

# Exploring Research Engagement of Saudi University EFL Teachers: Capabilities and Challenges

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This paper adds to the existing knowledge on the foreign teachers' level of research capability, conceptions of research, and views on the hindrances to their research engagement in select universities of Saudi Arabia. It employed a quantitative design by administering an e-questionnaire to 48 foreigners researching as language teachers in the KSA. In the Saudi context, in particular Qassim University and Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, English is considered a Foreign Language (FL), which is a core requirement in all educational systems at all academic levels starting from preschool to post-graduate education. This study is guided by the view that promoting the climate of research through transformative and effective educational management will provide fresh avenues for enhancing the research capabilities of foreign language teachers in the KSA so as to take the lead in research findings dissemination that are anchored on knowledge-sharing. To stave off the stasis in research in the KSA, this study hopes to fill the gap in the literature, which will help address the needs of teachers for research capability enhancement.

**Keywords:** *Research capabilities, EFL teachers, Knowledge generation, Research, Educational management, Research productivity.*

## Introduction

There is no denying the fact that research plays a vital part in the development of information worldwide. Research is a significant predictor of a global innovation index that determines a nation's capacity to produce new information and technologies for human use, sustainability, and growth in the existing knowledge-based environment. Without quality work that leads to the advancement of new frontiers of awareness and the forms of learning and adaptation in the current setting, intellectual development remains elusive. The productivity among countries worldwide is thus better calculated by academic papers, patents and the development among expertise (DiMasi, Grabowski, & Hansen, 2016). Regional development and performance are interwoven. Universities have the responsibility, as a powerful source of intellectual and technological advancement, to train and develop highly skilled professionals, scientists and experts, who will act as a catalyst for innovation. Based on a large number of studies, Busch and Lacy (2019) suggest that the emergence of a global rating constitutes a slight shift to the geopolitical and geo-economical orientation of higher education research and development. It is generally accepted that the overarching goal of education is to allow individuals to understand, practice and develop skills and abilities. Such thrusts in education are part of the position of higher education institutions all around the world, particularly in Saudi universities, which are supposed to be key research movers, starting with university courses that are gradually integrated into their curriculum. Therefore, the quality training of future professionals depends on the quality of the program, which represents the duties and qualifications of instructors and teachers.

Broadly speaking, research is a crucial element for both public and higher education institutions because research productivity reflects their contribution to the advancement of society. Moreover, research is considered one of the indicators for universities ranking worldwide. For example, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings looks at the universities' reputation for research excellence as one significant indicator for university ranking. From a teaching perspective, research-based instruction has become the tendency in public and higher educations because the primary purpose of the research is to report evidence-based finding to instructors, teachers and curriculum specialists (Pearson & Hiebert, 2015). Thus, teachers should design their courses and teaching materials in light of the research findings. More importantly, teachers should gain classroom-based research capabilities in order to be familiar with the techniques of collecting evidence and to be aware of the different needs of students on the basis of research findings.

Saudi Arabia is a developed nation, which has made enormous strides in educational growth. Asian Universities have regularly ranked themselves in the high echelons of the 2019 Asian University Rankings (King, 2009; Koch, 2014; Welch, 2011). This appeals to many foreign teachers and students in Saudi Arabia because of its reputation in the international business,

knowledge and technology generation and production. Teachers are the backbone of educational systems, and also indicators of quality education. The standard of Saudi and international teachers' research presence distinguishes part of teacher training and expertise in Saudi Arabia. It is noted that immediate and constructive participation in research is a significant consideration for teachers to show ingenuity and imagination. Research is, therefore, a required and inclusive part of Saudi Arabia's teaching cycle as a discipline focused on facts (Al Khateeb, 2017; Al-Abdullatif, 2019; Aldahmash et al., 2019; Alnefaie, 2016; Mutambik, 2018). The active engagement and involvement of teachers in Saudi Arabia in playing a leading role in research would also be essential to advance in teaching and to promote successful professional growth.

