

Reframing Language Education: A Critical Review of Empirical Studies Grounded in Sociocultural Theory

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Abstract

In recent years, analysing academic publication trends has become essential for understanding evolving priorities and theoretical orientations in language education and applied linguistics. This study presents a dual-perspective meta-analytic review of all research articles published in 2023 in 3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature, a peer-reviewed journal by the University of Kebangsaan Malaysia. The analysis is conducted from two dimensions: a structural perspective, focusing on research context, participant profiles, and methodological approaches; and a socio-cultural perspective, examining the theoretical foundations and pedagogical implications of the published studies. Guided by sociocultural and ecological theories, the study investigates whether the journal's research contributions align with broader educational goals and serve the needs of the language education community. Findings reveal a dominant focus on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Malaysian contexts, with ecological theory underpinning much of the inquiry. Assessment was identified as the most frequently addressed theme, while instructional practices and the role of educators received limited attention. By highlighting these trends, the study contributes to both scholarly discourse and editorial practice, encouraging more theoretically grounded and contextually responsive research in applied linguistics.

Keywords: Applied Linguistics, Meta-Analysis, Sociocultural Theory, Research Trends, Ecological Framework

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INTRODUCTION

In the evolving field of applied linguistics, the ecological perspective has emerged as a vital theoretical lens for exploring the complex, situated nature of language learning and instruction. Rooted in the works of Kramsch (2002), van Lier (2004), and Pennycook (2007), ecological approaches emphasise the interdependence of learners, their sociocultural environments, and the broader institutional and historical contexts in which language learning takes place. This perspective challenges reductionist views that isolate the learner as an autonomous unit, instead advocating for a more holistic understanding of learning as a dynamic, socially embedded process.

Closely aligned with sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), the ecological approach foregrounds the significance of tools, interaction, and mediated activity. From this standpoint, language acquisition is not merely a cognitive process but an activity deeply shaped by context, culture, power relations, and pedagogical design. Multiple overlapping

systems, ranging from classroom microstructures to national education policies, influence learners, as illustrated by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory.

Recent studies have also expanded the practical dimensions of these perspectives, especially in diverse educational contexts. For instance, Jabeen and Akhtar (2013) demonstrated how applying sociocultural principles in ESL classrooms in Pakistan improved learners' communicative competence through scaffolding and collaboration. Similarly, Zhang (2024) and Tavil and GÜngör (2017) highlighted how socioculturally informed pedagogy fosters reflective teaching practices and contextualised learning in Chinese and Turkish language classrooms, respectively. These contributions underscore a growing recognition of the teacher's role not merely as a facilitator but as a co-constructive agent within an ecologically complex environment (Reeve & Cheon, 2014; Ramos, 2018).

Despite this growing interest, there remains a need to critically examine how ecological and sociocultural perspectives are represented and operationalised in contemporary research. Meta-analytical approaches provide a valuable methodology for this task, offering a systematic lens through which to assess theoretical alignment, methodological choices, and conceptual orientations across published studies (Cooper, 2010; Norris & Ortega, 2000). By aggregating and interpreting patterns across multiple articles, such reviews reveal not only prevailing trends but also neglected dimensions of inquiry, allowing the field to refine its theoretical and practical priorities.

This study presents a critical meta-analysis of all research articles published in 2023 in *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature*, a leading journal in the Southeast Asian academic context. We aim to investigate how key components—such as research context, participants, focus areas, theoretical orientations, methodologies, and reported implications—align with ecological and sociocultural principles. Particular attention is given to how learners and teachers are positioned in research narratives, the degree of contextual sensitivity, and the extent to which pedagogical and methodological designs reflect the complexity of language learning as a social practice.

In doing so, this study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about the scope and application of ecological perspectives in language education. It also provides the editorial community and readers of *3L* with a reflective evaluation of their publication's theoretical trajectory. Ultimately, this meta-analysis offers a creative and theory-driven framework for identifying both promising trends and areas in need of further conceptual development, thereby guiding future empirical investigations in applied linguistics. Top of Form

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding second language acquisition (SLA) has long required a multifaceted approach. Ellis (1994) laid essential theoretical groundwork by emphasising the interaction between internal and external factors in language learning. Building on this, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) introduced complexity and dynamic systems theory to SLA, framing it as an emergent, interconnected process influenced by ever-shifting variables, both individual and contextual.

