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## EXPLORING CHALLENGES IN RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT OF RURAL EFL TEACHERS

The article presents the results of a study aimed at identifying the challenges faced by rural English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Kazakhstan when conducting research. A quantitative approach was used, using a Likert scale questionnaire completed by 81 participating teachers. The quantitative findings indicate that rural EFL teachers generally recognize the value of research in improving teaching practice and performance. However, the teachers also described significant obstacles to engaging in research, including a lack of research knowledge and skills, heavy teaching workloads that leave little time for research, and limited training and institutional support for professional development in this area. These challenges were perceived similarly across teachers with different qualification levels, suggesting systemic issues in the rural educational context. The results suggest a need to enhance research capacity among rural EFL teachers through targeted training programs, mentoring initiatives, and workload adjustments to empower them to utilize research more effectively in their teaching. The authors offered recommendations.

**Key words:** research competence, teacher professional development, EFL teachers, research challenges, research engagement.

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### Ауыл мектептеріндегі ағылшын тілі мұғалімдерінің зерттеу қызметіне қатысуының мәселелерін зерттеу

Мақалада Қазақстандағы ауылдық орта мектеп ағылшын тілі (EFL) мұғалімдерінің зерттеу жұмыстарын жүргізу кезінде кездесетін мәселелерін анықтауға арналған зерттеу нәтижелері көрсетілген. Осы мақалада сандық әдіс, оның ішінде 81 ауылдық орта мектептердің ағылшын тілі мұғалімдері толтырған Лайкерт шкаласы түріндегі сауалнама қолданылды. 81 қатысушылардың жауаптарын SPSS талдау нәтижесі бойынша ауылдық орта мектептердегі ағылшын тілі мұғалімдерінің оқыту тәжірибесі мен өнімділігін арттырудағы зерттеудің құндылығын жалпы растайтындығын көрсетеді. Дегенмен, мұғалімдер ғылыми-зерттеу жұмыстарына қатысудағы елеулі кедергілерді де сипаттады, оның ішінде ғылыми-зерттеу саласындағы білім мен дағдылардың жетіспеушілігі, ғылыми зерттеулерге аз уақыт қалдыратын ауыр оқу жүктемесі, осы саладағы біліктілікті арттыру үшін шектеулі дайындық пен институттық қолдау. Бұл қиындықтар әр түрлі біліктілік деңгейлері бар мұғалімдер арасында бірдей қабылданды. Бұл нәтижелер ауылдық білім беру жағдайында жүйелі проблемалардың бар екенін көрсетеді. Нәтижелер ауылдық орта мектеп ағылшын тілі мұғалімдерінің ғылыми-зерттеушілік әлеуетін мақсатты оқыту бағдарламалары, тәлімгерлік бастамалар және оқу жүктемесін түзету арқылы арттыру қажеттілігін көрсетеді, осылайша олар зерттеуді педагогикалық қызметке тиімдірек енгізе алады. Авторлар өз ұсыныстарын білдірді.

**Түйін сөздер:** зерттеушілік құзіреттілік, мұғалімнің кәсіби дамуы, ағылшын тілі мұғалімдері, зерттеу мәселелері, зерттеумен айналысу.

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### Изучение проблем вовлеченности в исследовательскую деятельность преподавателей английского языка в сельских школах

В статье отражены результаты исследования по выявлению проблем, с которыми сталкиваются сельские учителя английского языка как иностранного (EFL) в Казахстане при проведении исследований. Данные, используемые в настоящей статье, были получены при проведении опроса на основе шкалы Лайкерта. Анализ ответов 81 респондента, проведенный с помощью SPSS, свидетельствует о том, что сельские преподаватели английского языка в целом признают ценность исследований для улучшения практики преподавания и повышения эффективности работы. Тем не менее, учителя также описали значительные препятствия для участия в исследованиях, включая отсутствие знаний и навыков в области исследований, большую нагрузку на преподавателей, которая оставляет мало времени для исследований, и ограниченную подготовку и институциональную поддержку профессионального развития в этой области. Эти проблемы одинаково воспринимались учителями с разным уровнем квалификации, что свидетельствует о наличии системных проблем в сельском образовательном контексте. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о необходимости повышения исследовательского потенциала сельских преподавателей английского языка с помощью целевых программ обучения, инициатив по наставничеству и корректировки рабочей нагрузки, чтобы они могли более эффективно использовать исследования в своей преподавательской деятельности. Авторы предложили рекомендации.

**Ключевые слова:** исследовательская компетентность, профессиональное развитие учителей, преподаватели английского языка, исследовательские проблемы, исследовательская вовлеченность.