Thus, to foster the engagement of faculty in research, both public and private universities across Saudi Arabia have recently offered some research funding programs. For example, King Saudi University, Imam University, Qassim University and Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University offer Research Excellence Awards, which take place annually. Some other initiatives, like research groups, research leaderships international research exchange programs are also provided by some universities. Moreover, some research centres have been established like the Center for Excellence Research in Science and Mathematics Education at the College of Education, King Saud University. Such programs and initiatives allow faculty and researchers to be more productive, providing them opportunities to hire research assistants, participate in conferences, exchange their expertise with international scholars and make use of technology. Pedagogically speaking, these programs and research grants will have a positive influence on teaching and learning by putting theory into practice on the basis of research findings. However, from a research perspective, particularly in the EFL context, the studies that have been conducted on Saudi University EFL teachers' views toward their engagement in the research practice for teaching English as a foreign language are scarce. Hence, this encouraged us to conduct this study whose findings will possibly provide a thorough description of the Saudi University EFL teachers' engagement in research and the research difficulties they encounter.

### ***EFL Teachers' Research Engagement and Motivation***

EFL teacher research is gaining popularity and a higher level of acceptability worldwide (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Al-Maamari, Al-aamri, Khammash & Al-Wahaibi, 2017). In a South American context, Burns and Westmacott (2018) reported that for Chilean universities there is a need to support EFL teachers' professional development, capturing their role from being a classroom teacher to becoming teacher-researchers. The study of feasibility, inspiration and importance of research expectations and difficulties between professors and teachers of foreign languages in Mexican universities have been examined for the North American background by Reyes-Cruz, Murrieta-Loyo and Perales-Escudero (2018). They recorded high rates of performance,

but little dedication to research, which suggested that language teachers grossly underestimated their potential for research writing. Keuk (2015) in Cambodia noticed in South-eastern Asia that EFL teachers had vague and confused conceptions of research, which led to their disinterest in research involvement. There is also a call for an initiative in Cambodia to reconceptualise ELT teachers' participation in research. The study climate of an EFL Thailand University has been analysed by Wonglorsaichon, Wongwanich and Wiratchai, (2014), and shows that EFL's research interaction with teachers is a result of external and internal time-constraints, such as limited funding and restricted institutional support. EFL teachers were recommended to be inspired and allowed to be engaged in research in order to develop their classroom experience. Both studies have focused their recommendations on appropriate approaches to research management, with the goal to strengthen the engagement of teachers of foreign languages through an efficient and sustainable research system in faculty. As one of the most critical aspects of higher education, faculty leaders play a central role in research and growth. The university administration also requires a robust support system to help it to reach its greatest flourishing future. Consequently, in Pakistan, Hassan (2020) assessed the research capability of English language teachers and showed that teachers seem to have specific information about their research as an opportunity to do research. While the majority agreed that no study was made, it also looked scattered and less organised to meet those who said they were performing any kind of research. The main challenging factors for the research engagement of the teachers are the learning atmosphere, management attitude, relationships between seniors and younger students, research load, lack of cash benefits and incentives as well as high ranks.

### ***Research Challenges to Saudi Teachers***

In the Saudi context, many foreign language teachers are not aware of the importance of research in their professional activities (Abu-Zaid, 2014; Alsufyan & Aloud, 2017; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2012a; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019b; Farsani & Babaii, 2019; Montgomery & Smith, 2015; Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). In a study by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019), it is reported that English teachers in Saudi Arabia mainly have opinions regarding technical research, including experimental designs and detailed testing. Nevertheless, they understood the importance of research in their professional development. Alhija and Majdod (2017) analysed the predictors of research productivity among Arab professors and found that teaching credentials, places, and ranks are predictors. They suggested that the recruitment of teachers with outstanding qualifications, assigning administrative duties, and professional development programs, particularly for new instructors, should also be introduced to enhance research productivity. Corollary to that, Qasem and Zayid (2019) have discussed particular problems and difficulties when writing research and projects proposals in the academe, such as difficulty in deciding on the research topic, lack of strong technological expertise, incapacity to identify fresh, applicable sources and experts, lack of research interest,