Applied linguistics has increasingly shifted toward inclusive, socially grounded pedagogies. Canagarajah (2011) proposed codemeshing in academic writing as a translanguaging strategy that challenges monolingual norms and supports linguistic diversity. Similarly, Spolsky (2009), through the lens of language management, explored the relationship among policy, ideology, and learner agency, highlighting the sociopolitical nature of language learning.

Contextual sensitivity has been a recurring theme. Holliday (2010) emphasised the importance of respecting local sociocultural norms when interpreting learning outcomes. Pennycook (2010) similarly argued that language is inherently local and context-dependent. Intercultural competence has emerged as essential to language education, as demonstrated by Araújo et al. (2016), who showed that intercultural classroom activities enhance both cultural awareness and language skills. Ajayi (2008) also advocated for integrating sociocultural awareness in ESL teaching to provide a holistic learning experience.

Block (2003) introduced the “social turn” in SLA, shifting focus to identity, power, and discourse. Kramsch (2002) expanded this through an ecological framework, portraying language learning as situated within broader socio-environmental systems. This notion is echoed by Atkinson (2011) and Ellis and Larsen-Freeman (2009), who promoted alternative paradigms viewing language as a complex adaptive system. Drawing on sociocultural theory, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) conceptualised language acquisition as self-construction through socially mediated activity. Norton and Toohey (2011) emphasised that power, legitimacy, and access are central to learners' development.

Sociocultural theory has thus become a key framework in SLA. Xu and Long (2020) reviewed its application in East Asia, showing its effectiveness in fostering deeper learner engagement through cultural and social practices. Jabeen and Akhtar (2013) explored their challenges in Pakistani ESL classrooms, emphasising the need for culturally adaptive teaching. Tavi and Güngör (2017) studied pre-service teachers in Turkey, concluding that sociocultural frameworks foster context-aware pedagogy. These findings affirm Pavlenko and Lantolf's (2000) assertion that learning is inseparable from social environments.

Meta-analyses and systematic reviews have further advanced the field. Larsen-Freeman (2007) examined the tension between cognitive and social paradigms, calling for integrative models. Byram (2008) charted the shift from communicative competence to intercultural citizenship in language teaching. Norton (2000, 2013) highlighted how identity factors such as gender and ethnicity shape language access and use, critiquing assumptions of learner neutrality.

Recent studies build on this trajectory. Herdiyana et al. (2023) found that critical thinking—orientated instructional materials significantly improve analytical skills, especially in higher education. Their work illustrates how pedagogy shapes both learning outcomes and engagement. Borokhovski et al. (2022), in a second-order meta-analysis, showed that digital tools—particularly in blended or online environments—enhance engagement, autonomy, and collaboration. They also stressed that the success of technology integration depends on pedagogical alignment and contextual appropriateness.

Priya and Singh (2022) explored higher education

practices, identifying flexibility, student-centered teaching, and professional development as keys to effective learning. Their work demonstrates that institutional support and adaptive learning environments are central to success. Jafar et al. (2021) analysed technology use in ELT, showing significant gains in language proficiency through task-based and communicative approaches. They emphasised the importance of aligning tools with pedagogical objectives and learner needs, reinforcing the ecological view of learning as contextually grounded.

Hamad and Alsowat (2020) synthesised meta-analyses on effective ELT strategies, identifying teacher training, authentic materials, and reflective practices as essential to successful outcomes. They highlighted the importance of adapting methods to learners' cultural and social contexts, reinforcing that language acquisition is not only individual but also environment-dependent.

Hansford and Schechter (2023) identified methodological challenges in educational meta-analyses, such as variability in study quality and statistical limitations. Despite these issues, they affirmed meta-analysis as a valuable tool for detecting patterns and synthesising findings. Land and Booth (2020) further underscored its value in teaching experimental principles and guiding future research design. They advocated integrating meta-analytic training into research education to enhance understanding of experimental design and analysis.