## Introduction

Participating in research empowers teachers to expand their knowledge, develop critical skills, and improve educational practices. Despite these benefits, many educators find the process of creating new knowledge and applying existing expertise quite challenging, especially in the field of education. Often, teachers conduct research to comply with regulations, achieve promotions, or meet certain requirements, rather than to enhance professional development or improve schools. Nevertheless, engaging in research can significantly benefit teachers and their students. Many educators see research as crucial for developing effective teaching strategies that foster positive learning outcomes (Ulla, 2017).

In Kazakhstan, the State Compulsory Standards (the professional standard, 2012) have introduced a modernized educational framework rooted in constructivist principles that emphasize the enhancement of students' metacognitive skills. The education system has transitioned to a competency-based model (Ford, 2014), which prioritizes the individual needs and progress of each student. As part of these reforms, Kazakhstan has rolled out a trilingual language policy, updated curricula, constructivist teaching methods, criteria-based assessment,

and a 12-year schooling program (McLaughlin & Ayubayeva, 2014). Teachers are now required to be skilled in "lesson study" and "action research" methodologies, alongside project-based learning techniques.

Research has examined how teachers' engagement in research activities can improve the learning experience in Kazakh schools (McLaughlin et al., 2014). In the UK, researchers interpret teachers' research efforts as a response to political shifts during periods of transition, with significant support from the government. They have pinpointed three main factors affecting the learning process: cultural aspects of education reform, the traditional nature of vocational training, and the continuous professional development of teachers (McLaughlin et al., 2014).

However, the implementation of "action research" methodologies has encountered difficulties, primarily due to the insufficient development of meta-subject research competencies among teachers. This finding is based on data from questionnaires and thematic essay analysis conducted by the authors. Although there is extensive scientific literature on secondary school teachers' competencies, there is a significant gap in understanding how these competencies evolve through research engagement. A study by the Faculty of Education at the Univer-

sity of Cambridge in Kazakhstani schools revealed a strong connection between emotions, knowledge, and research practice in the context of action research, characterizing it as a profoundly personal and emotional process (McLaughlin & Ayubayeva, 2015). Thus, this survey study aims to investigate the perspectives and challenges of research engagement among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Kazakhstan. By exploring the factors that influence EFL teachers' involvement in research and identifying the support and resources they need, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of fostering a research-engaged teaching profession in the Kazakhstani educational context.

### Literature review

The significance of teacher engagement in research is well-recognized within the education sector. Engaging in research allows teachers to critically evaluate their teaching practices, pinpoint areas for enhancement, and apply evidence-based strategies to tackle classroom challenges (Ulla, 2017). When teachers conduct their own research, they produce context-specific knowledge directly relevant to their teaching environments, rather than depending solely on studies by external researchers (Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016). Numerous studies highlight the benefits of teachers' involvement in research, noting its positive impact on professional growth and instructional methods (Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016; Borg, 2009; Borg, 2010; Borg, 2012; Tavakoli, 2015; Burns, 2010; Williams & Coles, 2007; Leat & Ried, 2015; Sato & Loewen, 2018; Morales, 2016). Educational research operates on the premise that integrating research into teaching practices leads to improved instruction (Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016; Tavakoli, 2015) and fosters a sense of accountability and commitment to enhancing educational practices (Morales, 2016).

Despite these benefits, there are significant challenges that can prevent teachers from fully engaging in research. Recent studies have identified several barriers, such as negative research environments in educational institutions, demanding teaching schedules, heavy workloads, and limited time (Kutlay, 2012; Ulla, 2018). Additionally, a lack of financial support (Firth, 2016; Biruk, 2013) and insufficient research training and skills (Ellis, 2016; Norasmah, 2016) further complicate research engagement.

To overcome these obstacles, experts stress the need for robust support systems, including professional development opportunities, research mentoring, and institutional frameworks that promote and reward research engagement (Ulla, 2017). Cultivating a research-oriented teaching culture enables schools and educational systems to utilize teacher-generated knowledge for continuous improvement, thereby enhancing teaching and learning quality.

Overall, the literature consistently emphasizes the importance of teacher research engagement and the necessity of understanding the factors influencing this process, especially in the context of EFL education. This study aims to add to the existing research by exploring the perspectives and challenges of research engagement among EFL teachers in Kazakhstan.

### Research methods and materials

The primary goal of this study is to explore the specific challenges rural EFL teachers face when conducting research as well as evaluate their perceptions toward research, serving as a foundation for enhancing research capacity at the district level. Specifically, it aims to address the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of rural EFL teachers towards research?
2. What are the primary challenges faced by rural EFL teachers in conducting research?
3. How do these challenges differ based on teachers' qualification categories?