incomprehension of the topic, lack of time and delay. Using a qualitative design used by Rahimi, Yousofi and Moradkhani (2019) in which narrative structure was used to gather information on scholarly analyses in higher education. A semi-structured interview with participants was also subsequently held to triangulate the outcomes of the narratives and to provide further information about the research effects of participants on ELT higher education. While teachers are expected to take care of, and, be motivated to research, little knowledge of how teachers meet these requirements is available in the Saudi context. This makes research highly relevant and useful to study. In addition, the decisions to include teachers in their research must be informed by a realistic understanding of what teachers think about science in particular. To that end, the study presented a concise account of Saudi English teachers' research aspirations.

### ***Significance of Research for University Teachers***

The significance of the research is attributed to two essential factors in higher education institutions. First, research improves teaching, and second, research is an indicator of institutional prestige (Alhija & Majdob, 2017). The impending factor which hinders the thriving of teacher-researcher in Saudi is attributed to culture (Elmaadaway, 2018; Rahimi, Yousofi, & Moradkhani, 2019). Conventionally, teachers are not yet fully trained and oriented to do research as an integral part of their professional experiences (Algraini & McIntyre-Mills, 2019; Hill & Haigh, 2007; Hughes, 2019; Ligang, 2005; Xiaofen, 2020). Findings confirmed that teachers are not aware of the role and concept of research in education. They consider research as somewhat complicated and sophisticated, which should only be done by experts and university scholars. Even for those teachers in the service who are oriented on their role as researchers, numerous difficulties are faced in putting their research for dissemination and publication (Ellis & Loghland, 2016). Hence, if teachers do not have the capability for research, they will not be able to carry out their tasks effectively (Ulla, 2018). Consequently, when teachers nurture an unfavourable attitude towards research, it eventually affects their professional development. In contrast, teachers who hold positive views about research, they research towards their professional development promoting new perspective in their respective fields. Generally, the studies presented provided theatrical grounding on the challenges of teachers in conducting research. However, the studies mentioned did not explore the needed support of teachers in conducting research. More so, few studies have tried to inspect the issues and challenges faced by foreign teachers with regards to their research capabilities in Saudi. Thus, this present study will address the gap in the literature to provide important implications for the educational management of universities.

## **Context and Research Gap**

In Saudi Arabia, English is taught and learned as a foreign language (Al-Ahdal, 2020). The effectiveness of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia from the basic to higher education levels has caught the interest of researchers the world over (Alahmad et al., 2016; Aljohani, 2016; Barnawi, & Al-Hawsawi, 2017; Elyas & Picard, 2020). However, a large body of the reviewed and culled literature discussed the research engagement as an important vehicle of professional development among teachers across countries (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014; Cho, 2009; Loewen et al., 2014; Moncada, 2007; Sadeghi, 2010; Tarrayo, 2011). Yet, there is a clear paucity of research literature venturing on the specific research skills, teachers' capabilities and engagement. The search for the relevant literature brought forth a limited number of papers, focusing on the foreign teachers' engagement in research (Mehrani, 2015). Nevertheless, such an inquiry is a useful ground for educational management practitioners on how to address this gap in the actual field. Likewise, this paper sought to fill in the gap of the existing literature by reporting the research capability of foreign teachers engaged in Saudi's universities. This paper views that promoting the climate of research through transformative and effective educational management will provide avenues for enhancing research capabilities of foreign teachers in Saudi Arabia to take the lead for research findings dissemination that are anchored on knowledge-sharing. Given the poor research participation of foreign teachers in research in Saudi, this study hopes to fill the gap in the literature, which will help address the needs of teachers for research capability enhancement.

## **Objectives of the Study**

This paper explored the research capabilities of foreign teachers in Saudi Arabia. It sought to answer the following research inquiries: (1) What are the foreign teachers' Level of Research Capability? (2) How do the foreign teachers establish conceptions of research? and (3) What are the foreign teacher's views on the impediments to their research engagement?

