

Defining 'teacher research' for teachers

BERA Research making a difference in
the classroom: BERA Teacher Conference

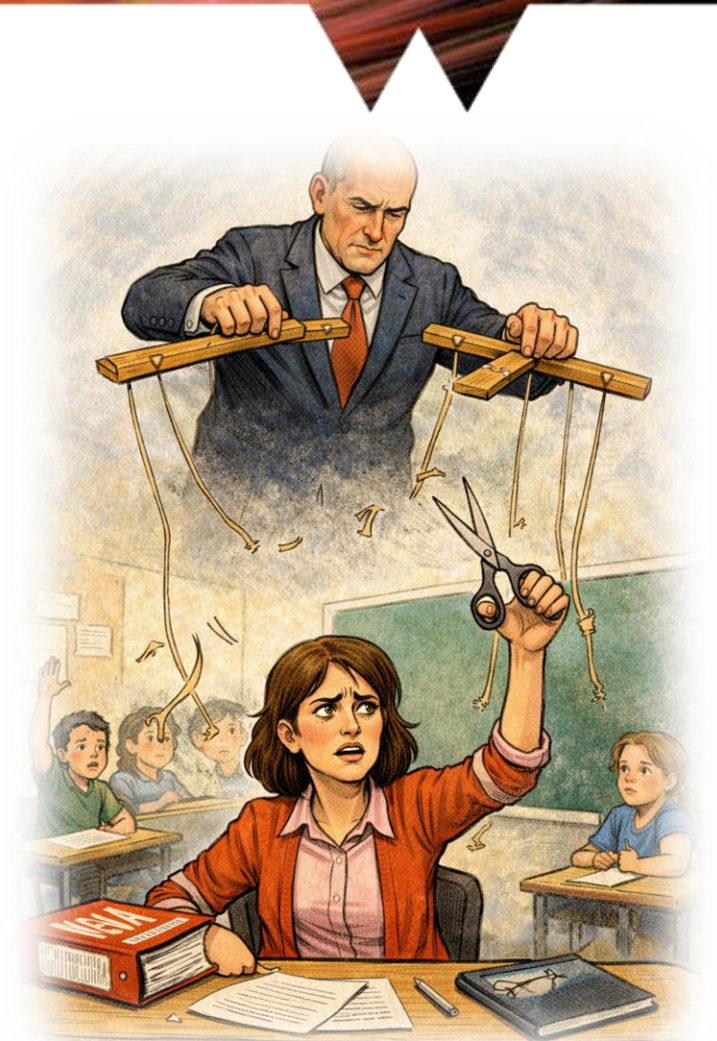
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25 April 2026, London, UK



slides



WARWICK

APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Defining 'teacher research' for ourselves

Preferred name
for workshop!



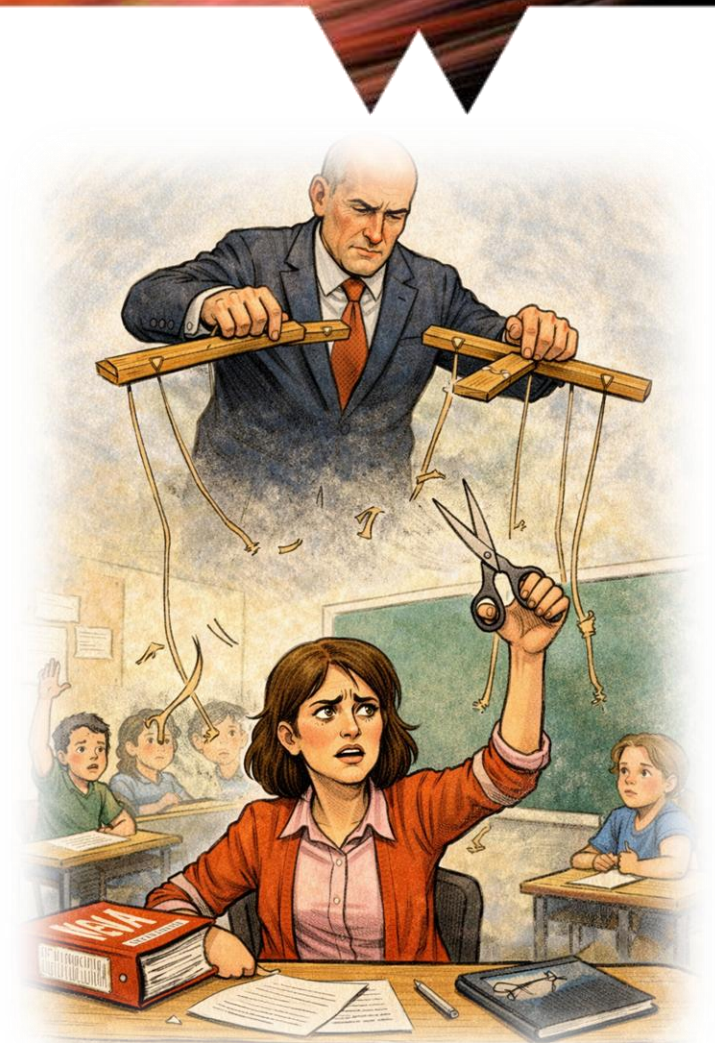
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Example academic definition of teacher research

