



## RESEARCH IN TESOL: A SYSTEMATIC INVESTIGATION OF TRENDS AND TYPES OF RESEARCH IN ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE LAST TEN YEARS

**Waheeb S. Albiladi<sup>i</sup>**

University of Arkansas,  
Fayetteville, AR,  
USA

### **Abstract:**

This paper provides a systematic review of the research around teaching English as a second or foreign language over the last ten years. The review aims to help second and foreign language researchers to recognize the trends that have impacted English teaching and learning research. More than 400 articles from leading journals were reviewed to examine the trends and method that were used. The findings suggested that the research interests in the TESOL field have changed as many topics and trends have risen based on students' academic and social needs. Topics such as teaching methodology, digital literacy, and using technology to teach English have dominated the research during the last decade.

**Keywords:** TESOL, English teaching; ESL; EFL; English learning; research interests

### **1. Introduction**

Over the years, the English language has become one of the most significant and dominant languages over the globe. Millions of people around the world are currently learning English for different purposes such as communicating, working, or pursuing a degree in one of the English-speaking countries. In fact, English is the most widely spoken language in the world, and the number of the non- native speakers who speak English as a foreign or as a second language exceeds that of the native speakers (Sharifian, 2013). According to recent statistics, between 914 & 1200 million people speak English, 450 million speak English as a First Language (USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland, and South Africa), 400 million speak English as a Second Language, and 350 million speak English as a foreign language. English today is probably the 3rd largest language by number of native speakers, after Mandarin Chinese and Spanish (Crystal, 2012; Flores & Aneja, 2017). However, when combining native and non-native speakers, it is probably the most commonly spoken language in the world.

Recently, teaching English as a second or foreign language has received much attention as researchers have consistently and continuously looked for the most effective and beneficial

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [walbilad@gmail.com](mailto:walbilad@gmail.com)

practices to teach English to speakers of other languages. Teaching English as a second language (ESL) refers to the role of teaching and learning English in English-speaking countries (Newton & Nation, 2020). This includes teaching and learning of English for academic reasons as well as other purposes such as communication and work. Also, teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) refers to the role of teaching and learning English in non-English speaking countries (Albiladi, 2019). English is not the primary language and taught there as a foreign language. Mckinley (2019) tells us that *“TESOL research was traditionally led by researcher-practitioners, who acknowledged real-world English language teaching problems (in alignment with developments in establishing applied linguistics as a field of study) as the basis for research enquiries”* (p. 1).

During the last decade, numerous research studies have been conducted to understand the linguistic and educational needs of language learners. This includes looking for more effective teaching and learning approaches and understanding learners' responses to these methods. In essence, English education is one of the most researchable fields around the world as new learning theories, teaching practices, and learning concerns have appeared. Brooke (2013) summarized the research in the TESOL filed by stating *“There has been, and still is, a visible gap in TESOL between applied linguistics and the pedagogy of the second language classroom (SLC) with theoretical papers more prominent than case studies based on situated learning”* (p. 433).

## 2. Purpose

The purpose of this review is to provide a systematic review of the research around teaching English as a second or foreign language. The review aims to help second and foreign language researchers understand the trends that impact the research in the last ten years. To achieve these goals, the following research questions were used in his review:

- 1) What are some of the most researchable topics in Teaching English to Speakers of other languages (TESOL) filed for the last ten years?
- 2) What research trends have been done in TESOL for the last decade?
- 3) What types of research methods have been used during the last decade?

## 3. Material and Methods

The researcher started this research project by asking experts in the TESOL field about the most dominant and significant research journals to get the newest topics and trends in English education. These experts include some professors in the TESOL program at one mid-south university. Different scholarly journals were identified and selected. The selection of these four journals was based on the researcher's knowledge and the experts' recommendations and preferences. These journals are quarterly academic peer-reviewed journals published thousands of articles on different topics around English language teaching and learning. The publication in one of these journals is a bit challenging as hundreds of researchers work to get their paper accepted there.