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Research Participants***

Anchored on ethical research standards, personal information, and participants' details were treated confidentially. Prior to the naming and placement of applicants, the authority submitted a formal submission. 48 EFL international teachers were tried to separate assistance from seven school heads. Males and females with 26 female and 22 male EFL teachers with a mean experience of 12.8 years of international teaching were almost evenly distributed in the study. Both participants earned a degree in the teaching language and/or literature and a minimum master's or equivalent. The mean age of the researchers was 44.3 years and was part of the world's nations. Two Institutions in Saudi Arabia, Qassim



University, and Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, performed the research. Such Universities have been selected for their outstanding EFL libraries.

### ***Research Instruments***

#### ***The measure of Research Capability***

An adapted version of Meerah, Osman, Zakarina, Ikhsan et al. (2012), which is the measure of research skills was modified to suit the purposes of the current study. The instrument is a diagnostic measure that helps identify the research competencies of teachers with 13 statements. The instrument is a self-assessed tool with, a 5-point Likert scale, with descriptive interpretation and ranges: Highly Capable, Very Capable, Moderately Capable, Fairly Capable, Not Capable.

#### ***The measure of Conceptions on the Values of Research***

The measure of the level of foreign teachers' research conceptions instrument by Biruk (2013) has been modified in Hishan et al. (2020). This instrument was further adapted to the research needs and used. The statement has 8 items, and responses are sought with a 5-point Likert scale, with the following descriptive interpretations and scale ranges: Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data from the 65 participants were electronically collected, given the closure of educational institutions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A higher number was chosen to allow the researcher to discard incomplete questionnaires. Consequently, only 48 response sheets were taken for the analysis, as these answered all the questions, and also divulged the demographic details.

## Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the responses to the measure of research capability questionnaire.

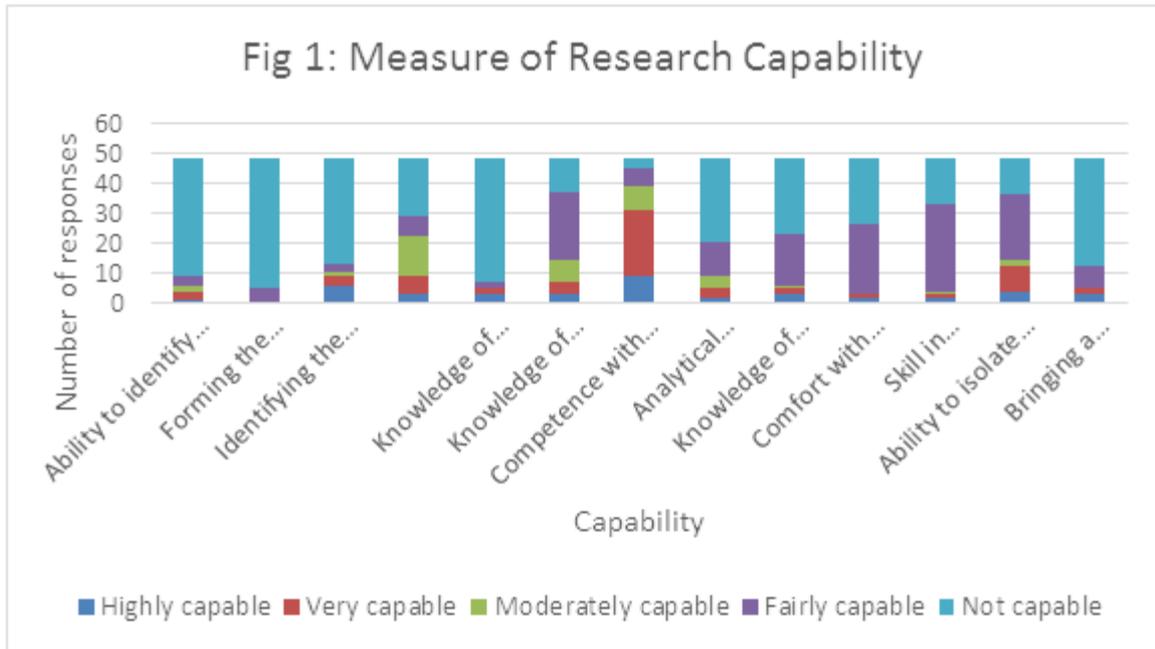
**Table 1:** Participants' responses to the Measure of Research Capability questionnaire

