



**Barriers to research engagement among in-service EFL
teachers in Esmeraldas - Ecuador: An exploratory study**
*Barreras para la participación en la investigación entre docentes de EFL
en servicio en Esmeraldas - Ecuador: Un estudio exploratorio*

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Abstract

This exploratory study examines the barriers that limit research engagement among in-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Esmeraldas, Ecuador. While many educators demonstrate a genuine interest in conducting research, systemic and contextual challenges—such as limited institutional support, inadequate preparation in academic writing, and time constraints—impede their participation. Data were collected through a cross-sectional survey using purposive and snowball sampling, with responses from 21 EFL teachers across diverse educational settings. The findings reveal that, although structural obstacles persist, most participants do not perceive research as an exclusive domain for experts. This suggests a shift toward a more inclusive understanding of teacher inquiry. The study highlights the importance of targeted professional development and institutional reform to support a sustainable research culture within the EFL teaching community.

Keywords: research engagement, EFL teachers, academic writing, institutional support, professional development

Resumen

Este estudio exploratorio examina las barreras que limitan la participación en la investigación entre docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en servicio en Esmeraldas, Ecuador. Aunque muchos educadores demuestran un interés genuino por realizar investigaciones, desafíos sistémicos y contextuales—como el escaso apoyo institucional, la preparación insuficiente en escritura académica y las limitaciones de tiempo—obstaculizan su participación. Los datos se recopilieron mediante una encuesta transversal utilizando muestreo intencional y de bola de nieve, con respuestas de 21 docentes de EFL provenientes de diversos entornos educativos. Los hallazgos revelan que, aunque persisten obstáculos estructurales, la mayoría de los participantes no perciben la investigación como un ámbito exclusivo para expertos. Esto sugiere un cambio hacia una comprensión más inclusiva de la indagación docente. El estudio resalta la importancia del desarrollo profesional específico y la reforma institucional para fomentar una cultura de investigación sostenible en la comunidad docente de EFL.

Palabras clave: participación investigativa, docentes de inglés, escritura académica, apoyo institucional, desarrollo profesional

Introduction

Engagement in academic research plays a vital role in the professional development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators. Beyond contributing to personal growth, research fosters reflective practice and supports pedagogical innovation in response to evolving educational demands. Despite global calls to enhance practitioner-led inquiry, EFL teachers—particularly those working in under-resourced contexts—often remain at the margins of scholarly activity. Oftentimes, a confluence of institutional, structural, and personal challenges hinders sustained research engagement (Hasanpour & Hassaskhah, 2024; Mukhatova et al., 2024).

Among the most pressing barriers is the lack of institutional support. Without designated time, funding, or collaborative infrastructure, research engagement is challenging. Studies from Chile and Iran illustrate that while teachers may be intrinsically motivated to pursue scholarly work, the absence of systemic encouragement and access to mentorship or resources renders such efforts sporadic at best (Carcamo et al., 2024; Khatibi & Shamsi, 2024). Effective institutional leadership has been shown to moderate these challenges by fostering environments that promote teacher agency and professional inquiry (Theriana et al., 2024). Where such support is lacking, research is often treated as an extracurricular endeavor rather than a professional imperative (Hasanpour & Hassaskhah, 2024).

Equally significant are the time constraints EFL educators face. Teaching workloads, administrative responsibilities, and curricular demands often leave little room for sustained research activity. This pressure is magnified in rural or underserved areas. Staff shortages and disproportionate teaching assignments prevail (Mukhatova et al., 2024). Gender-based expectations further complicate this reality, particularly for women who must balance professional and domestic responsibilities (Boualili & El Bakkali, 2025).

Linguistic barriers also play a critical role. Academic research requires mastery not only of English language proficiency but also of the conventions of academic discourse, which are often inadequately addressed in teacher training programs. Fear of rejection and unfamiliarity with research writing genres frequently deter teachers from submitting their work for publication (Mukhatova et al., 2024). Although digital tools offer some support, they rarely cater to the nuanced demands of academic writing. That said, when used in conjunction with structured mentorship, AI-assisted platforms are beginning to demonstrate potential in bridging these gaps (Sari et al., 2025).

Deeply rooted epistemological beliefs compound these practical barriers. Research is still widely perceived as a domain reserved for academics, disconnected from everyday classroom realities. However, emerging evidence suggests that action research—grounded in teachers' contexts—can be a more accessible and relevant model for practitioner inquiry (Theriana et al., 2024; Erlankyzy, 2025). When educators are empowered to see their classrooms as knowledge production sites, perceptions shift.