Furthermore, to complete this research project, the following plan was followed. First, the researcher conducted general research on all journals to look for the most recent articles in

English Education for the last ten years. Second, the researcher scanned the first ten articles in each year's issue to identify the topics as well as other essential information such as the specific focus of the article, the research methodology, and the techniques that were used. Finally, the researcher started a data table that included this information. It is worth mentioning that more than 400 articles from both journals were examined to collect data for this research project.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The systematic review of the research revealed several trends and topics that have caught the researchers' attention in the TESOL field for the last ten years. Table 1 illustrates some of the research topics that seem to be of interest to researchers during this time.

**Table 1:** Topics and Trends in the English Education for the Last Ten Years

Focus of the Articles	Number of Articles	%
Digital Literacies /Technology in English Classes	55	13.7%
Second Language Methodology	50	12.5%
English for Specific Purposes	42	10.5%
Testing and Evaluation	35	8.7%
Language Planning and Policy	33	8.25%
Language and Culture	30	7.5%
Computer-Assisted Language Learning	26	6.5%
Language and Identity	25	6.2%
Gender/Race in English Teaching	22	5.5%
Translanguaging (Bilingual Education)	20	5%
Authentic Materials in ESL/EFL Classes	18	4.5%
TESOL in the 21st Century	15	3.7%
Psycholinguistics and TESOL	12	3%
Creativity across the Language Domains	10	2.5%
Plurilingualism	8	2%

Over the last decade, the research in English teaching and learning focuses on many topics and trends that are related to both teachers' and students' pedagogies. Based on the data, the topics can be categorized on different themes such as teaching practices, teaching materials, students' development, and multicultural education. Each one of these categories consists of several topics and trends that the scholars in the TESOL field have looked at and examined.

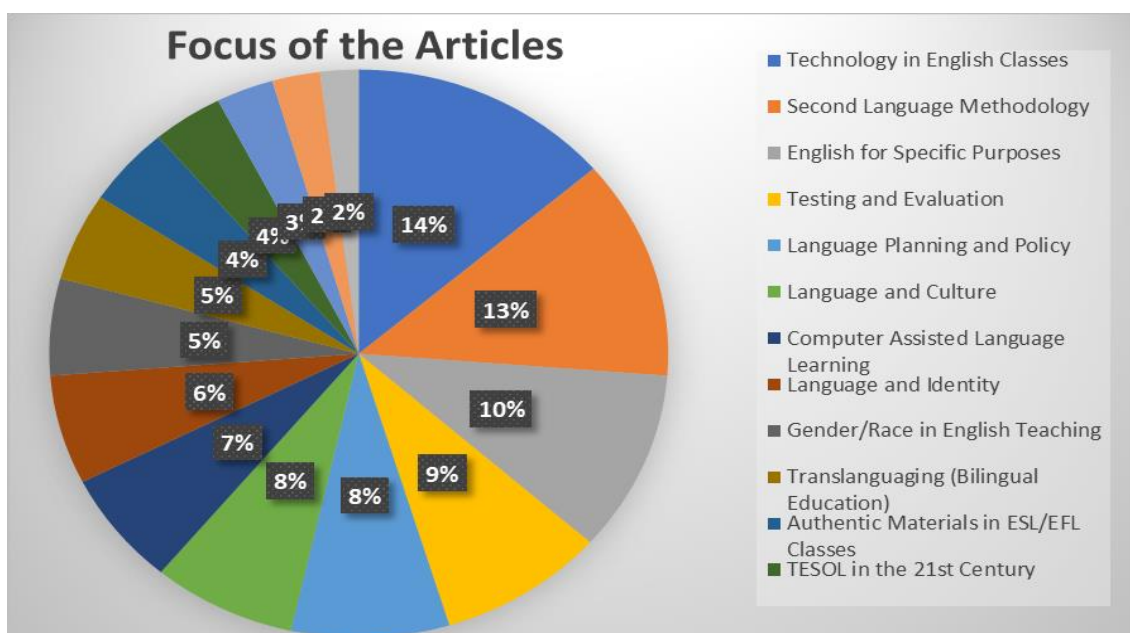
To illustrate, the researchers in the TESOL field have extensively examined the teaching practices in the last ten years. As can be seen in Table 1, the most dominant topics in the last decade have been using technology in English classes (13.7%) followed by English teaching methodology (12.5%). There is an increase in the research that examine the use of technology as a tool in English teaching and learning. The research emphasizes that technology and technological applications are a useful tool for both language teachers and individual learners. Some of the studies (e.g. Andrei, 2017; Chun, et al., 2016; Rezaee E. T., 2012) focus on teachers education and practices, whereas other research studies focuses on students' learning pedagogy (e.g. Andrei, 2017; Lai, Hu, & Lyu, 2018). The research study provides better understanding of