No	Statement	Highly capable	Very capable	Moderately capable	Fairly capable	Not capable
1	Ability to identify a research issue	2%	6%	4%	6%	81%
2	Forming the research questions	0%	0%	0%	10%	90%
3	Identifying the objectives for the research	13%	6%	2%	6%	73%
4	Ability to collect relevant literature	6%	13%	27%	15%	40%
5	Knowledge of designing a research frame research	6%	4%	0%	4%	85%
6	Knowledge of data management and statistical tools	6%	8%	15%	48%	23%
7	Competence with the use of a computer as a research and writing tool	19%	46%	17%	13%	6%
8	Analytical abilities to select useful information	4%	6%	8%	23%	58%
9	Knowledge of research methods	6%	4%	2%	35%	52%
10	Comfort with interpretation of data	4%	2%	0%	48%	46%
11	Skill in presentation of both data and analysis	4%	2%	2%	60%	31%
12	Ability to isolate conclusions	8%	17%	4%	46%	25%
13	Bringing a manuscript up to the desired level for publication	6%	4%	0%	15%	75%

As can be seen from the data, on all the thirteen parameters that measure the participants' research capability, self-assessment is centred around the poor ability. Closer inspection of the data revealed that the few responses that centre around higher capability spectrum are from those male participants who already had some exposure to research such as in the course of their higher education. We present the data graphically for ease of use in Figure 1 below. This can be interpreted to mean that with rigorous in-service training, many of the

teachers not engaged in research can be enabled to do so. That is, of course, a matter of training, but these results must be seen in consonance with the value that these teachers place on research in academics.

**Figure 1. Participants’ responses to the Measure of Research Capability questionnaire**



This data was collected via the second instrument viz, the measure of conceptions on the value of research. The results are tabulated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Measure of the Conceptions on the Value of Research**

No	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	Conducting research is important for my teaching output	12	26	3	4	3
2	Research helps improve my knowledge base	32	5	1	4	6
3	If I carry out research, it will indirectly benefit my learners	16	21	2	5	4
4	Research is likely to enhance my skills as a teacher	23	14	1	3	7
5	It is important that I be updated with the latest findings in the field	26	13	2	5	2
6	Involvement in research will help solve educational problems	14	12	11	4	7
7	Research output is likely to raise	17	14	7	5	5



	my professional graph					
8	Research will enable me to be more knowledgeable, systematic and effective as a teacher	21	13	2	5	7