This study follows that direction, applying a meta-analytic framework to ecological research in TEFL. Riazzi and Candlin's (2014) model for meta-analysis has been particularly influential in educational research synthesis, offering a structured method to integrate diverse studies and identify research gaps. Their framework provides a solid foundation for ecological analysis within TEFL, allowing this study to propose new ways of linking learner experiences with broader contextual dynamics.

Despite the growing interest in ecological research in TEFL, gaps remain—especially regarding recent, localised research within specific journals and geographic contexts. As Holliday (2010) and Riazzi and Candlin (2014) noted, many existing reviews neglect emerging local perspectives. This study addresses that gap by analysing all 2023 papers published in *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature in Malaysia*. The analysis focuses on ecological applications in TEFL by examining study context, participants, methodologies, and theoretical orientations.

Drawing on Kramsch (2002) and van Lier (2004), this study applies an ecological lens to understand how learners, teachers, and environments interact. The goal is not only to synthesise current research but also to propose creative, context-aware approaches for future TEFL practice. Using Riazzi and Candlin's (2014) meta-analytic framework, the study aims to contribute meaningful insights to ecological theory in language education and expand its practical applications.

Research Questions

Structural Perspective:

What are the predominant research contexts and participant profiles in the 2023 publications of the journal *3L*?

What research foci and methodological approaches are most commonly employed in these studies?

Socio-Cultural Perspective:

3. What theoretical orientations underlie the research published in the journal, and how do they influence the interpretation of findings and pedagogical implications?

4. To what extent do the published studies address broader educational goals, and what gaps remain for future research to explore?

This study holds significance for both researchers and educators in the field of language education and applied linguistics. By providing a comprehensive analysis of recent publications, it contributes to a more profound understanding of the dynamics of language learning and teaching contexts (Norton, 2013; Byram, 2008). Furthermore, the insights gained from this analysis will inform future research directions and pedagogical practices in TEFL, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of language education in diverse settings (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Atkinson, 2011).

METHOD RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design for this study was a qualitative, descriptive content analysis. This design was chosen because it allows for a detailed exploration of the characteristics of the literature, providing insights into how ecological perspectives and other theoretical frameworks are applied in current applied linguistics and TEFL research.

The research methodology involved a systematic and comprehensive analysis of all 61 papers published in the journal *3L*. This analysis aimed to understand various aspects of the literature, including context, participants, research foci, methodology, theoretical orientation, and implications of the findings.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The data collection involved the systematic review of all papers published in *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature* during 2023. Both empirical and non-empirical articles were included in the review, as both types provide valuable contributions to understanding the trends in the field of applied linguistics and language teaching. All articles were accessed from the journal's online archive

to ensure that the full range of publications for the year was included.

A coding scheme was developed to categorise and analyse the identified themes and patterns in the literature. This coding scheme was informed by the framework designed by Riazi, Shi, and Haggetry (2018), which provided guidance on conceptualising and understanding language education and applied linguistics.

Each paper was analysed to extract data related to its contextual and participant characteristics. This involved identifying specific contexts in which the research was conducted (e.g., EFL micro context, macro context) and documenting information about the participants involved in the research (e.g., students, teachers, stakeholders).

The methodology of each study was also analysed to determine the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques used. This step involved reviewing the types of data sources utilised, such as surveys, interviews, or observational methods, and analysing how data were interpreted and presented.

Finally, the implications of the findings were considered. This section explored how the studies contributed to the field of applied linguistics and language teaching. It highlighted the practical applications of the research findings, particularly in terms of their relevance to educators and researchers. The analysis also identified gaps in the literature and suggested areas for future research, especially in the context of applying ecological perspectives to language education.

The research focus and theoretical orientation of each paper were examined, identifying the main topics or themes explored and the theoretical frameworks guiding the studies. The prevalence of an ecological theoretical orientation was noted throughout the examined literature. Methodological details were documented and analysed, including the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques employed. The sources of data utilised in each paper were also identified and analysed.

Inter-coder analyses were conducted to establish reliability, with a sample of 25 randomly selected articles coded by multiple coders. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and modification of the coding approach if necessary. Following discussion of the initial coding results, a second round of coding was conducted to ensure reliability and consistency. Each coder independently coded a third of the sample articles to further ensure accuracy and consistency. To finalise the coding process, each coder double-checked the coding for themes across all articles. Questions were discussed among the coders to reach consensus.