the relationship between emerging technology and emerging pedagogy, and this can enhance the teaching of English as a second or foreign language.

Also, the data shows that the researchers in English Education were eager to examine the other important topics that are related to teaching practices such as English for specific purposes which accounted for more than (10.5%) of the research during the last ten years. This finding resonates with Barrett and Liu's (2016) statement which highlighted the shift toward more research in English for specific purposes and English for academic purposes. Barrett and Liu (2016) state that *"In English language teaching, there has been a shift toward teaching a more practical style of English, known as English for academic purposes (EAP) or English for specific purposes (ESP), which can give nonnative speakers specific language tools that facilitate a presentation or help them discuss their academic work in English."* (p.1228).

Moreover, other research trends have been highlighting such as evaluation and assessment (8.7%), and educational policy (8.2%). The theme Evaluation and assessment refers to the research on ESL and EFL evaluation strategies among teachers of English. In addition, multicultural education has been a focus as researchers examined the relationship between language and culture (7.5), gender, race and ethnicity in English classes (5.5%), and bilingualism (5%). Other topics were present including Psycholinguistics (5%), 21st-century learning (3.7%), and creativity (2.5%). Finally, Plurilingualism accounted for 2% of the research in TESOL. Even though it was the least researchable topic in the reviewed articles, many researchers emphasized the importance of Plurilingualism in today's language classrooms. As Taylor and Snoddon (2013) mention that *"Plurilingualism in TESOL entails a paradigm shift that opens new approaches to understanding teaching and learning."* (p. 440)

Overall, the data shows that the research interests in the TESOL field have changed and many topics and trends have been raised based on students' academic and social needs. Topics such as teaching methodology, digital literacy, and using technology to teach English have dominated the research during the last decade.



**Figure 1:** The research topics that seem to be of interest to researchers in the last 10 years

#### 4.1. Research Methods used in the Reviewed Research

Regarding the research methods, the data in Table 2 reflects that qualitative research inquiry has been the most common type of research methods over the last ten years in the English education field. 47% of the researched articles were qualitative in nature, and the researchers used several qualitative techniques to collect data such as interviews, observations, written essays, and focus groups discussion. This finding resonates with Rahman's work which suggested that qualitative research methodology has obvious contributions to the TESOL field as researchers examine language learners' and teachers experiences and opinions toward teaching and learning of English (Rahman, 2015). The researchers in the reviewed articles explored second/foreign language teachers' and students' experiences and opinions regarding many teaching and learning issues in the TESOL field. The qualitative method allows researchers to dive deep into teachers' and students' perceptions and experiences regarding many issues in their teaching and learning practices.

**Table 2:** Types of research methods that have been used in TESOL during the last ten years

Research Method	Numbers of articles	%	Data collection Instruments
Quantitative	128	32%	Questionnaires, Surveys
Qualitative	188	47%	Interviews, Observation, Focus groups, Written Essays
Mixed Methods	84	21%	

In addition, As can be seen in Figure 2, quantitative research method represents 32% of the articles in the selected journals. Mostly, the researchers used surveys as prime instruments to collect data. Finally, the data in Table 2 indicates that the mixed method represents only 21% of the identified articles. The researchers in these articles used surveys followed by face to face interviews to collect data. Mixed research method has been used in the TESOL research for decades (Mirhosseini, 2018). This research approach allows researchers to combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies in the data collection and analysis processes. However, King & Mackey (2016) states that *"A dominant although not particularly productive strand throughout many discussions of methodology has been the debate around quantitative versus qualitative methods, sometimes characterized as a division between more cognitive and more social approaches to studying second language learning."* (p. 209).