...systematic inquiry, qualitative and/or quantitative, conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts, individually or collaboratively (with other teachers and/or external collaborators), and which aims to enhance teachers' understandings of some aspect of their work, is made public, has the potential to contribute to better quality teaching and learning in individual classrooms and which may also inform institutional improvement and educational policy more broadly.

(Borg, 2010, p. 395; repeated in Borg, 2013, p. 10)

Example academic definition of teacher research ... concerns?

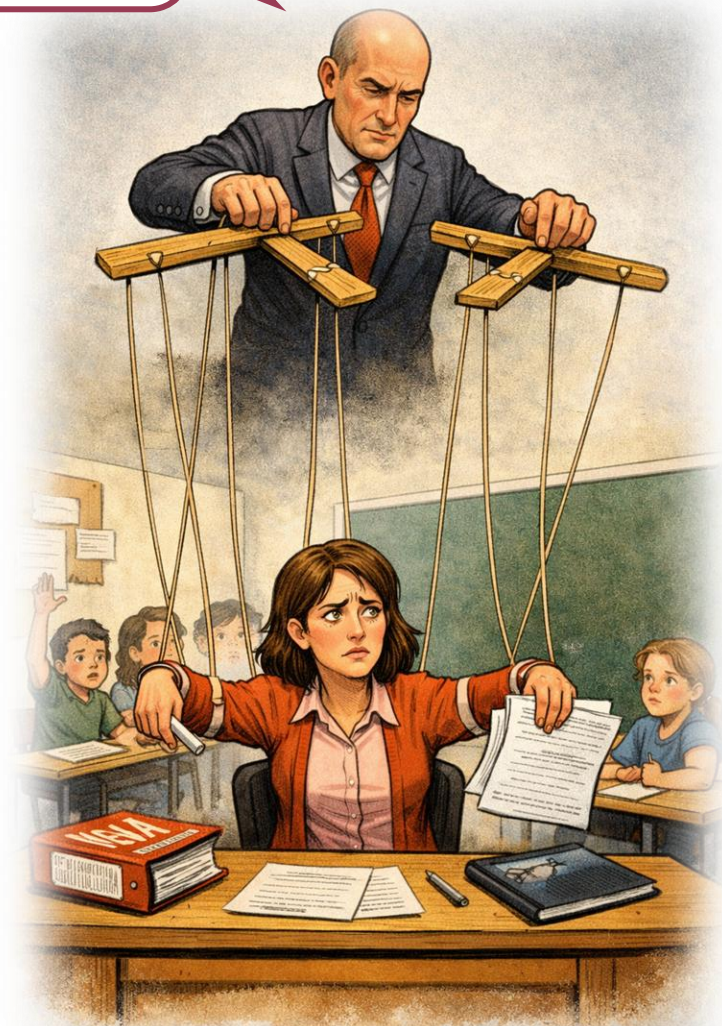
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(Borg, 2010, p. 395; repeated in Borg, 2013, p. 10)

Why teachers might want to avoid/be critical of academics' definitions

- teacher research is promoted as a vehicle to self-sustainable professional competence
- i.e. independence from (academic) 'received knowledge' of how to teach
- BUT... if academics 'shape' what research is for us, one type of received knowledge is replaced with another
- They remain the experts, mentors, 'editors'
- *But does it really make any difference?*
- *Do definitions really differ that much?*

This is how you should ~~teach~~ do research



What defining research for ourselves can (potentially) do

We (can) take control of

what counts as research
what matters (to us)
how we think about research
how we do research
who we research with and for
what happens to what we learn (~~“findings”~~ learnings)
the agenda(s) for what gets researched and, ultimately,
why we do research

Hang on a sec!!!