Personal and socio-cultural constraints further shape research engagement. Emotional fatigue, lack of work-life balance, and hierarchical institutional cultures can erode teachers' confidence and willingness to initiate research (Xu & Sukavatee, 2025; Tung et al., 2024). These factors are especially acute in isolated or rural regions with limited collegial support networks (Mukhatova et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, promising developments are emerging. Action research initiatives have enabled teachers to regain professional agency and establish new forms of scholarly identity (Carcamo et al., 2024). Institutional reforms, targeted mentorship, and peer-driven digital communities have also proven effective in broadening research access (Adriyanti & Sangkala, 2025). Importantly, systemic support is needed to institutionalize these gains. As Mekheimer (2024) argues, redefining research as an integral part of

teaching, rather than a specialized or elite activity, is essential to achieving educational equity and innovation.

While these patterns are well-documented in various international contexts, little is known about how such barriers manifest among in-service EFL teachers in Esmeraldas, Ecuador. This region shares many characteristics with under-resourced educational systems yet remains understudied in the literature. Whether teachers in Esmeraldas face similar obstacles or if distinct contextual factors shape their research engagement has yet to be explored.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating the experiences, challenges, and perceptions of EFL teachers in the province. It seeks to identify and understand the barriers they encounter and the forms of support they believe could enhance their capacity to engage meaningfully in academic research.

The following research questions guide this inquiry:

1. What are the main barriers preventing in-service EFL teachers in Esmeraldas from engaging in academic research?
2. What forms of support could enhance research engagement?

Methodology

Research design

This study adopted an exploratory, cross-sectional design aligned with the goals of identifying and understanding barriers to academic research engagement among in-service EFL teachers in Esmeraldas, Ecuador. An exploratory approach was well-suited given the limited prior research in this specific context. The cross-sectional nature allowed data collection at a single point in time, capturing insights into teachers' current experiences, motivations, and constraints related to research practice.

The research initially utilized purposive sampling to target in-service teachers with an interest in or prior exposure to research. However, a snowball sampling method organically emerged as participants shared the survey with colleagues. This hybrid sampling approach expanded the study's reach, particularly valuable given the limited timeframe and logistical challenges associated with the geographical area.

Participants and context

The final sample comprised 21 in-service EFL teachers representing Esmeraldas' basic and higher education institutions. Among the participants, 81% identified as female and 19% as male. Regarding academic qualifications, two held associate degrees, five held bachelor's degrees, and fourteen had completed master's programs. The most common areas of postgraduate specialization included Education ($n = 9$), Pedagogy of English as a Foreign Language ($n = 2$), Applied Linguistics ($n = 2$), and Foreign Languages ($n = 1$). While the small sample size limits generalizability, it yields valuable exploratory insights into the challenges and conditions affecting teacher research engagement in this specific local context.

Instrument

This study's primary data collection tool was a self-administered questionnaire developed using Google Forms. It consisted of 20 questions to identify perceived barriers to engagement and interest in future research training. The survey was available online. Question types included dichotomous (yes/no) responses, Likert-scale items, and closed-ended multiple-choice questions. These formats were selected to facilitate straightforward analysis while capturing a broad range of teacher experiences and attitudes.

Data collection and analysis procedure

Participants were invited via institutional email and educator networks. Once responses were collected, the data were exported into Microsoft Excel for organization. Due to the

small sample size, data analysis relied on visual representations (e.g., bar graphs and pie charts) to identify trends. While inferential analysis was not appropriate given the scope, the data provide meaningful exploratory insights into patterns of research engagement and perceived obstacles.

Results

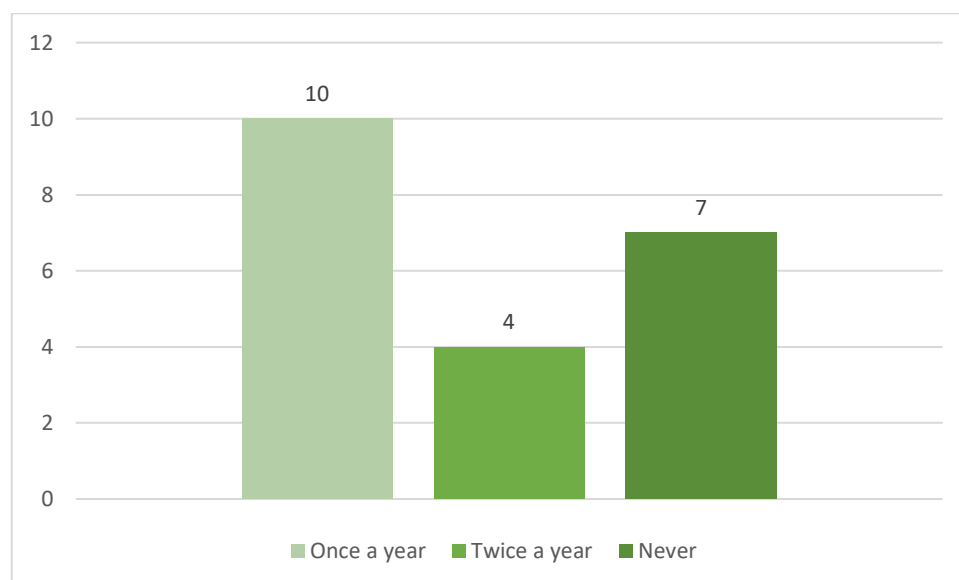
The results of this study are organized into two main categories that emerged from the analysis. They reflect key areas where participants expressed both challenges and strengths in their research involvement.

