the same personalised and focused feedback.

ELT values context-specific insights. Research paradigms such as action research and exploratory practice actively encourage teachers to investigate their own practice in depth, rather than

seek general laws of learning. These paradigms accept and even embrace small sample sizes, prioritising the exploration of what works for particular learners in particular contexts.

Small-scale studies often illuminate aspects of teaching and learning that might be missed in broader surveys. They allow researchers to observe micro-patterns of interaction, trace learner development over time or test new strategies in manageable ways. In short, the small sample is a practical necessity. Having realised you are already doing valuable research, it makes sense not to worry about receiving funding or working from a large data pool. Confirming hunches with colleagues helps build confidence in our viewpoints; our experiences are often universal and patterns can be quickly identified, isolated and established when we follow our instincts and have the support network in place to share what we've unveiled.

Pros of small sample sizes

There are several advantages to using a small sample size, particularly in practitioner-led ELT research.

Acuity over expanse

As mentioned, one of the key benefits of small samples is the potential for in-depth exploration. With fewer participants, researchers can dedicate more time to

observing individuals, collecting rich qualitative data through interviews or journals, and capturing detailed snapshots of classroom interaction. This depth often leads to nuanced understandings of learner behaviour, teacher-student dynamics or the impact of specific teaching strategies. Our beguilingly anomalous learners are a gift as they force us to find new strategies to help them learn.

Feasibility for the philosophically minded

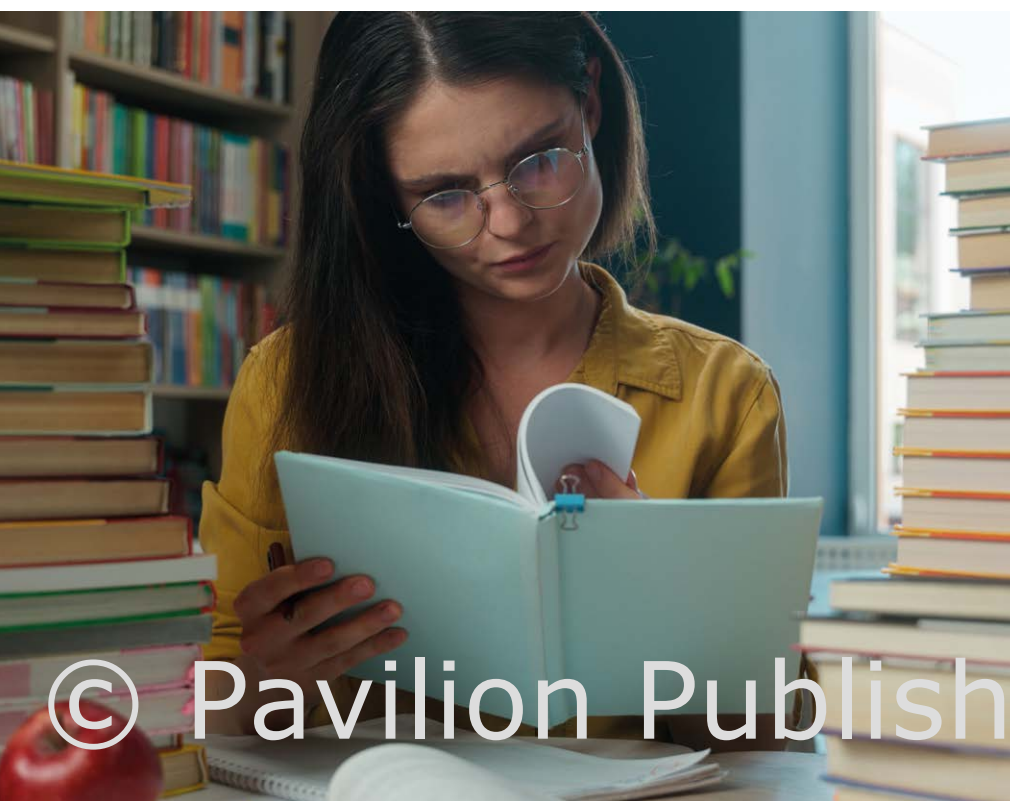
Smaller samples make research more manageable for busy teachers. Collecting, analysing and interpreting data from a whole institution or multiple classes could be overwhelming. Focusing on a small group or even one learner allows for a more realistic scope, enabling you to engage in research without compromising your primary responsibility: teaching.