- My ~~positionality~~
- Teacher, teacher educator and materials writer for 25 years (1995-2020ish)
- PhD completed 2021, first ‘academic’ position 2022
- Technically speaking, I have been an ‘academic’ for 13% of my career (and ‘teacher’ for 87%)
- But I’m feeling “the challenge of distance from the classroom”*
- **Stay sceptical!**



*Anderson, J. (2024) Empathetic observation [Blog post]

<https://jasonanderson.blog/2024/04/24/empathetic-observation/>



Accepted (?) types of (language) teacher research

action research	Involves the systematic introduction and observation of an innovation or change in the classroom, through a four-stage model of planning, doing, observing and reflecting.
exploratory practice	Involves the teacher working with their learners to investigate a puzzle of some sort through classroom activities, with an aim to achieve increased understanding and improved quality of life for all in the classroom.
lesson study	Involves a group of teachers working to develop and improve a lesson or curriculum component through cycles of collaborative planning, teaching (with peer observation) analysis and reflection.
auto-ethnography/ narrative inquiry	Involve longitudinal or retrospective personal inquiry into their own experiences through the use of journaling, storytelling, visualization and critical interpretation to increase understanding of their context, community, practices and identity.
reflective practice	Involves the teacher systematically examining (aspects of) their own practice critically. It is often mediated by reflective writing or dialogic reflection with a peer.
evaluative research	Research in which teachers evaluate methods, materials or course changes. It may make use of learner surveys and interviews, observations of learner engagement, formative and summative assessment to determine the efficacy of the focus of evaluation. It varies in its degree of formality and systematicity.

↖
← Generally accepted (by academics)

← New kid on the block

← Debated: Is it research?

← Borg (2013) described and then rejected
← Anderson (2026) reclaimed and expanded upon

Anderson, J. (2026). Teacher Research. In H. Nesi & P. Milin (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 3rd Edition. Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-323-95504-1.00082-X>

Neglected (?) types of teacher research

1. Needs analysis (or Peer needs analysis; Anderson, 2017) and subsequent course planning
2. Assessment for (teacher) learning (e.g., adapting teaching based on analysis of test results, end-of-lesson assessment, etc.)
3. Self-observation (e.g. audio recording, listening and reflecting)
4. Trying out something you've read about (cf. Petty's 'supported experiment' 2006; 'evaluative research')
5. Reviewing (others') research (personal research synthesis)
6. Peer-mediated problem solving (reflective practice?)

- Others?

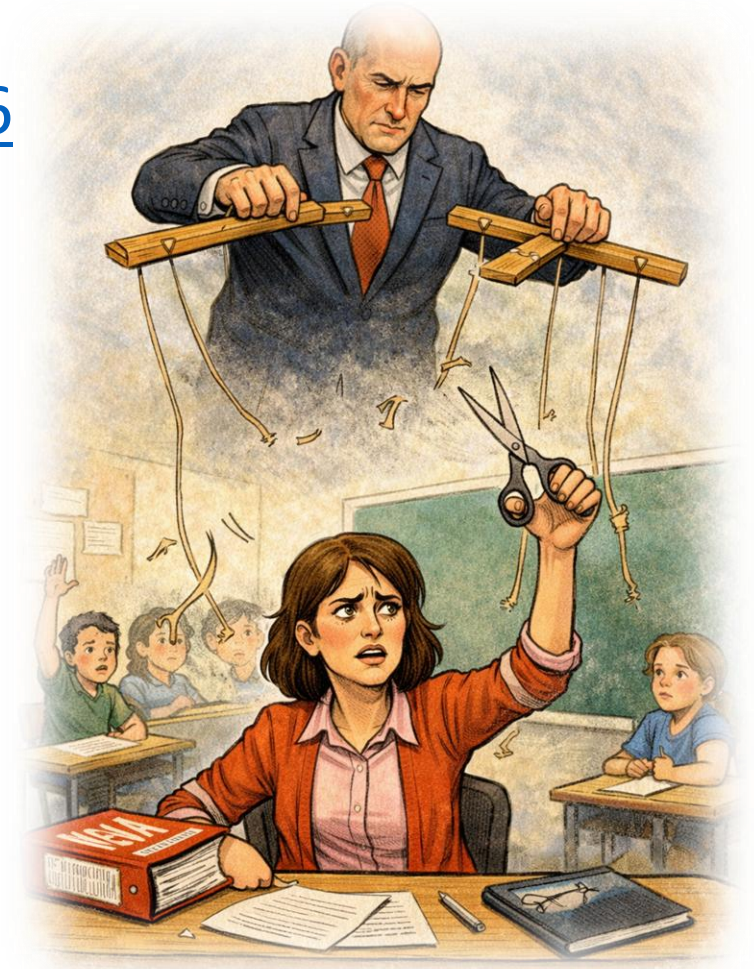
Anderson, J. (2017). Peer needs analysis. *English Teaching Professional*, 113, 49-51. [\(click here\)](#)

Petty, G. (2006). *Evidence-based teaching: A practical approach*. Nelson Thornes.