a) Research engagement and barriers

Among the 21 teachers who participated in the survey, 48% expressed they write a scientific paper once a year—a smaller group, roughly 19%, mentioned doing this twice annually (See Figure 1). Interestingly, about one-third (33%) admitted they don't engage in academic writing. This mix of responses points to a partial but uneven level of research involvement, where some teachers are active while others remain largely disengaged from scholarly publication.

Figure 1.

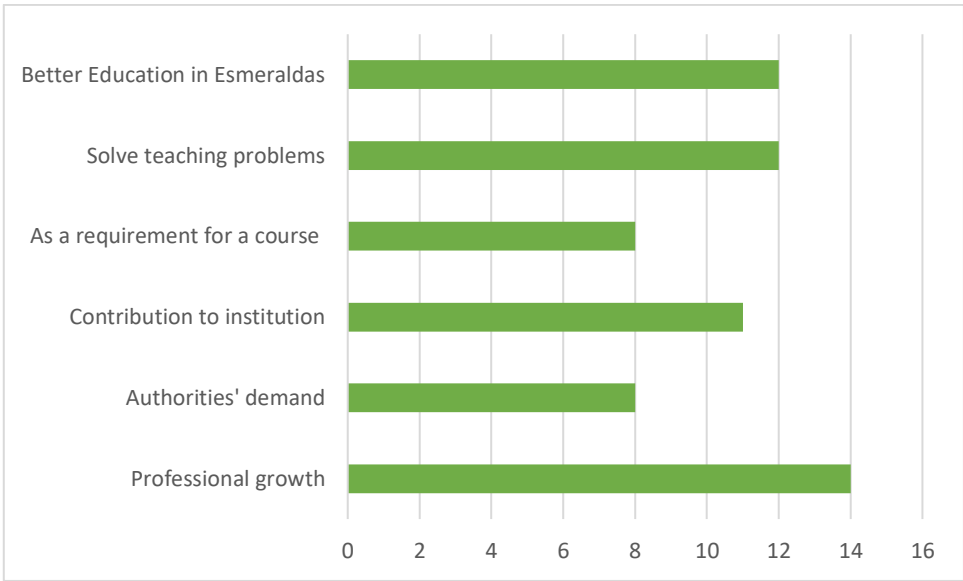
Frequency of writing scientific papers



Participants who indicated conducting research reported various motivations, as shown in Figure 2. They highlighted a mix of personal and institutional motivations. The emphasis on growth and local impact suggests that many engage in research to meet requirements, address real educational needs, and improve their professional practice. This reflects a research culture driven more by internal commitment than external pressure.

Figure 2.

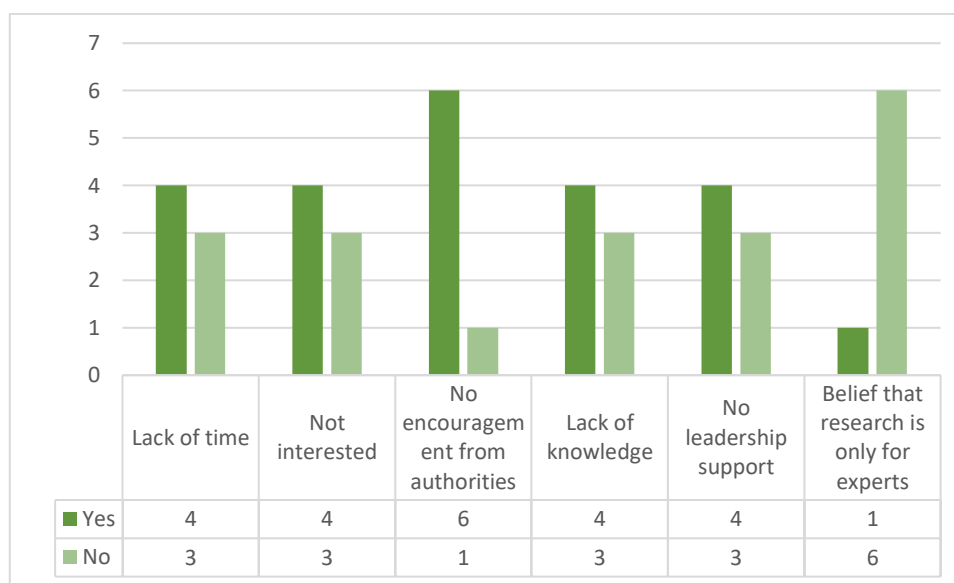
Reasons for conducting research



However, participants who indicated not conducting research pointed to institutional factors—particularly lack of encouragement from authorities—as key (see Figure 3). While individual factors like disinterest or lack of knowledge were mentioned, they appeared less decisive overall.