The data show that teachers' perceptions of research are positive, and that they do understand the important place it holds in their professional growth and development. Responses to a large number of statements in the questionnaire are almost unanimous. It can be interpreted that teachers are quite aware of the immense benefits that will accrue to them and their learners if they are involved in research and the development of their fields. This finding, seen in consonance with the data gathered from the previous questionnaire, shows that though teachers are not well-versed with research as an academic exercise, and that they are desirous of learning and engaging in it. Teachers' emphasis as an indicator of strong performance on the practicality of their studies appears to be based on comparing research and experience (Mehrani 2017; Reyes-Cruz, Murrieta-Loyo and Perales-Escudero 2018; Shafiee & Sotoudehnama 2019). While analysis also provides a kind of knowledge, which is proposal-based, empirical, totally logical, untouched by sentiments or impulses and better connected to a review of the problem, language teachers need a kind of knowledge which is contextual, realistic, relationship, and sometimes unconscious and helps them to decide whether to behave under a given circumstance. In other words, language teachers have to discuss their ongoing pedagogical problems urgently and concretely. The heavy dependency of language teachers on the functional dimension of study is, thus, warranted to the point that research does not yield valid and realistic outcomes (Faribi, Derakhshan & Robati, 2019; Soltanpour & Valizadeh, 2019). Another question that is important for the findings of the present analysis is the product of the small and restricted underestimation by the students of the field of research. An additional consequence could be that a lot of research, which is carried out inside alternate study paradigms (e.g. project review, ethnography, case studies, etc.) remains inaccessible and unattractive to practitioners. As is quite apparent, the second conclusion relates to the effects of the concerted attempts made by the Ministry of Education to involve teachers in education, and to support teacher education in the education system of Iran. With respect to teachers' existing study expectations, it seems unlikely that such interventions will be really successful since substantive learning and instruction will improve even if teachers had constructive attitudes to small-scale research activities. Therefore, language teachers cannot be believed to be professionals in their own environments by changing their distorted research concepts.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Study results gave a variety of ramifications for educational administration and research in the departments of international languages at Saudi universities. First of all, this study not only has significant consequences for Saudi universities but also for all higher education institutions worldwide. There is a need for strong encouragement by universities to promote initiatives by moving from universities focused on teaching to research-induced. Through the development of qualified, flexible, and productive human resources able to generate, verify, disseminate, apply, and use new ideas, discoveries, and technologies, scientific innovation will be the focus and the key to the promises of tomorrow. Second, since international teachers have shown a moderate degree of learning capability, a long-term professional development program will be planned to reflect on the limitations and strengths, as found and examined in this study. A series of proactive strategic plans and assessments will be part of the staff growth strategy to fill the difference between what is and what should be: between the real and the ideal, in other words. Moreover, the faculty development program on research should have the following parts and components: (a) *capacity-building for foreign teachers* through researchshops and seminars on the topics research gap identification, research and statistical analysis, survey methodology, research process, technical writing, research publications and disseminations; (b) *administrative support system for research* through the following initiatives: institutionalising the research incentive and remuneration system from research proposal to release; provision of modern facilities and equipment for the conduct of research; institutionalising research policies, capturing processes of research engagement; reduction of research load to give teachers reasonable time for research activities; (c) *integrating research in the academics* through the following: formulation of research-based syllabus in teaching foreign language core subjects; using teaching strategies which are research-based, requiring student-teacher collaboration in research writing and publication; (d) *establishing strong research collaboration* by way of inviting internationally-acclaimed authors, scholars, and researchers to share best practices; request for research grant and funding from other institutions; strong peer mentoring and advising; and conducting research through participatory and collaborative processes.

## Implications for Teaching

Generally, school plans, instructional goals, strategies of instruction, and bodies of knowledge of what is taught can be strengthened and reinforced. The study participation often increases teachers' conscientious behaviour, appreciation, or praise. Research has shown that this study is designed to educate and improve practice with various definitions and understandings of educational practices. In order to provide educators and policymakers with appropriate and valuable knowledge, it is important to continue focusing on study experiences of language teachers to examine potential approaches to encourage more feasible



ways of research involved in the Saudi ELT climate. The impact of the function of language teachers on their instructional practices and student performance is one of the most related problems that require more investigation. Moreover, future studies should examine obstacles to the involvement of participants and the challenges faced by lecturers and researchers alike. There are also important factors to consider in the development of the concept of teacher research. Future research should investigate in-depth in testing methodology which methodological fields are seen as most appropriate, and which forms of instructional study are promoted as most effective, especially in the programs for teacher language education.

### **Limitation**

This paper, however, focused only on the foreign teachers' level of research capability, conceptions of research, and views on the hindrances to their research engagement, by using mixed-method research designs to a small number of respondents. Hence, the study may have deeper and varying themes that can be generated and interpreted when other variables such as socio-economic profile, cultural background, and teachers' personality, and research topic interest can predict research productivity. Likewise, another study may be conducted to examine how teachers' research engagement can be correlated to students' learning outcomes, exploring the possible linkages between them so as to rejuvenate the entire learning process.

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