



Is 'research' a dirty word?

This article challenges the perception of research as intimidating or irrelevant to English language teachers. It advocates reclaiming research as a reflective, empowering and context-sensitive practice. By embracing teacher-led inquiry, emotional engagement and relevance, classroom research becomes a tool for professional growth, learner support and systemic change.

Introduction

For many English language teachers around the world, the word 'research' can feel intimidating – sterile, academic, even alien. Some associate it with dense journal articles, complex methodologies or institutional agendas far removed from the realities of the classroom. Others may feel pressure to engage in 'evidence-based practice' without clarity on whose evidence

counts or whether that evidence reflects the diverse, dynamic settings in which they teach. In fact, it is worth asking: is 'research' a dirty word?

For certain Indigenous scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021), it has been. She writes that 'research' is one of the dirtiest words in the vocabulary of many Indigenous communities, not because inquiry is inherently wrong, but because of the ways research has historically been used in colonial settings – to extract, exploit and erase. While the context may differ, there are echoes of this experience in how many language teachers feel about educational research being imposed on them: it often feels disconnected, top-down and extractive. As the activist Sahibzada Mayed (2025) points out, 'without reciprocity, research is just another form of exploitation masked as inquiry and knowledge production'.

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argues in favour of classroom research.

This article aims to rethink what research means for English language teachers. What if we moved beyond the idea of research as an external imposition and reclaimed it as something empowering, relevant and relational?

Reclaiming research as a practice of ownership

Polarising educational research in terms of academics and practitioners is not helpful because, while the two communities might have distinct expectations and purposes, the former's research endeavours can play an instrumental role in developing classroom practice. What is problematic is when there is no attempt to make research more participatory in nature (Galletta & Torre, 2019) or reluctance to establish bidirectional communication between the two communities (Mills *et al.*, 2020). In some educational settings, research tends



to be something that is exclusively done *to* teachers and learners, rather than *with* them. Policymakers, academics and consultants decide the questions, collect the data and draw the conclusions. Those within the classroom are often relegated to being data providers – observed, surveyed or tested – while real decision-making power lies elsewhere. But what if we turned that model on its head?

When teachers choose to engage in classroom research – whether through action research, exploratory practice or reflective inquiry – they take back ownership of knowledge-making (Xerri, 2025). They ask the questions that matter to them. They explore the puzzles that emerge in their specific contexts (Hanks, 2017). They make sense of findings in ways that are immediately relevant to their learners. This kind of research does not just add value to classroom practice – it validates the teacher’s role as a knowledge creator, not just a knowledge consumer (Xerri, 2017). Research stops being something that solely belongs to those who are traditionally associated with it through their institutional affiliation or job description.

From extraction to reciprocity and relevance

Much of traditional educational research has relied on models of extraction (Gaudry, 2011). Information is collected from classrooms, analysed in distant offices and published in inaccessible scholarly journals. The communities being researched – teachers, learners and other school stakeholders – rarely benefit directly. In contrast, teacher-led research offers a model of reciprocity (Taylor, 2024). It is grounded in relationships: between teacher and learner; between peers in a department or community of practice; and

between the teacher and their own evolving identity. The goal is not just to extract insights but to deepen understanding, improve practice and support learners more meaningfully. It is research with a heart and purpose. When English language teachers investigate learner motivation, experiment with new feedback strategies or reflect on translanguaging practices in multilingual classrooms, they are engaging in research that gives back. It serves a purpose beyond personal curiosity or institutional expectations – it enhances the learning experience.

Besides being a manifestation of reciprocity, teacher-led research also invites us to rethink the notion of research relevance (Xerri, 2025). Sometimes, research is framed as rigorous only if it uses certain methodologies, produces statistical results or is published in peer-reviewed journals. Yet these standards can be exclusionary. They often dismiss the kinds of rich, reflective and messy investigations teachers engage in daily. Moreover, we must acknowledge that, at times, relevance matters more than rigour alone. What good is a perfectly controlled study on vocabulary acquisition if it does not help your learners in a multilingual, exam-driven, resource-limited classroom? What value does a broad study on classroom behaviour have if it ignores the lived realities of your learners who work part-time jobs and come to class exhausted? Practitioner research challenges these assumptions. It recognises that small-scale, context-specific insights are not only valid – they are vital (Heissenberger & Maticsek-Jauk, 2019). Relevance, after all, means asking: does this research help me teach better? Does it help my learners thrive?

