

## **TESOL Research Directions 2023-2027**

Presented by the *Research Directions Working Group* of the TESOL Research Professional Council: Jessie Curtis, Özgehan Uştuk, Amira Salama, Christine Coombe, Huili Hong, Christina Kitson; Raichle Farrelly (Board Liaison) and Sarah Sahr (Staff Partner)

TESOL International Association's professional councils support the association's objectives with professional knowledge and advice. One of seven professional councils, the [Research Professional Council \(RPC\)](#) focuses on research by identifying priorities, promoting collaboration, fostering inquiry, and building expertise. This document describes the **TESOL Research Directions 2023-2027 initiative** and the process undertaken by the RPC sub-committee, the Research Directions Working Group, to identify research areas of relevance to TESOL members. Following a brief description of the vision for the current initiative, we introduce the project history and background. Next, a timeline outlines key actions taken to engage with and learn from TESOL members in the process of shaping research directions for the coming years. We then summarize the steps that led to our recommendations for **Research Education & Literacy, Professional Learning, Teaching Methods, and Emerging Educational Technologies** as research directions in TESOL.

### **TESOL Research Directions 2023-2027 Initiative**

This initiative builds from and expands on previous work by TESOL to highlight research in English language education and to address the research concerns, priorities, and directions for research that TESOL members pursue. The project extends TESOL's commitments to [equity, diversity, inclusion, and access](#) to the area of research, recognizing the complexity of TESOL as a field and the challenges of language teaching and learning in diverse contexts. We envision an inclusive TESOL research community in which professional

learning involves opportunities for mentorship and collaboration with and in a global conversation about research that is local and relevant.

## **History and Background**

Prior to the current project, the TESOL International Association led three initiatives to develop a research agenda in English language education. The first two, led by [Brindley et al. \(2000\)](#) and [Borg et al. \(2004\)](#), were scholarly papers that outlined priorities while also anticipating change in the field. The 2000 agenda set forth a plan to create a task force for future research agenda projects and outlined potential topics and contexts for inquiry. Following these recommendations, the next agenda was developed by a task force and published in 2004. This agenda was intended for dissemination to graduate students, corporations, and governmental agencies, while promoting “a broader awareness of what constitutes research in TESOL” (Borg et al., 2004, p. 1). The third initiative, the [TESOL Research Agenda \(2014\)](#), also led by a task force, initially focused on the needs of TESOL members in higher education. The task force then broadened participation by emailing a survey to TESOL members as well as to nonmembers with an interest in English language teaching. Its aim was to bring researchers and practitioners together, and called for attention to “how practitioners can use research” (2014, p. 2) by encouraging systematic process of observation and inquiry.

In 2018, a *Research Trends and Priorities Working Group* was established by the RPC to update the TESOL agenda. The working group first emailed a survey to learn about how TESOL members and non-members used the 2014 Research Agenda. The survey revealed that the agenda was underutilized – only 3% reported having used it in their work. Recommendations by respondents included making the research agenda “user-friendly” and focusing “on real teachers,” in addition to sharing “a concise summary of the document, separate from the explanation” (TESOL Research Agenda and Future Priorities Survey Report, 2018, p. 6). These

recommendations reinforced those articulated in the TESOL Research Agenda (2014):

TESOL should maintain and make available to its membership, for historical record, all versions of the agenda, and make all versions available for public review. ...With each new agenda, *it is also imperative that the association consider how best to publicize it and otherwise make it a useful document for the association and the field.* (2014, p. 15, emphasis added)

The current initiative began in 2018; however, it was interrupted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the RPC, in tandem with the TESOL Board, continued the 2018 project to renew research priorities. With the earlier recommendations in mind, the working group aimed for a concise and user-friendly final product to promote research in TESOL, facilitate its wide dissemination among TESOL members, and ensure ease of access for members who are interested in pursuing research.