All coding processes were conducted using NVivo 11, and the coding outcomes were further analysed using SPSS 21 to identify patterns and trends within the data. The implications of the findings reported in the literature

were examined to understand their potential impact on the field of language education and applied linguistics, with suggestions for future research derived from the identified trends and gaps in the literature.

The coding process for contexts and participants involved categorising them based on factual information from the original publications. Contexts were subdivided into macro-contexts (countries) and micro-contexts (programmes), while participants were differentiated by their levels of education and status.

We categorised the macro-contexts of the papers according to the geographical origin of the research, in contrast to prior investigators who used the institutional affiliations of the authors to detect regional variety. Nevertheless, the macro-context was not specified in several articles.

Coding for theoretical orientation was trickier and needed a lot of discussion among our team. The difficulty lay in finding clear references to the theories and frameworks guiding the research. Even though it was tough, we managed to assign each article to a single category based on its theoretical orientation, but it required close examination and discussion, especially for the more challenging articles.

To make sure our method was reliable, we had initial discussions to come up with categories for research focus and theoretical orientation. Then, we analysed a subset of 25 randomly selected articles, which represented about 40% of the sample. While we reached a good level of agreement for research focus, hitting 85%, we had more trouble agreeing on theoretical orientation. This showed us just how complex this part of our analysis was.

In our examination of research methodology and data sources in L2 writing research, we relied on Silva's (2005) framework for categorising research designs. Specifically, we focused on coding the general methodological orientation used by researchers, categorising them as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. This approach aligns with Silva's classification of "main methodologies", which encompasses widely recognised approaches such as qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods.

To refine Silva's "mixed" category, we drew on the work of Riazi and Candlin (2014) and Riazi (2016) to provide a more nuanced understanding of mixed methods research (MMR) in L2 writing. Instead of treating all mixed methods approaches as "eclectic", as Silva did, we adapted Riazi and Candlin's classification, distinguishing between "eclectic", "principled", and "innovative" mixed methods research.

As a result, Silva's "mixed" category was redefined as the eclectic category in our coding framework. Articles classified within the mixed methods category were those in which authors explicitly labelled their study design as mixed methods and referenced the literature on mixed methods research to inform their studies. Meanwhile, studies employing "narrative" inquiry were categorised under the qualitative category. In coding the implications of the articles, a systematic and rigorous process was employed to ensure accuracy and reliability.

Initially, a comprehensive framework was developed to categorise and analyse the implications identified within each article. This framework encompassed various stakeholder perspectives, including instructors, learners, instructors and learners together, stakeholders, and researchers.

Each article was meticulously reviewed, with specific attention given to discerning the explicit and implicit implications embedded within the text. Through iterative discussions and consensus-building among the research team, thematic patterns and trends emerged, allowing for the identification of overarching themes and subthemes.

Moreover, to enhance the validity of the coding process, inter-coder reliability checks were conducted periodically, whereby discrepancies were resolved through collaborative discussion and refinement of coding criteria. Ultimately, this systematic approach facilitated a thorough and nuanced analysis of the implications gleaned from the 3L journal articles, providing valuable insights into the practical implications of TEFL research within the Southeast Asian context.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

Each paper was analysed to extract key data points related to the study's context and participant characteristics. The context of each study was examined in terms of its setting, such as whether the research was conducted in an EFL micro-context or a macro-context across different countries. The types of participants involved—students, teachers, or other stakeholders—were also documented. Additionally, the research focus of each paper was identified, noting the primary topics or issues addressed, and the theoretical orientation was determined by identifying the frameworks guiding each study. The prevalence of ecological orientations was specifically noted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1. What are the predominant research contexts and participant profiles in the 2023 publications of the journal 3L?

Table 1: Micro-Context Frequency

Category	Frequency	Percentage
ESL	12	19.67%
EFL	49	80.32%
ESL and EFL	0	0%
Other	0	0%
Total	61	100%

Most articles specified the micro-context, indicating whether the study was situated in an ESL (English as a Second Language), EFL (English as a Foreign Language), or FL (Foreign Language) context.