Reflective practice provocateur

Even micro-discoveries can have a powerful impact on your professional development. Observing how a handful of learners respond to a new technique may inspire pedagogical changes or prompt new questions. In this way, small-sample research functions as a reflective tool, helping you fine tune your approach in a grounded, evidence-informed way.

Exploratory and collaborative value

Small studies are often stepping stones to larger investigations. They help researchers trial data-collection tools, refine their research questions and assess the feasibility of their methods. In this sense, small sample sizes can be understood as an essential part of the research cycle, providing the foundation for future studies. There is growing recognition – especially in practitioner journals such as *MET* – of the unique contributions such studies can make. Professional networking platforms are also a boon for budding ELT researchers. I recently joined LinkedIn and within no time at all had joined several research groups on WhatsApp, with over 300 members all over the world willing to propose collaborative research, share their papers and give links to seminars and forums. The constant message alerts



get a bit much, at times, but then I'm reminded how wonderful it is to have a daily dose of language passion. The ELT industry really does have a give-first mentality, and it has been such an inspiration to make these connections and join these support networks.

Cons of small sample sizes

Despite their advantages, small sample sizes also carry significant limitations that must be acknowledged and addressed.

Limited generalisability

Perhaps the most common criticism is that small samples lack generalisability. What works for one class or learner may not work elsewhere, especially given that the ELT landscape is changing so rapidly. While findings may be locally valid, much like the fact that the same lesson can work brilliantly in the morning and crash and burn in the afternoon encourages caution in applying the findings beyond the study.

Risk of bias

Smaller studies are more vulnerable to bias. If you select your dyslexic student(s) for a study – consciously or not – the results may not reflect average dyslexic learning abilities. Furthermore, when teachers act as both researchers and instructors, their expectations or assumptions may influence data collection and interpretation.

Reduced statistical power

Quantitative studies based on small samples may not yield statistically significant results, simply due to the small number of data points. This makes it harder to detect real patterns or differences and increases the risk of drawing inaccurate conclusions. Even where trends are observed, they should be presented as suggestive rather than definitive.

Publication and recognition challenges

In academic publishing, small-scale studies may be undervalued, especially if they lack rigorous methodology or statistical backing. This can discourage teacher-researchers from sharing their work, or from framing their insights as research at all.

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Making small samples work

The pathway to using small samples effectively lies in understanding their strengths and limitations. Rather than trying to convince yourself a small study offers universal truths, be transparent about what your findings represent.

One way to enhance the credibility of small-sample research is through triangulation. Combining multiple data sources (observations, interviews, student work) can help validate findings and reduce reliance on any single perspective. Similarly, using mixed methods – qualitative and quantitative – can offer a more rounded picture.

Framing is also important. Small studies may be better presented as case studies or exploratory inquiries, not as attempts to prove a hypothesis definitively. Researchers should clearly state their context, acknowledge potential biases and explain the limitations of their sample. This honesty enhances trust and encourages responsible interpretation. I have been working on a hypothesis regarding the effects of meditation on language learning and, even after five years of testing and research, I am still reluctant to come to any concrete conclusions (despite what I believe my findings to show!).

Lastly, small studies should not be viewed in isolation. When multiple, small-scale projects explore similar questions, they contribute to a broader mosaic of understanding. Teachers sharing their findings in communities of practice, conferences or practitioner journals help build a collective evidence base – one that reflects the complexity and variety of real-world teaching. The freer we feel to share our research, no matter how

pocket-sized it may be, the closer we'll get to building a bigger picture of how we learn. And there's no better feeling than having a eureka moment and sharing discoveries with peers.

Conclusion

Small sample sizes are not a flaw in ELT research; they are often a necessary and productive feature. While they limit the scope of generalisation and require careful handling to avoid bias, they offer powerful insights into the lived realities of language teaching and learning.

Mini-research projects invite us to look closely, think critically and respond thoughtfully to our own contexts. It reminds us that evidence can take many forms, and that even modest inquiries can stimulate significant change. For teacher-researchers (and if you're reading this I believe you already are), small studies are not just a stepping stone to something bigger – they are valuable in their own right and should be shared and celebrated.

By approaching small-sample research with rigour, humility and transparency, we can ensure that our findings contribute meaningfully to the shared knowledge of our profession – one well thought-out class or learner at a time.



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