Continuing the project with the support of our Staff Partner, Board Liaison, and the TESOL Board of Directors, preliminary survey findings were presented to the Board by then-past chair Scott Douglas at its October 2022 meeting. In January, 2023, rather than forming a task force, the Board asked the RPC subcommittee to guide the project for developing TESOL's research priorities. Scott Douglas led the process of finalizing analysis of the survey data; subsequently, as past chair, Jessie Curtis finalized the volunteer working group members for the coming year and took on leadership of the project. The analysis, the [Research Priorities Survey Report](#), presented to the TESOL Board in February 2023, forms the basis of the current research, conducted with focus groups. Meanwhile, during the pandemic, the RPC continued discussions with TESOL members about their research interests.

## **Member Engagement Timeline**

Based on this background, the current initiative has centered on member engagement. The RPC's efforts to engage TESOL members in

discussing, renewing, updating, and sharing research priorities are presented in Figure 1, a timeline of those activities.

**Figure 1**

*RPC’s Member Engagement Activities Timeline*



In sum, throughout the current initiative to develop research priorities and directions, we have been intentional about broadening both participation in the process and potential audiences for engaging with and generating research. In the next section, we discuss the notion of audiences and the need for further interpretation of the survey data by highlighting demographic data from the three 2014–2022 surveys, with a focus on the 2022 survey results, and questions that arose from that data.

## **The Survey Report and the Need for Further Interpretation**

In July and August 2022, the Research Trends and Priorities Working Group [surveyed TESOL International members](#) to identify TESOL International’s future research priorities. The survey was conducted with the support of TESOL International’s Board of Directors for the purpose of

informing a task force that would update the organization’s [Research Agenda \(2014\)](#). The open-ended survey asked: **What are your top three research topics, contexts, and challenges?** The data gathered from 639 respondents—over 2700 data points in total—was then analyzed for themes in the research topics, contexts, and challenges named by TESOL members. An analysis was finalized in February 2023.

In March of 2023, we read and reflected on the findings presented in the final [Research Priorities Survey Report 2023](#). As we read the report, questions arose from the demographic data about whether the survey responses adequately represented the concerns of TESOL membership and, noting different concerns informing similar responses, whether we needed further interpretation. For instance, given that most respondents to the survey held advanced degrees—about 80%—we wondered what was meant by “teacher development”? Why was “research design” named as a top challenge?

To help answer these questions, and to amplify the demographic data available to us, we first accessed demographic data from 2014, the earliest survey data available, and 2018, the survey that aimed to assess how TESOL members used the Research Agenda. Comparing the three sets of demographic data, we noted a trend toward broadening geographic distribution that contrasted with relative stability in terms of years of experience and advanced degrees reported by TESOL members, illustrated in Table 1:

**Table 1.**

*Survey Respondent Demographics*

Survey Year	2014	2018	2022
Number of respondents	384	341	639
TESOL members	83%	90%	100%
10+ years of experience	60%	67%	77%

Advanced degrees	93%	74%	80%
Based in North America	68%	95%	35%

A closer look at the demographic detail from 2022 revealed a nuanced portrait of respondents to the survey:

- Nearly 45% reported working in non-university settings and approximately 32% reported working with children or adolescents.
- Of those who reported working in university contexts, nearly 30% reported teaching multilingual learners and 20% reported their main role as teacher educators.

To summarize, while most respondents held advanced degrees, nearly half, 45%, worked in non-university settings and a significant proportion reported working with children and adolescents. A picture began to emerge that shed light on the priorities and challenges that were named in the survey. This picture confirmed that we needed more information, and we subsequently planned for focus groups to interpret the top topics, contexts, and challenges TESOL members named as priorities.

### **Path to the Focus Groups**

To begin, we recruited volunteer focus group participants at the 2023 TESOL Convention in March, contacted past participants in RPC Research Mentoring Workshops, and reached out to the Affiliate Network Professional Council leadership for their assistance in involving Affiliate Leaders. This collaboration resulted in a joint communication to Affiliate Leaders on MyTESOL in April. In addition to taking these steps, to promote the initiative more widely, we created a [research web page](#) that included an online form for membership feedback. Following up on this step, in May 2023, an [RPC blog post](#) invited TESOL members to participate in focus groups or provide their feedback on the Survey Report through the online form. These steps were completed with the support of the RPC Staff Partner, Sarah Sahr, and Board

Liaison, Raichle Farrelly, who are also members of the RPC subcommittee. The project could not have advanced without the support and trust of the TESOL Board of Directors and its Executive Committee, for which we take this opportunity to express our profound thanks.

