

Practitioner Research in TESOL: 7 Ways to Get Started

by [Sue Garton](#)

Recently, I've found that TESOL members are increasingly feeling the need to become more involved in research. In some cases, that may simply mean having the tools to critically read and evaluate the numerous research articles that are published in our field, but more and more practitioners feel the need to carry out research themselves and for a number of very good reasons.

Research in TESOL¹

I firmly believe that all practice should be based on sound underlying principles, and these principles are not necessarily established only by academics working with large research grants. Practitioner research, or classroom-based research, is fundamental in establishing a knowledge base for TESOL, and teachers are the ones who can really make a difference.

Research in a field as diverse and multifaceted as TESOL can be approached in a variety of ways: cognitive theories are well-established but social and critical perspectives have become much more prominent, while a relatively narrow view of second language acquisition is being replaced by more consideration of multilingualism. Theoretical diversity is reflected in the many valid approaches to research in TESOL:

- quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method
- descriptive and critical
- large scale and small scale
- cross sectional and longitudinal
- observational and experimental
- research conducted by university researchers and by teachers in their own classrooms

Therefore, research within TESOL can move from both theory to practice and from practice to theory as knowledge is constructed through means that have more recently become known as *practitioner research* or *classroom-based enquiry*.

One of the criticisms of practitioner research is that it lacks rigor. But does that have to be the case? I would argue most certainly not. The TESOL Research Task Force, which recently drew up the research agenda for the field for the next few years, took a broad view of research and defined it as systematic investigation that contributes to the knowledge base that provides a principled basis for making decisions about policies, plans, and actions. Practitioner research can most certainly do that.

All research that has “systematic investigation” at its heart has the potential to help members of the profession improve the conditions, processes, and outcomes of language teaching, learning, and assessment. It also can help the profession address urgent social and political needs around the world, improve the materials used in language teaching, as well as clarify debates and debunk myths regarding L2 issues.

Getting Involved in Research

¹ Most of this section is based on the [TESOL Research Agenda](#)

So how can you get involved in research? Firstly, by reading research carried out by others with a critical mindset, and asking what relevance it has to you and your learners and what you can take from it, if anything. Secondly, by carrying out research yourself, in your own classroom. The most daunting aspect of this can be knowing where to start. The [TESOL Research Agenda](#) has lots of suggestions for possible areas in the field where research is needed.

The TESOL Standing Committee for Research (SCR) was recently asked what advice it would give to a practitioner who wanted to start researching. Here are some practical suggestions:

1. Learn How to Research

Get guidance on how to carry out research from good “how to” books and articles on practitioner research such as [Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners](#) by Burns (Routledge, 2010). This is a very practical and accessible step-by-step guide to doing action research. Dick Allwright’s work on [exploratory practice](#) is also useful.

2. Read About How Others Researched

Read relevant publications such as [TESOL Journal](#), [ELT Journal](#) or TESOL’s [Language Teacher Research series](#) to see how other people (teachers) did their research; you can learn a lot from how others have carried out their projects. Moreover, don’t be afraid to contact authors to ask for more information: Most authors are only too happy to share their experiences.

3. Get Research Insight at the TESOL Convention

Attend the TESOL annual convention. In addition to the research-related academic sessions, there is the SCR preconvention event, which has a practical focus on doing research for both novice researchers and those with more experience. This event looks at how to get started in research as well as collecting and analyzing data. Guest researchers who have shared their experiences in recent years include Suresh Canagarajah, Michael Legutke, and Anne Burns.

4. Keep a Journal

Start keeping a journal to record significant moments every week or month to reflect on them—such reflections can make a good starting point for identifying a topic but can also constitute data in their own right. A very good book that has suggestions on how to start reflecting on your own practice, conduct research, and develop professionally is [Pursuing Professional Development: The Self as a Source](#), by Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (Heinle, 2001).

5. Collaborate

If you can, get a group together to work on joint projects, rather than do it alone. Apart from being able to pool ideas and share the load, you can motivate each other and keep each other going. Try to set up group of colleagues in your own institution, or join your local language teachers’ association. You can find more ideas about collaborative action research in Collaborative Action Research by Anne Burns, which is now available [online](#).

6. Participate in Research-Focused Professional Development

Participate in a course or program (online or face-to-face) that recognizes the importance of research as part of professional development. Many distance learning TESOL master's programs in my U.K. context, for example, are based on course participants carrying out their own small-scale research projects. Well-known courses are those offered by the universities of Aston, Birmingham, Exeter, and Manchester. These universities will also offer certificates and diplomas if you don't feel ready to launch straight into a master's degree.

7. Join a Professional Community

Join professional communities (online or face-to-face) that value research as a crucial impetus and means for professional growth, and stay connected with like-minded professionals for mutual assistance in research. One example is the newly established [TESOL Research Community Group](#); the group plans to allow members to:

- find links to useful resources for getting started with or developing your research skills
- connect with like-minded TESOL members who are interested in the same areas of research
- share information about opportunities for research
- discuss research concerns and issues.

To join, simply visit [the group](#) and click on "Join Now" in the upper right part of the screen.

Sharing Outcomes

Finally, once you've done your research, find ways of sharing what you've done with fellow professionals. Generalization is not the goal of this type of research, but don't underestimate the power of practitioner research to resonate with fellow professionals—that is where its wider value lies. Sharing within your own institution is one way. Presenting at an event or conference is another. But why not publish your work in one of the many journals that value practitioner research? [TESOL Journal](#), [English Teaching Professional](#), and [ELT Journal](#) are just some journals that welcome accounts of practitioner research.

And if you get your work published, consider applying for TESOL's [Award for Distinguished Research](#), which aims to recognize excellence in any area of research on language teaching and learning.

I hope that has whetted your appetite for research and given you some ideas on how to get started.

Sue Garton is director of postgraduate programs in English at Aston University, UK, where she also tutors in undergraduate and graduate TESOL programs. Her research interests are in the areas of classroom interaction, language teacher education, and language-in-education policy and practice. Her most recent publication is [International Perspectives on Materials in ELT](#), with Kathleen Graves and published by Palgrave. She is currently chair of the TESOL Research Committee.