Strategy for (re)defining (research)

We have just used this procedure at the [IATEFL 2026 Conference](#)

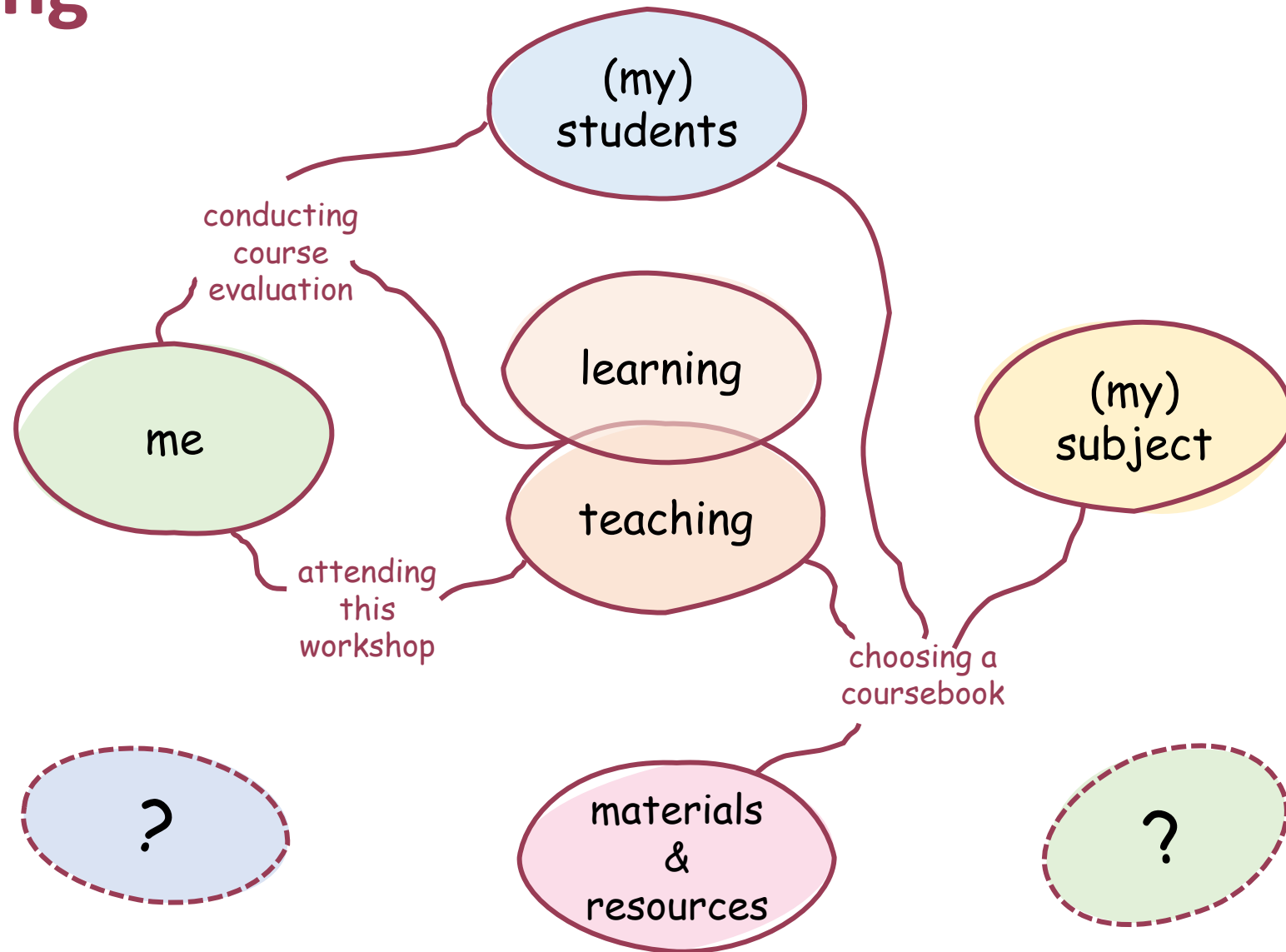
1. Stepping back from 'received' understandings
2. Considering alternative perspectives
3. Centralising *my* practice
4. Exploring inclusive definitions
5. Comparing definitions
6. Reflecting on the utility of the exercise



Activity 3. Centralising my practice

- Create a '*personal research diagram*' that includes all the things you might '*research*'
- Add things that you feel are research to your diagram
- Example on next slide... (?)