Significantly, the differences in using the two methodologies was a result of the researchers' way of handling and thinking about their research ideas and interests. As Nunan mentions, *"One reason for the persistence of the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research is that the two approaches represent different ways of thinking and understanding the world around us. Underlying the development of different research traditions and methods is a debate on the nature of knowledge and the status of assertions about the world, and the debate itself is ultimately a philosophical one"*. (1992, p.10)

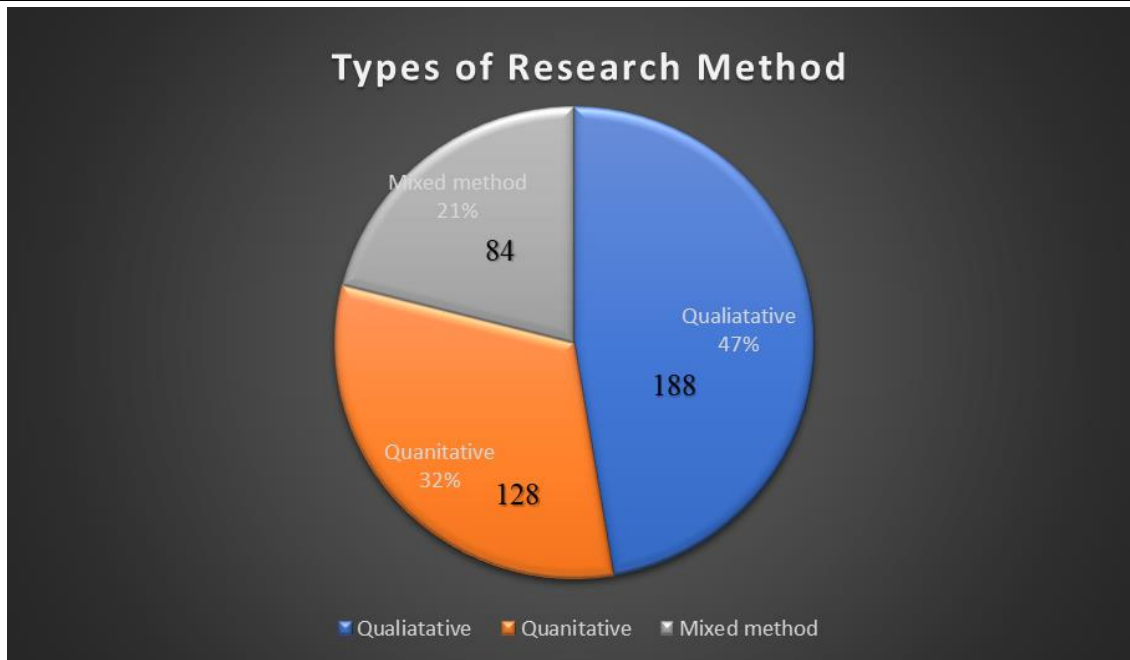


Figure 2: Types of research methods that have been used in TESOL during the last ten years

## 5. Conclusion

This paper provides an overview of the most recent topics and trends in the field of English teaching and learning. It tracks down the shifts and changes in research interests that ESL and EFL researchers have gone through. During the last decade, teaching methodology, digital literacy, and using technology to teach English have dominated the research agenda. Different research methodologies have been used to investigate these trends. Having an overview of what has been trending in the field of English teaching and learning is crucial for language teachers and researchers. The review suggested that in the last ten years, more emphasis was placed English education-related topics such as teaching methodology, teachers' and students' pedagogies, using technology in English teaching and learning, bilingualism, and multiculturalism. Also, using technology in English teaching and learning was one of the most researchable topics. This gives us an idea of the impact of technology in today's classrooms.

### About the Author(s)

Waheeb S. Albiladi is a PhD candidate in the TESOL program at the University of Arkansas. He has 8 years of experience in teaching English as a second/foreign language. His research interests include technology in English teaching and learning, bilingual education, and teachers' use of data.

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