The primary instrument for data collection was a Google Forms survey, which contained three parts: demographic information (4 items), views on research (13 items), and challenges in conducting research (14 items). The participants indicated their level of agreement with 5-items Likert-scale survey statements from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". The questionnaire was adapted from Romel G. Lagrio et.al. (2022) and Aksit Z. (2010).

The quantitative data analysis was conducted via SPSS version 29.0.0.0 (241). To ensure the reliability of questionnaire items, Cronbach's alpha was calculated (Table 1), demonstrating acceptable (0.712) and high (0.876) internal consistency, respectively, with the overall scale showing very high reliability (0.887).

**Table 1** – Cronbach’s alpha values

Constructs	Cronbach’s Alpha	N of Items
Views on research	.712	13
Challenges of conducting research	.876	14
Total	.887	27

## Results

The sample for this study consisted of rural EFL teachers working in villages near Almaty, Kazakhstan. The respondents were selected based on their location and profession, ensuring that the sample accurately represented the unique challenges and circumstances faced by rural educators in this region. A total of 81 teachers participated in the survey. The languages employed were English and Kazakh in order to ensure complete understanding by the participants. Participants were recruited through school networks and their participation was voluntary. All respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses to encourage candid and honest feedback.

The demographic characteristics of the sample included teachers from various qualification cat-

egories, ranging from young teachers to master teachers within the rural teaching community. As it can be seen from Table 2 below, the respondents’ age distribution shows a higher concentration in the 31-35 age range (27.2%) and the 36-40 age range (23.5%), with smaller percentages in other age brackets. The majority of the teachers are female (90.1%) compared to male (9.9%). Work experience varies, with the largest group having 1-5 years (29.6%) and a significant number with 6-10 years (24.7%). Qualifications range across several categories, with ‘moderator’ being the most common (34.6%) and ‘master teacher’ the least common (1.2%). This variety allowed for a nuanced analysis of how research competence and challenges may differ across different levels of experience and expertise.

**Table 2** – Demographic information

Demographics	Frequency	Percent	
Age	20-25	6	7.4
	26-30	11	13.6
	31-35	22	27.2
	36-40	19	23.5
	41-45	10	12.3
	46 and above	13	16.0
Gender	Male	8	9.9
	Female	73	90.1
Work experience	1-5 years	24	29.6
	6-10 years	20	24.7
	11-15 years	15	18.5
	16-20 years	9	11.1
	21 years and above	13	16.0
Qualification category	young teacher	22	27.2
	Moderator	28	34.6
	Expert	19	23.5
	research teacher	11	13.6
	master teacher	1	1.2

In order to answer RQ1, descriptive statistics was employed with calculation of means and standard deviations (Table 3). The level of agreement was defined based on the mean values

with “high” between 3.5 and 4.0; “moderate to high” between 3.0 and 3.5; “neutral” as around 3.0; “moderate disagreement” between 2.5 and 3.0:

**Table 3** – Descriptive statistics

Question items	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of agreement
Doing / reading research improves teachers' performance.	-	2.5	14.8	70.4	12.3	3.93	.608	High
Doing research is difficult for language teachers.	2.5	23.5	24.7	37	12.3	3.33	1.049	Moderate
I tend to put off research related activities due to a number of issues	2.5	11.1	30.9	45.7	9.9	3.49	.910	Moderate to High
Doing research is the job of academicians in other departments	4.9	27.2	33.3	32.1	2.5	3.00	.949	Neutral
Reading research articles is boring.	4.9	40.7	35.8	8.6	9.9	2.78	1.025	Moderate Disagreement
Doing research and teaching are not related.	3.7	33.3	29.6	29.6	3.7	2.96	.968	Neutral
Research findings do not have great importance in teaching English	7.4	38.3	28.4	21	4.9	2.78	1.025	Moderate Disagreement
I read research published on language teaching.	2.5	13.6	21	54.3	8.6	3.53	.923	High
I am not interested in doing research whatsoever.	6.2	44.4	30.9	14.8	3.7	2.65	.938	Moderate Disagreement
Research involvement (by reading or doing) helps me understand how well I do my job.	1.2	6.2	32.1	49.4	11.1	3.63	.813	High
Conducting a research project helps me to get moderator/ expert/research/master teacher qualifications.	1.2	9.9	23.5	55.6	9.9	3.63	.843	High
To teach effectively, there is no need for research.	3.7	44.4	30.9	16	4.9	2.74	.946	Moderate Disagreement
Conducting / reading research helps improve my teaching practice	-	2.5	17.3	66.7	13.6	3.91	.636	High

