

Position Statement on Research and Policy

Research refers to a spirited inquiry and systematic investigation that contributes to the knowledge base of a field. Research-based knowledge provides a principled basis for understanding language teaching and learning, and making decisions about policies, plans, and actions. Research has the potential to help English language teaching professionals improve the processes, outcomes, and conditions for language teaching, learning, and assessment. It also can help the profession address urgent social and political issues around the world, improve the materials used for second language teaching in schools, institutions, and workplaces, as well as clarify debates and debunk myths regarding second language acquisition. A strong commitment to research as a means of improving professional knowledge is vital to the field of teaching of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL).

In a field as diverse and multifaceted as TESOL, research must be flexible and inclusive. There are many valid approaches to research: quantitative and qualitative, descriptive and critical, large-scale and small-scale, cross-sectional and longitudinal, observational and experimental, research conducted by university researchers and by teachers in their own classrooms. It is also important to look at English language education from global to local perspectives and to examine different but perhaps complementary ways of achieving the same goals and to interrogate assumptions and prejudices, to ask why problems in one context are not occurring in another. Many types of research can contribute to knowledge in TESOL provided that the research is conceptually and methodologically sound, open to critical peer review, and the results are accessible to others. In turn, such research findings can serve as the basis for sound educational policies.

TESOL research can inform policy makers at local, regional, national, and global levels. All stakeholders in policy decisions have a genuine need for accurate and timely information, particularly in a rapidly changing world. As such, policy makers, researchers, organizations, and academic institutions should seek out opportunities to partner with one another to have ready access to such information. Further, the use of unsound, biased, or politically expedient studies should be avoided, especially when formulating policy decisions.

Policy makers must go beyond consideration of the conclusions of research. They must consider important variables within the research, the specific purposes and constituencies of the research, and the impact of decisions made based upon limited—or inconclusive—results. TESOL encourages researchers and policy makers to reflect on how their beliefs about the nature of language, language learning, and language teaching relate to policy decisions, and to discover what research has to say about these beliefs.

*Approved by the Board of Directors
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