An ESL context encompasses the learning and teaching of English in countries where English is the dominant language, such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, and Ireland. In contrast, an EFL context pertains to scenarios in which English is learnt or taught as a foreign or additional language within societies where languages other than English are prevalent, including regions like Hong Kong and Singapore. An FL context entailed learning or teaching a language other than English in a country where the target language is not the dominant (or students') first language, such as Arabic in the United States or Japanese in Singapore.

Participants were categorised based on educational status and level, including learners, instructors, a combination of instructors and learners, other participants, and instances where participant status was not specified.

In exploring research focus and theoretical orientation, we faced the challenge of dealing with many different categories and subcategories, making it tough to stay consistent across articles and coders. To tackle this, we went for a data-driven thematic approach, inspired by the ideas of Boyatzis (1998) and Braun & Clarke (2006). This approach focused on pulling insights directly from the authors' words instead of forcing them into predefined categories, as Braun and Clarke suggest.

To understand what each article was mainly about, we carefully looked through the abstracts, introductions, and research questions, picking out relevant bits of text to guide our categories and subcategories. Every article was assigned a main research focus, showing our dedication to being thorough and accurate in our coding.

Table 2: Macro Frequency (Country)

Country	Frequency	Percentage
Malaysia	13	22.8%
Thailand	6	10.52%
Pakistan	4	7.01%
China	3	5.26%
Japan	2	3.5%
Indonesia	2	3.5%
India	2	3.5%
UAE	2	3.5%
Iraq	2	3.5%
Vietnam	2	3.5%
Australia	1	1.75%
France	1	1.75%
Turkey	1	1.75%
Canada	1	1.75%
Spain	1	1.75%
Jordan	1	1.75%
Hong Kong	1	1.75%
Korea	1	1.75%
Africa	1	1.75%
Other	10	17.54%
Total	57	100%

Table 3: Participants Frequency

Participants	Frequency	Percentage
Learners	25	40.32%
Instructors	2	3.22%
Instructors and Learners	0	0%
Other Participants	35	56.45%
Not Specified	0	0%
Total	62	100%

The majority of the studies were conducted in EFL contexts (80.32%). A smaller proportion was focused on ESL contexts (19.67%) (Table 1). Geographically, Malaysia accounted for the highest number of studies (22.8%), followed by Thailand and Pakistan, reflecting a regional concentration in Southeast and South Asia (Table 2).

In terms of participants, learners (40.32%) and other participant groups (56.45%) were primarily involved. Only 3.22% of studies focused specifically on instructors, and none involved both learners and instructors together (Table 3). This suggests a dominant focus on learners, with instructors and mixed participant designs being notably under-represented.

RQ2. What research foci and methodological approaches are most commonly employed in these studies?**Table 4:** Research Foci Frequency

Research Foci	Frequency	Percentage	Subcategories
Instruction	6	10.34%	sentence combining, routines, genre-based pedagogy, learner perceptions, instructor perceptions, classroom talk, etc.
Feedback	2	3.44%	instructor feedback, peer feedback, tutor feedback, peer response, peer evaluation, error correction, perceptions, etc.
Assessment	27	46.55%	instructor/rater bias, test performance, writing prompts, task types, alternative assessment, placement testing, learner perceptions, etc.
L1 vs. L2	3	5.17%	linguistic features, cohesion markers, causality markers, epistemic markers, cognitive models, collocations, etc.
L1 and L2	9	15.51%	transfer, interaction, language switching, L1 involvement, maintenance or loss, discourse strategies, writing processes, etc.
Composing processes	11	18.96%	writing strategies, revision, noticing, planning, restructuring, formulation, publishing, computer skills, temporal dimensions, etc.
Total	58	100%	

Table 5: Methodology Frequency

Methodology	Frequency	Percentage	Definition
Qualitative	35	58.33%	Studies that were purely qualitative in terms of data collection and analysis
Eclectic	5	8.33%	Studies that used a combination of qualitative and quantitative data and analysis but did not explicitly mention that their study was mixed methods
Quantitative	3	5%	Studies that were purely quantitative in terms of data collection and analysis
Mix	17	28.33%	The research explicitly stated that it used a mixed methodology and drew on the relevant literature to frame study and define its purpose
Total	60	100%	

The most frequent research focus was assessment (46.55%), followed by composing processes (18.96%) and instruction (10.34%) (Table 4). Topics such as feedback and L1-L2 interaction appeared less frequently.