Teacher research as reflection, resistance and care

Some teachers labour under the misconception that good research must be neutral or objective. This is partly driven by the persistent inclination to define objectivity as something that exists independently and communicates its truth without being influenced by human perception, interpretation or judgment (Feinberg, 2023). However, in the case of research involving human participants, such objectivity is a myth (Bowden & Green, 2010). This is because neutrality can often mask bias – especially when it ignores the social, cultural and political realities of the classroom. Teaching is never neutral, and neither is researching it. In fact, the push for objectivity in educational research can sometimes lead to detachment.

Rather than viewing emotional engagement and subjectivity as liabilities, we might instead recognise them as vital elements of meaningful classroom research. Teachers interested in research are told to be observers, not participants;

to minimise emotion, not embrace it; to avoid bias, rather than recognise and work with it. But what if, instead, we treated teaching and researching as intertwined? What if being present, reflective and emotionally invested were not obstacles to good research but essential components? Research that emerges from lived experience – especially in complex environments like language classrooms – is not flawed; it is deeply human (Binder, 2012). When we embrace our own subjectivity, we open the door to more authentic inquiry.

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Viewing research through a personal and contextual lens also allows it to become a form of resistance and empowerment (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2018:107–120). In contexts where top-down policies dominate, where testing regimes narrow the curriculum or where teachers are under constant scrutiny, engaging in classroom research can be a radical act (Simon & Campano, 2013). It says: I know my classroom. I trust my learners. I believe my voice matters. Research becomes a form of resistance when it challenges the notion that knowledge only comes from outside experts. It becomes a form of professional learning that is reflective, sustainable and teacher driven. For English language teachers, this is particularly powerful. Language teaching is inherently intercultural, socially situated and emotionally charged. Practising inquiry within this context helps resist decontextualised methods and instead affirms the richness of our classrooms.

In addition, to truly support teachers to conduct meaningful research, we must not only equip them with the knowledge and skills to engage in research (Xerri, 2022; Xerri & Pioquinto, 2018). If we want to make research something teachers can embrace – not fear – we must also nurture a culture of care (Banegas & Consoli, 2024). That means valuing collaboration over competition, depth over scale and process over product. It also means supporting teachers emotionally. Doing research, especially on challenging topics like learner trauma, inclusion or failure, can be isolating and even triggering. We need systems that honour not just the intellectual labour of research but the emotional one, too. A caring approach to research encourages listening, trust and reciprocity. It treats knowledge not as a product to be mined, but a relationship to be cultivated (Xerri, 2025).

Beyond binaries: a holistic approach to inquiry

This article advocates for a conceptual transformation in our understanding of research. Figure 1 contrasts traditional, often alienating conceptions of research – such as being imposed, extractive, objective and detached – with a more empowering, relational and context-sensitive vision. On the left, research is shown as something external

to teachers: driven by institutional agendas, valuing objectivity over experience and reinforcing a culture of fear or compliance. On the right, these views are reframed to emphasise research as a teacher-led, reflective and emotionally invested process. Here, subjectivity is not a flaw but a strength; relevance to classroom realities takes precedence over abstract rigour; and research becomes a form of care, creativity and professional agency.

From →	→ To
Research as imposed	Research as empowering
Extractive models	Reciprocal relationships
Objectivity myth	Embraced subjectivity
Detached knowledge	Contextual understanding
Teacher as consumer	Teacher as creator
External validation	Classroom relevance
Fear of research	Culture of care

Figure 1: Shifting perspectives on research

While the article emphasises the need to reclaim research as a practitioner-driven, contextually grounded activity, it is important not to create a false dichotomy between academic and practitioner research. Academic research can offer valuable theoretical frameworks, empirical insights and methodological tools that enrich classroom inquiry (Bergmark & Erixon, 2020). When accessible and responsive to the realities of teaching, it can help practitioners see their work in broader educational, social or cultural contexts (Gleeson *et al.*, 2022). Rather than viewing academic research as inherently disconnected, we can recognise its potential to complement practitioner research – provided it is communicated in inclusive ways and invites dialogue rather than prescription (van Schaik *et al.*, 2018). A more integrated, reciprocal relationship between academics and practitioners can foster a richer, more holistic understanding of research, teaching and learning (Xerri & Block, 2024).

Conclusion

So, is 'research' a dirty word? It can be. Especially when it is imposed, extracted or disconnected from those it claims to serve. But it does not have to be. For English language teachers, classroom research can be a tool for empowerment, relevance and connection. It can be a path to professional growth, learner support and systemic change. Perhaps the task ahead is not to reject research, but to reclaim it. To strip it of its intimidation, reroot it in classrooms and reimagine it as a collaborative, caring practice. Because when teachers lead the way, research is not something to fear. It is something to celebrate.

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