Ultimately, in line with our vision for promoting inclusivity in research, ten focus groups were held from May through July 2023 with the intention of engaging TESOL members that were less represented in the survey data. Despite the wide geographic distribution of respondents to the 2022 survey, a plurality (35%) was concentrated in North America. The ten focus groups, which were organized by time zone and by Interest Section (IS), included TESOL members in 16 countries: Argentina, Cameroon, Canada, China, Côte d'Ivoire, Czechoslovakia, India, Israel, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, Tunisia, United States, and Vietnam. TESOL ISs represented Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and Program Administration (PA). Some TESOL members in other ISs opted to complete the online feedback form.

The ten focus groups, each led by a member of the working group, comprised two to five participants and lasted 60-90 minutes. In these groups, participants were asked to reflect on the findings of the Research Priorities Survey Report and discuss what each of the findings meant, in their context. These reflections were then summarized by the focus group leaders and communicated in a shared document. The initial recommendations, based on the reflections of focus groups, were subsequently communicated to the Executive Committee in a memo on August 10, 2023. The working group decided to have another round of input from focus group participants to validate both the reflections and the initial recommendations to the Executive Committee. The final set of recommendations to the TESOL Board, September 29, 2023, incorporated this second round of feedback. In what follows, we summarize the recommendations of the working group that were shared with the Executive Committee and TESOL Board.

## Summary of the Working Group Recommendations

The findings communicated in the [Research Priorities Survey Report \(2023\)](#) were given nuance by focus group reflections and discussions. In the focus groups we asked, “What do the top research topics, contexts, and challenges named in the survey mean to you?”

- In terms of **topics**, the working group found that participants viewed *teaching methods*, *teacher development*, and *educational technology* as integrated and interrelated research priorities that required contextually relevant research.
  - **Teacher development** emerged as a central priority. Members of the PA IS suggested that “teacher development” be expanded beyond “teachers,” so that other educational roles could be included—arguing that it takes a whole school to achieve goals for equity. With that in mind, we reinterpreted this research priority as *professional learning*. **Teaching methods** remained a high research priority, as did educational technology, which was expanded to **emerging educational technologies** on the advice of the CALL IS focus group.
- In terms of **contexts**, across regions the focus group discussions emphasized *learner contexts*, specifically *bi/multilingual learners*. Attention to postsecondary *institutional contexts* was interpreted as having a ripple effect, ultimately having an impact on the quality of teaching in elementary and secondary schools.
- Regarding research **challenges**, *research design* remained the top priority. We reinterpreted research design as *research literacy*, which would in turn address the challenges of *funding* and *workload*. The TESOL Executive Committee then suggested expanding research literacy to *research education and literacy*, a step that served to include participants in university and non-university settings.



## Moving from Research Agenda and Priorities to Research Directions

To highlight inclusivity and access, we suggested renaming our recommendations “Research Directions” instead of following the taxonomy of *agendas* and *priorities*. This reinforces the previous work of the RPC Research Trends and Priorities Working Group formed in 2018, which recommended moving away from the top-down approach suggested by a research *agenda*. The current working group found *directions* allowed for the possibility of different priorities in different contexts. In sum, we emphasize the validity of educators’ agency to determine their own priorities in their contexts, communities, and classrooms. To put the research directions into operation, the RPC’s event planning for the 2024 TESOL Convention focuses on contextualized research on teaching methods, teacher-led research, and research mentoring.

In conclusion, we wish to emphasize a process that builds on the work begun by those who preceded the current working group and is informed by a shared vision of an equitable and inclusive research community. In line with this vision, this explanatory phase of the current research project will reveal more about how the research directions—**Research Education & Literacy, Professional Learning, Teaching Methods, and Emerging Educational Technologies**—can inform TESOL members’ engagement with and in research. We look forward to working together to complete this second stage of analysis and sharing our final report in the coming months.

Respectfully,

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Amira Salama (RPC Incoming Chair)

Christine Coombe, Huili Hong, Christina Kitson (First Year Members)

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