Regarding methodology, the studies predominantly used qualitative methods (58.33%), followed by explicitly

mixed methods (28.33%) (Table 5). Only a small number employed quantitative (5%) or eclectic approaches (8.33%), indicating a strong preference for qualitative inquiry in the journal's publications.

RQ3. What theoretical orientations underlie the research published in the journal, and how do they influence the interpretation of findings and pedagogical implications?

Table 6: Theoretical Orientation Frequency

Theoretical Orientation	Frequency	Percentage	Subcategories
Communicative	5	8.33%	Primarily focused on developing learners' ability to communicate effectively.
Psychological	2	3.33%	Focused on psychological aspects of language learning and learners' differences.
Cognitive	10	16.66%	primarily focused on beliefs, perceptions, knowledge, or mental processes related to the texts writers produced
Constructivist	7	11.66%	primarily focused on constructing understanding of language through active participation.
Ecological	29	48.33%	Expressly focused on the dynamic interplay between language learning and the broader socio-cultural context.
Cognitive/socio-cognitive	3	5%	expressly focused on both social and cognitive aspects and how their interactions influenced individuals or groups and the texts they produced
Contrastive rhetoric	4	6.66%	primarily focused on comparison of rhetorical features of texts across cultural or social groups
Total	60	100%	

The dominant theoretical orientation was ecological theory (48.33%), emphasising the interaction between language learners and their socio-cultural environments (Table 6). Cognitive (16.66%) and constructivist (11.66%) perspectives were also present, though less prevalent.

This trend suggests a strong alignment with broader socio-cultural paradigms in applied linguistics, positioning

learning as situated, interactive, and context-bound. These theoretical choices frame how researchers interpret learners' experiences and outcomes, focusing more on systemic and environmental influences than individual cognitive processes alone.

RQ4. To what extent do the published studies address broader educational goals, and what gaps remain for future research to explore?

Table 7. Implications Frequency

Implications	Frequency	Percentage
Instructors	17	20.98%
Learners	1	1.23%
Instructors and Learners	13	16.04%
Stakeholders	28	34.56%
Researchers	22	27.16%
Total	81	100%

The implications drawn from the studies were mostly directed at stakeholders (34.56%) and researchers (27.16%), with fewer studies directly addressing learners (1.23%) or classroom instructors (20.98%) (Table 7). Only 16.04% of studies provided implications that encompassed both instructors and learners.

as this study reveals. Yet beneath this progress lies a compelling tension between what has been explored and what remains uncharted a vast terrain rich with potential. This discussion unpacks the nuances of recent findings and situates them within broader TEFL scholarship, offering a creative reconsideration of current patterns, overlooked areas, and future possibilities.

DISCUSSION

The landscape of TEFL research especially through an ecological lens has evolved considerably in recent years,

Contextualizing Efl and Esl: A Call For Balance

The predominance of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research reflects the growing global emphasis on

English as a lingua franca. However, this imbalance invites a critical reconsideration of the limited attention given to English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. While EFL research has yielded valuable insights, the relative absence of ESL studies leaves important sociocultural dimensions underexplored.

Pennycook (2007) and Kramsch (2002) advocate for more profound engagement with ESL environments, where English functions as a lived, daily practice shaped by multilingual realities. This call has been echoed by studies such as Jabeen and Akhtar (2013), who demonstrated the transformative impact of sociocultural approaches in ESL classrooms in Pakistan. Similarly, Zhang's (2024) case study on Chinese language instruction revealed how sociocultural adaptation to learners' needs fosters internalisation and communicative competence. These findings suggest that bridging EFL and ESL research could diversify TEFL theory and practice by capturing a broader range of sociocultural learning experiences.

Geographical Imprints: Southeast Asia's Dominance and Its Meaning

Southeast Asia's prominence in TEFL literature, particularly Malaysia, Thailand, and Pakistan, reflects both robust academic activity and dynamic educational reforms. However, this concentration may inadvertently obscure the voices and contexts of less-studied regions. This concern resonates with the findings of Xu and Long (2020), who emphasized the importance of expanding sociocultural research to lesser-represented East Asian contexts to uncover underappreciated cultural narratives and practices.

