RESEARCH DIFFICULTIES AMONG MASTER'S STUDENTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Mukaddam Ibrokhimova
PhD Student of Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages
mukaddam.ibrokhimova@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9676-4613
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22303607

Abstract: Teacher research can support professional learning and help teachers connect research with classroom practice, but engaging in research can be challenging for novice researchers. This paper explores the main challenges experienced by Master's students in English language education when conducting academic research. A preliminary diagnostic survey was conducted with 29 Master's students using a questionnaire covering research knowledge, confidence, attitudes, research difficulties, and support needs. The findings indicate that students were generally motivated to improve their research skills and confident about completing their research, but reported greater difficulty with data analysis, research-method selection, understanding research procedures, and managing research-related tasks. Open-ended responses particularly highlighted difficulties in finding reliable and relevant sources, identifying research gaps, selecting and collecting data, narrowing research topics, and receiving sufficient practical guidance. The findings suggest that research preparation should move beyond theoretical instruction towards structured, practice-oriented learning supported by supervisors, teachers, peers, and research communities.

Keywords: teacher research, research challenges, research competence, Master's students, English language education, research engagement, research support

Introduction

Teacher research has increasingly been recognized as an important form of professional learning in language education. It encourages teachers to investigate questions arising from their own classrooms and to use evidence to better understand and improve their practice (Borg, 2009; Burns, 2010). Rather than positioning teachers only as consumers of knowledge produced by academic researchers, teacher research recognizes teachers as potential contributors to professional knowledge.

However, research engagement is not always easy for teachers or students preparing to become teacher-researchers. Previous research has identified several barriers, including limited research knowledge, lack of time, workload, restricted access to resources, lack of confidence, and insufficient institutional support (Borg, 2009; Borg & Liu, 2013; Burns, 2010). In addition, novice researchers may have difficulty understanding what research actually involves and may associate it with complex methods, statistics, and highly formal academic writing.

These challenges are particularly important at Master's level, where students are often expected to conduct independent research while simultaneously completing coursework and other academic responsibilities. Understanding their specific difficulties can help teacher educators and supervisors design more appropriate research preparation and support.

Therefore, this preliminary study explores the following questions:

1. What challenges do Master's students experience when conducting academic research?
2. Which aspects of research do students feel less confident about?
3. What kinds of support do students perceive as helpful for developing their research competence?

Methodology

Participants

A preliminary diagnostic survey was conducted among 29 Master's students in English language education. The participants included 19 first-year students and 10 second-year students.

The survey was designed as an initial diagnostic instrument rather than a full-scale evaluation. Its purpose was to identify students' perceived strengths, difficulties, attitudes, and support needs related to academic research.

Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale statements and two open-ended questions. The statements addressed several areas of research competence, including:

- understanding the purpose and stages of research;
- distinguishing research topics, problems, and questions;
- understanding qualitative and quantitative methods;
- research ethics and academic integrity;
- conducting literature reviews;
- identifying relevant academic sources;
- selecting research methods;
- analysing research data;
- academic writing;
- confidence and motivation;
- perceived research difficulties;
- supervisor and institutional support; and
- preferred forms of research learning and guidance.

The final two questions asked students what they found most difficult about academic research and what kinds of support would help them improve their research competence.

Preliminary Findings

Students Were Generally Motivated but Not Equally Confident in All Research Skills

The survey suggests a generally positive attitude towards research. Students reported relatively high levels of motivation to improve their research skills, with 22 of 29 participants (76%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were motivated to improve their research skills.

Similarly, 23 students (79%) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident in their ability to complete their Master’s research successfully. However, this general confidence did not correspond equally to all specific research skills. The weakest area was independent data analysis. Only 11 students (38%) agreed or strongly agreed that they could analyse research data independently, while 10 students (34%) remained neutral and 8 students (28%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Students also showed comparatively lower confidence in selecting appropriate research methods. Only 14 students (48%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while 13 students (45%) were neutral.

These findings suggest that students may feel generally positive about completing research while still lacking confidence in some of the practical skills required to conduct it independently.

Finding and Evaluating Sources Was a Major Difficulty

The open-ended responses strongly highlighted difficulties related to academic sources and information. Students mentioned:

- “Finding sources”
- “Finding reliable materials”
- “Finding useful methods”
- “Finding appropriate articles on my topic”
- “Finding resources that are appropriate to my work”
- “Finding information”
- “Reliable materials”

One student described the challenge more specifically as the difficulty of identifying reliable and relevant sources and critically analysing them rather than simply summarising information.