The survey data in Table 3 indicate that a majority (70.4%) agree that doing or reading research improves teachers' performance, with a high mean score of 3.93 and a standard deviation of 0.608. Opinions are divided on the difficulty of research for language teachers, with 37% agreeing and a mean score of 3.33 (SD = 1.049). A significant portion (45.7%) tends to procrastinate research-related activities (mean = 3.49, SD = 0.910). There is mixed agreement on the notion that research is the job of

academicians in other departments (mean = 3.00, SD = 0.949) and a notable proportion find reading research articles boring (40.7% disagree, mean = 2.78, SD = 1.025). The connection between research and teaching is also mixed, with 33.3% disagreeing that they are unrelated (mean = 2.96, SD = 0.968). Despite these challenges, many recognize the importance of research in improving teaching practices (mean = 3.91, SD = 0.636) and understanding job performance (mean = 3.63, SD = 0.813), although

interest in research is varied (mean = 2.65, SD = 0.938). Overall, the data suggest a recognition of the value of research but also highlight significant challenges and varying levels of agreement.

The Kruskal-Wallis H test was deemed fit in order to answer RQ2 and RQ3 as the data met the assumptions that are required for this type of analysis. The results are presented in Table 4 below.

**Table 4** – Kruskal-Wallis H test results for “Challenges in conducting research” items

Question items	Kruskal-Wallis H	Df	Asymp. Sig.
Lack of knowledge on how to conduct research	6.646	4	.156
I find researching time-consuming.	5.174	4	.270
Busy with my teaching practice and personal life to do research.	2.468	4	.650
I do not have much support from school to do research	4.429	4	.351
No interest in research at all.	5.048	4	.282
I am not motivated to do research.	3.527	4	.474
Low proficiency in English hinders me from doing research.	4.644	4	.326
Lack of training and seminars on how to do research.	7.580	4	.108
I don't know how to conceptualize my research	3.208	4	.524
Heavy teaching load affects the practice of research.	4.592	4	.332
Lack of knowledge on how to do statistical analysis of numerical data.	.874	4	.928
Difficulty in analyzing my qualitative data.	3.900	4	.420
Our process of proposing research is very tedious and rigorous.	1.302	4	.861
No mentor in conducting research.	3.058	4	.548
*Grouping Variable: Qualification category			

The Kruskal-Wallis H test results above show that there are no statistically significant differences among qualification categories for any of the listed barriers to conducting research. This suggests that these barriers are perceived similarly across different qualification levels. However, the barrier of “Lack of training and seminars on how to do re-

search” approaches significance, indicating it might be worth exploring further.

As we have identified that the answer to RQ3 is that there is no statistical difference in how teachers with different qualification categories perceive challenges, we delved deeper into overall perception of those challenges (Table 5).

**Table 5** – Frequencies for “Challenges in conducting research” items

Question items	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Lack of knowledge on how to conduct research	1.2	9.9	21	58	9.9	3.65	.839
I find researching time-consuming.	1.2	9.9	7.4	67.9	13.6	3.83	.834
Busy with my teaching practice and personal life to do research.	1.2	14.8	29.6	43.2	11.1	3.48	.923
I do not have much support from school to do research	4.9	24.7	25.9	35.8	8.6	3.19	1.062
No interest in research at all.	4.9	45.7	30.9	14.8	3.7	2.67	.922
I am not motivated to do research.	4.9	32.1	32.1	27.2	3.7	2.93	.972
Low proficiency in English hinders me from doing research.	6.2	53.1	24.7	9.9	6.2	2.57	.974

Continuation of the table

Question items	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Lack of training and seminars on how to do research.	2.5	23.5	24.7	42	7.4	3.28	.990
I don't know how to conceptualize my research	6.2	23.5	33.3	29.6	7.4	3.09	1.039
Heavy teaching load affects the practice of research.	3.7	12.3	22.2	54.3	7.4	3.49	.937
Lack of knowledge on how to do statistical analysis of numerical data.	2.5	17.3	34.6	40.7	4.9	3.28	.898
Difficulty in analyzing my qualitative data.	2.5	12.3	38.3	42	4.9	3.35	.854
Our process of proposing research is very tedious and rigorous.	1.2	12.3	44.4	33.3	8.6	3.36	.856
No mentor in conducting research.	1.2	19.8	21	51.9	6.2	3.42	.920