Figure 3.

Reasons for not conducting research



Interestingly, belief such as the notion that research is only for experts—appear less internalized among respondents. Only one teacher expressed this view. The findings indicate that fostering a research culture in these settings may depend more on reshaping institutional practices than altering teacher mindsets.

b) Self-assessed research competency

The findings show uneven confidence across research skills (See Table 1). Participants feel more at ease with tasks like writing introductions and designing surveys, likely because these follow clearer templates and are often practiced. However, there is noticeable uncertainty when it comes to choosing research designs or distinguishing methods, which hints at gaps in deeper methodological training. The fact that even basic skills were sometimes rated only as “Acceptable” suggests mixed research experience. Still, very few rated themselves poorly, showing a general awareness, even if not mastery. Targeted training in design and analysis could help close these gaps.

Figure 4.*In-service teachers' self-ratings across specific research skills*

Category	Very Good (%)	Good (%)	Acceptable (%)	Poor (%)
Writing a research introduction	47.6	33.3	14.3	4.8
Understanding how to review the literature	23.8	52.4	19.0	4.8
Formulating research questions	28.6	33.3	38.1	0.0
Writing survey questions	42.9	28.6	28.6	0.0
Asking questions to conduct interviews	23.8	38.1	38.1	0.0
Identifying research designs	28.6	23.8	33.3	14.3
Distinguishing quantitative and qualitative research strategies	23.8	28.6	38.1	9.5
Using statistic tools to analyze data	28.6	42.9	19.0	9.5
Presenting results	28.6	42.9	23.8	4.8
Writing a discussion with strong arguments	23.8	47.6	19.0	9.5
Drafting a conclusion	33.3	42.9	14.3	9.5

Discussion

This study examined the specific challenges that prevent in-service EFL teachers in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, from engaging in academic research. The findings confirm that many barriers mirror those reported in broader international contexts. However, the results also reveal distinct local dynamics that deserve focused attention.

As observed in the study by Carcamo et al. (2024) on Chilean university instructors, intrinsic motivation to conduct research was present among the participants in this study. However, formal institutional support remains largely absent. Teachers expressed a genuine desire to improve their pedagogical practice and contribute to educational

development, but highlighted a lack of institutional encouragement, which limits sustainable engagement in scholarly activity.

Self-assessed research competencies revealed an uneven landscape. Participants showed confidence in performing procedural tasks such as writing introductions and crafting survey questions, skills often guided by templates and practical experience. However, they reported notable uncertainty with conceptual elements, including the selection of research designs and the distinction between methodological approaches. These gaps reflect the findings of Khatibi and Shamsi (2024), who emphasized that weak institutional policies and limited academic training restrict research involvement. The need for deeper conceptual and epistemological instruction is evident, as familiarity alone does not translate into effective research practice.

Time constraints and excessive workload were also repeatedly cited as significant barriers. These findings align with those of Xu and Sukavatee (2025), who noted that the intensification of teaching demands, especially in the wake of pandemic-driven educational changes, forces teachers to deprioritize research in favor of immediate responsibilities such as lesson planning, student assessment, and administrative duties.

A particularly notable finding was the minimal presence of the belief that research is only for experts. Unlike the hierarchical educational systems described by Erlankyzy (2025), where teacher-led inquiry is often discouraged, participants in this study did not express such exclusionary views. This suggests a shift in cultural perceptions around research, where teachers increasingly see themselves as potential contributors to knowledge production, not merely as practitioners.

These findings point to the need for systemic changes rather than isolated interventions. Increasing research engagement in Esmeraldas will require institutional policies that formally support teacher inquiry, mentorship systems that provide ongoing guidance, and

professional development programs that address conceptual foundations in addition to procedural skills. Without these supports, even highly motivated educators face insurmountable barriers to meaningful research participation.

Conclusion

This study investigates the key barriers that limit the participation of EFL teachers in academic research in Esmeraldas, Ecuador. Although many educators express a genuine interest in research, systemic constraints—such as insufficient institutional support, limited training opportunities, and demanding workloads—impede their engagement.

Addressing these constraints requires a coordinated approach. Educational stakeholders should integrate teacher-led research into professional development frameworks, ensuring time, resources, and sustained mentorship to support methodological and conceptual growth.

Ultimately, enabling meaningful teacher engagement in research will depend on structural reform and reimagining research as an integral part of professional identity within the EFL teaching community.

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