This finding is important because access to information alone does not necessarily mean that students possess the ability to evaluate and use academic sources effectively. Research competence requires students to search for relevant literature, judge its quality and relevance, synthesize findings, and connect the literature to their own research questions.

Identifying a Research Topic, Problem, and Gap Was Challenging

Several students referred to difficulties at the beginning of the research process. Their responses included:

- "Choosing topic"
- "Scientific novelty"
- "To find gap in research"
- "Research mavzusini tushunib boshlash"
- "To specify my topic"
- "At first I didn't know what should I write"

These responses indicate that some students struggle not only with conducting research but with deciding what should be researched in the first place.

This is consistent with the view that novice researchers may need support in moving from a broad area of interest towards a focused research problem and researchable question (Borg, 2009; Burns, 2010).

Data Collection and Research Design Were Also Difficult

Students mentioned difficulties with "collecting data," "authentic data," "experiments," and selecting "useful methods."

This corresponds with the Likert-scale findings. While students demonstrated relatively positive perceptions of their general research competence, their confidence decreased when they were asked about more specific methodological tasks.

The findings suggest that research methodology may be understood at a conceptual level but not yet fully transferred into practical research decisions. This distinction is important because learning about research methods does not automatically mean that students can independently apply those methods to their own research.

Time and Competing Academic Responsibilities

Time was another important concern. One participant explained that completing research was challenging because students had to manage research alongside other tasks from several subjects.

The Likert responses also showed that 12 students (41%) agreed or strongly agreed that time constraints made it difficult to conduct research properly, while 14 students (48%) were neutral.

Although time was not the strongest difficulty identified in the open responses, it appears to interact with other challenges. When students are simultaneously managing coursework, research, reading, data collection, and academic writing, research can easily become fragmented.

Lack of Practical Guidance and Supervisor Support

The open-ended responses particularly emphasized the need for guidance. Students requested:

- "Teacher's support"
- "Academic support"
- "Guidance"
- "More face-to-face guidance with the supervisor"
- "Adequate support by dissertation supervisor"
- "Supervisor's help"
- "Clear specific guidance"
- "More research activities"
- "Extra information about strategies to do academic research"

One participant reported having no clear and practical support from the dissertation supervisor, while another noted that the teacher was not always available to check work and explain misunderstandings or mistakes.

The Likert results similarly showed room for improvement in perceived support: 15 students (52%) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt adequately supported, while 11 students (38%) were neutral and 3 students (10%) disagreed.

These findings suggest that students may benefit from more structured and accessible support rather than occasional general advice.

Students Preferred Practical and Structured Research Learning

The strongest finding concerned students' preferences for more practice-oriented research preparation.

22 students (76%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would benefit from a more practice-oriented approach to learning research methods.

Similarly, 19 students (66%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would like more structured guidance during the research process, while 22 students (76%) agreed or strongly agreed that integrating research activities into coursework would improve their research competence.

These findings provide an important direction for teacher education. Students appear to want research to be connected to actual research tasks rather than learned only as theoretical content.

Discussion

The preliminary findings reveal an important pattern: students are generally motivated to conduct research, but motivation does not necessarily translate into research competence.

Participants demonstrated relatively positive attitudes towards research and expressed confidence in completing their Master’s research. However, specific research activities—particularly data analysis, methodological decision-making, identifying research gaps, finding and evaluating academic sources, and organizing research—were more challenging.

This distinction is important for research education. Students may understand basic research terminology and the general stages of research while still experiencing difficulty when they have to make actual research decisions. Consequently, research competence needs to be developed through opportunities to practise research rather than through theoretical instruction alone. The findings also support the importance of research engagement through practice. When students work with authentic research questions, analyse real examples, search for literature, design small-scale inquiries, collect data, and discuss their methodological decisions, research becomes a practical activity rather than an abstract academic requirement.

Mentoring and structured guidance are also important. Previous research has shown that research engagement is influenced by teachers' access to support, research knowledge, institutional conditions, and professional communities (Borg, 2009; Borg & Liu, 2013). For novice researchers, mentoring can provide a bridge between knowing about research and being able to conduct research independently.