Additionally, research conducted in Vietnam (Trukhanova & Filippova, 2024) on teaching Russian as a foreign language demonstrates how regional adaptation of sociocultural methods can yield rich pedagogical insights. Expanding research to include such diverse geographical cases could significantly broaden the global TEFL discourse, moving toward greater inclusivity and methodological plurality.

Learners, Teachers, and the Silent Imbalance

A striking trend in current TEFL literature is the disproportionate attention given to learners over teachers. While learner-centered research remains critical, this imbalance risks reducing teachers to passive transmitters of curriculum. Yet, teacher-focused research—such as that of Tavil and Güngör (2017), Reeve and Cheon (2014), and Ramos (2018)—illuminates the active, reflective, and strategic roles teachers play in shaping learning environments.

These studies underscore the importance of recognizing teachers as co-constructors of knowledge. For instance, Reeve and Cheon's work with autonomy-

supportive interventions showed how empowering teachers can significantly enhance classroom motivation and engagement. Gabryś-Barker (2014) further highlights the value of reflective narratives in shaping professional growth, reinforcing the need to integrate teacher voices into research agendas.

Even early childhood research, like that of Summers et al. (1991) and Fleer (1995), reveals the foundational impact of teacher-student interactions on conceptual learning and emotional well-being—dimensions that are equally critical in adult and secondary language education. These perspectives reinforce the argument for a more balanced research focus that captures both student and teacher agency.

Assessment: Moving Beyond Metrics

Traditional assessment practices remain central in TEFL research, yet their limitations are increasingly evident. While outcome-based metrics offer structure, they often fail to account for the complex emotional, social, and contextual dynamics of language learning.

Recent sociocultural research promotes alternative approaches—such as project-based assessments, digital portfolios, and collaborative evaluations—that prioritize learner agency and contextual responsiveness (Xu & Long, 2020; Araújo et al., 2016).

These methods align with ecological perspectives that view learning as a fluid, situated process. They also support the development of 21st-century skills, including creativity, critical thinking, and intercultural competence, making assessment not just a means of measurement but a meaningful component of the learning journey.

Methodological Creativity: Merging Depth And Breadth

The dominance of qualitative approaches in TEFL research is justified by their capacity to reveal the depth of human experience. However, emerging scholarship emphasizes the potential of mixed-methods research to weave together qualitative richness and quantitative rigor.

Riazi and Candlin (2014) highlight this integration as a pathway toward methodological innovation. Studies such as those by Ramos (2018) and Tavil & Güngör (2017) exemplify this by combining reflective journals, interviews, and classroom observations to construct nuanced teacher development narratives. These hybrid approaches allow researchers to capture the full complexity of language teaching, especially when working within dynamic, multilingual, and multicultural settings.

Ecological Perspectives: Language Learning as Living Systems

Ecological frameworks continue to gain traction in TEFL research for their capacity to capture the interwoven nature of language, identity, and environment. They offer

not only a descriptive model but also a transformative one, capable of reshaping pedagogical practices and research paradigms.

As noted in the Vietnamese study by Trukhanova & Filippova (2024), incorporating modern technologies into socioculturally-informed ecological approaches can foster learners' linguistic and cultural identities. Similarly, Zhang (2024) demonstrates how contextual lesson planning and adaptation in real-time teaching settings are critical to sustaining ecological relevance. These examples suggest that ecological perspectives are not static lenses but evolving strategies for engaging with learners in meaningful, context-sensitive ways.

CONCLUSION

A CREATIVE VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF TEFL RESEARCH

This study presents a clear call to action: to reimagine TEFL research as a space for creative, inclusive, and forward-thinking inquiry. From amplifying ESL voices to foregrounding teacher agency, and from diversifying methodologies to rethinking assessment, the field is ripe for transformation.

As teacher-centered and socioculturally-grounded research demonstrates, embracing the complexity of classroom life and honoring the voices of both educators and learners can lead to more equitable and impactful teaching practices. Only by expanding our geographical, methodological, and pedagogical horizons can we build a truly global understanding of how English is taught and learned in the 21st century.

Implications

The findings of this research extend beyond statistical summaries; they sketch a nuanced landscape of TEFL inquiry, revealing both vibrant growth and silent absences across the field. At its core, this study offers not only an empirical snapshot of current research trends but also a reflective mirror held up to the discipline—inviting us to question, reimagine, and redirect the future paths of English language education.