The data from Table 5 above indicate varying levels of agreement regarding barriers to conducting research. The highest level of agreement is for the items "I find researching time-consuming" (mean = 3.83, SD = 0.834) and "Lack of knowledge on how to conduct research" (mean = 3.65, SD = 0.839), both showing a high level of agreement. Other significant barriers include being "Busy with my teaching practice and personal life to do research" (mean = 3.48, SD = 0.923) and "Heavy teaching load affects the practice of research" (mean = 3.49, SD = 0.937), indicating moderate to high agreement. Moderate agreement is noted for "Lack of training and seminars on how to do research" (mean = 3.28, SD = 0.990), "Lack of knowledge on how to do statistical analysis of numerical data" (mean = 3.28, SD = 0.898), and "Difficulty in analyzing my qualitative data" (mean = 3.35, SD = 0.854). Conversely, the items "Low proficiency in English hinders me from doing research" (mean = 2.57, SD = 0.974) and "No interest in research at all" (mean = 2.67, SD = 0.922) show a low level of agreement. The levels of agreement are generally high for knowledge and workload-related barriers, moderate for support and training, and low for motivation and interest issues.

## Discussion

The findings from this study revealed varied perceptions among rural EFL teachers towards research. Overall, a significant majority of participants agreed that engaging in or reading research can enhance their teaching performance, indicating a positive outlook on the potential benefits of research in educational practice. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the role of research in professional

development and instructional improvement. The respondents had a positive attitude toward doing research and its benefits in their teaching (Ulla, 2017). Moreover, the teachers noted that research allows them to better understand their students' needs and tailor their lessons accordingly, leading to enhanced quality of instruction. This finding echoes studies demonstrating the link between teacher-led inquiry and improvements in teaching practices and student learning outcomes (Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016; Borg, 2010). By using research to diagnose problems and test innovative solutions, teachers can make more informed decisions to optimize their pedagogical approaches.

However, the perception that research is challenging for language teachers was also notable, with a considerable proportion agreeing with this statement. This suggests that while teachers recognize the benefits, they also acknowledge substantial barriers to engaging in research activities.

The survey identified several primary challenges faced by rural EFL teachers when conducting research. The most significant barriers included the perception of research as time-consuming and lacking sufficient knowledge on how to conduct research. These findings underscore the practical difficulties teachers encounter in integrating research into their already demanding professional and personal lives. According to Ulla et al. (2017) and Morales (2016), teachers are unable to do research due to time limitations caused by their heavy teaching schedules. The issue aligns with the conclusions of Firth (2016), who found that teachers' heavy teaching responsibilities hinder their ability to engage in research activities. Ellis & Loughland (2016) further argue that teachers are limited in doing high-quality

research due to time constraints and obligations associated with classroom teaching and other responsibilities. Additionally, Ulla et al. (2017) discovered that teachers face obstacles such as a lack of research knowledge, insufficient training and seminars, and time-consuming tasks. Hence, it is essential to provide research trainings and seminars to all these teachers, enabling them to obtain the essential knowledge and develop the abilities required for doing research.

The study examined how challenges in conducting research differed across qualification categories of rural EFL teachers. Surprisingly, the Kruskal-Wallis H test did not reveal statistically significant differences among qualification levels for most barriers. This indicates that challenges such as lack of research knowledge, time constraints, and institutional support are uniformly perceived across different levels of teaching experience and expertise. However, the item related to training and seminars on research approached significance, suggesting a trend that more experienced teachers may perceive a greater need for advanced training in research methodologies.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study have several implications for policy and practice in rural EFL education. Firstly, there is a clear need for targeted professional development programs that address the spe-

cific research training needs of rural EFL teachers. Such programs should be accessible, practical, and tailored to the contextual realities of rural teaching environments. Secondly, educational institutions should consider implementing supportive policies that facilitate teachers' involvement in research, including providing resources, mentorship, and recognition for research activities. Finally, fostering a culture that values research as integral to professional growth and instructional improvement is crucial for overcoming the perceived barriers and enhancing research engagement among rural EFL educators.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The sample size was restricted to a specific geographic region, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other rural contexts. Future research could expand the scope to include broader geographical areas and diverse educational settings to validate further these findings. Additionally, qualitative approaches could provide deeper insights into the lived experiences and motivations of rural EFL teachers regarding research engagement.

In conclusion, while rural EFL teachers recognize the potential benefits of research, they face significant challenges that hinder their active participation. Addressing these challenges through targeted support and policy interventions is essential for promoting a research-informed teaching practice and enhancing educational outcomes in rural communities

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