The findings therefore suggest several priorities for Master’s-level English language teacher education:

1. More practice-oriented research methodology instruction rather than predominantly theoretical teaching.
2. Step-by-step guidance from identifying a research problem to analysing and presenting findings.
3. Explicit training in literature searching and critical evaluation of sources.
4. More opportunities to practise data collection and analysis using manageable classroom-based examples.
5. Regular supervisor or mentor interaction, including opportunities to receive feedback.
6. Integration of research activities into coursework, allowing students to develop research skills progressively.
7. Opportunities for collaborative inquiry, where students can discuss research problems and methodological decisions with peers.

These priorities are consistent with a broader understanding of teacher research as a professional orientation in which inquiry is connected to meaningful educational questions and professional learning (Dikilitaş et al., 2015; Smith, 2020).

Implications for Teacher Research

Although the participants in this preliminary survey were Master’s students rather than practising teachers, the findings have implications for the development of future teacher-researchers. If Master’s programmes aim to prepare teachers who can conduct classroom-based research, research competence should be developed progressively. Students should not be expected to become independent researchers only when they begin writing their dissertations. Instead, research activities can be embedded throughout the programme.

For example, students can begin with identifying classroom problems, reviewing a small number of relevant studies, developing research questions, designing simple data-collection tools, analysing small

datasets, and reflecting on findings. These activities can gradually prepare students for more independent teacher research. This approach may also help challenge narrow perceptions of research. Research does not always require large samples, complicated statistics, or highly sophisticated experimental designs. Classroom-based inquiry can begin with manageable questions and appropriate forms of evidence (Burns, 2010; Smith, 2015).

Therefore, the development of teacher researchers should focus not only on research knowledge, but also on research confidence, practical skills, critical thinking, reflection, and sustained engagement with authentic research problems.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was relatively small, consisting of only 29 Master’s students from the participating context. Second, the findings are based primarily on students’ self-reported perceptions rather than direct measures of research competence. Third, the survey represents an initial diagnostic stage and therefore should not be interpreted as generalizable evidence about all Master’s students in Uzbekistan.

Future research should involve a larger and more diverse sample and combine questionnaire data with interviews, observation, analysis of students’ research work, and other forms of evidence. A longitudinal study could also examine how students’ research competence develops during their Master’s programme. Most importantly, the diagnostic findings can provide a basis for designing and evaluating a practice-oriented teacher research intervention. Such an intervention could investigate whether structured research activities, mentoring, and engagement in classroom-based inquiry lead to measurable development in students’ research competence.

Conclusion

This preliminary diagnostic study suggests that Master’s students in English language education are generally motivated to develop their research skills and feel reasonably confident about completing their research. However, important challenges remain in specific areas of research practice, particularly data analysis, methodological decision-making, identifying research gaps, finding and evaluating academic sources, data collection, and organizing research tasks.

The open-ended responses further indicate that students need more practical guidance, supervisor support, opportunities to practise research methods, and access to relevant academic resources. The strong preference for practice-oriented and structured research learning suggests that research competence may be better developed when research methodology is connected directly to authentic research activities.

The main implication is therefore clear: research education should move from teaching students about research towards engaging students in research. For English language teacher education, this shift can provide a foundation for developing future teacher-researchers who are able not only to understand research but also to ask meaningful questions, examine evidence, reflect on their practice, and use research to improve teaching and learning.

References

1. Borg, S. (2009). English language teachers’ conceptions of research. *Language Teaching, 42*(3), 365–387.
2. Borg, S. (2010). Language teacher research engagement. *Language Teaching, 43*(4), 391–429. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444810000170
3. Borg, S., & Liu, Y. (2013). Chinese college English teachers’ research engagement. *TESOL Quarterly, 47*(2), 270–299. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.56
4. Burns, A. (2010). *Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners*. Routledge.
5. Dikilitaş, K., Smith, R., & Trotman, W. (Eds.). (2015). *Teacher-researchers in action*. IATEFL.
6. Sarimsakova, D. (2024). Understanding teacher research: benefits and misconceptions. *Зарубежная лингвистика и лингводидактика Учредители: inScience LLC*, *2*(5), 23-30.

7. Shamim, F., & Smith, R. (2024). Addressing “academic” conceptions of research among teacher educators. In R. Smith, S. Eraldemir Tuyan, M. Serra, & E. A. Békés (Eds.), *Stories of mentoring teacher-research*. IATEFL.

8. Smith, R. (2015). Exploratory action research as workplan: Why, what and where from? In K. Dikilitaş, R. Smith, & W. Trotman (Eds.), *Teacher-researchers in action* (pp. 37–45). IATEFL.

9. Smith, R. (2020). *Mentoring teachers to research their classrooms: A practical handbook*. British Council.