The dominance of EFL contexts speaks to the global pervasiveness of English as a foreign language and the urgency to localize its pedagogical applications. However, this very dominance simultaneously casts a long shadow over ESL contexts, which remain underexplored despite their rich sociolinguistic potential. This imbalance echoes a call from critical scholars (e.g., Pennycook, 2007; Holliday, 2010) who argue that language education research must resist the gravitational pull of convenience and move toward epistemic diversity. Future studies might explore how learners in ESL contexts navigate language learning through community interaction, identity negotiation, and multilingual resource use—areas that remain largely uncharted in the current literature.

Equally compelling is the marginalization of instructors in current TEFL research. While learners rightfully occupy center stage, the near absence of teacher-focused studies (3.22%) raises essential questions: Where are the voices of those who shape, negotiate, and animate classroom realities daily? Language teaching is not a mechanical transaction but a deeply human, relational act. By sidelining educators, research risks silencing the very agents of pedagogical transformation. Future inquiries must therefore re-center teacher agency, delve into their professional ecologies, and explore their evolving roles in tech-mediated and intercultural classrooms (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Recognizing instructors as reflective practitioners—rather than passive implementers—demands inquiry into their lived experiences, decision-making processes, and identity negotiations within multilingual, tech-enhanced settings.

Moreover, the disproportionate emphasis on assessment (46.55%) demands critical reflection. While assessment remains vital in gauging learner progress, its dominance may indicate an overinvestment in measurement at the expense of meaning-making. It invites a deeper interrogation: What are we assessing, and why? Are we measuring what truly matters in communicative competence, or merely what is most easily quantified? There is a growing need for innovative, culturally responsive assessment models—ones that value multilingual repertoires, creativity, and communicative adaptability. Models such as project-based tasks, digital portfolios, and collaborative assessments can serve as more equitable, context-aware tools that reflect learners' diverse communicative repertoires. Assessment must evolve from being an endpoint to becoming a formative process that fosters reflection, autonomy, and intercultural understanding.

Another noteworthy finding is the prevalence of qualitative (58.33%) and mixed-methods (28.33%) approaches. This methodological tilt suggests a maturing field, one that increasingly values the complexities of local contexts, participant voices, and the nonlinear nature of language development. It reflects a shift away from positivist paradigms toward interpretive and ecological models, resonating with scholars such as van Lier (2004) and Norton & Toohey (2011), who advocate for viewing language learning as a socially embedded process. This epistemological evolution encourages not only methodological pluralism but also a rethinking of what counts as knowledge in language education. It also invites future researchers to embrace triangulation, integrating learner narratives, classroom observations, and performance data to better capture the intricacies of language acquisition and classroom interaction.

The prominence of ecological perspectives in nearly half of the analyzed articles signals a transformative shift in TEFL research. No longer confined to cognitive or structural paradigms, the field appears to be embracing complexity—acknowledging that language is not merely acquired, but co-constructed in interaction with

environments, identities, tools, and communities. Such a perspective aligns with the broader turn in applied linguistics toward situated, embodied, and relational understandings of learning. Future research could explore how ecological principles can be operationalized in teacher education and curriculum design—particularly through the use of digital technologies that mediate culturally responsive, learner-centered practices across diverse contexts.

Finally, the implications of these findings ripple outward. For policymakers, they underscore the importance of context-sensitive policies that reflect the lived realities of learners and teachers across varied geographies. For researchers, they pose a challenge: to pursue not only what is popular but also what is neglected, to dare to ask uncomfortable questions, and to design studies that are both empirically robust and ethically attuned. For instructors and stakeholders, the findings affirm their centrality in the educational ecosystem and call for inclusive research that values their insights and experiences.

In sum, this study contributes more than data; it offers a compass. It charts where the field stands and where it might go. It invites the TEFL community to imagine research not as a static report but as a dynamic dialogue—a conversation across borders, disciplines, and lived experiences. In embracing ecological, creative, and inclusive perspectives, we do not merely refine our research agendas; we re-envision the very meaning of language education in a globally interconnected, yet locally rooted world.

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