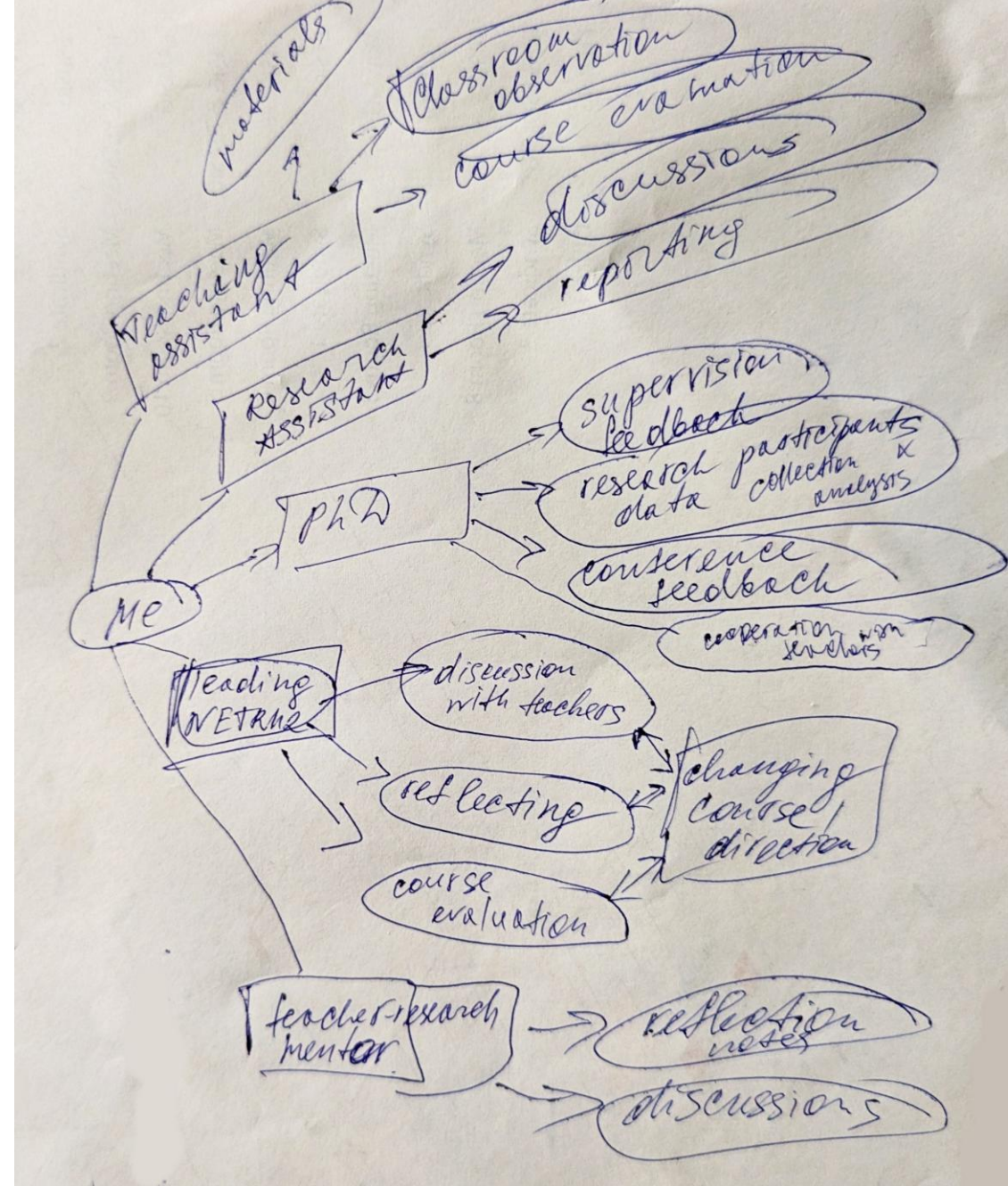
A personal research diagram



Activity 3. Centralising my practice

- Create a '**personal research diagram**' that includes all the things you might '**research**'
- Add things that you feel are research to your diagram

A real personal research diagram (used with permission)



Defining teacher research for ourselves

Some of the definitions

Post thoughts here...

Feel free to post definitions, thoughts, etc. You can also comment and 'like' posts.

+ Add comment

Exploratory research

To identify an issue, establish questions about what you don't understand, get ata to answer them, analyse and answer

+ Add comment

Definition of Research

It is trying to find out answers to questions that are of concern for us in order to help us come with the "better" decisions for us and for our students - Trying to help myself and help others mainly the learners

Cambridge Dictionary Definition: Detailed study of a subject especially in order to discover new information about something or reach a new understanding of it.

The dictionary definition emphasized that it is "detailed study" to discover new information or a better understanding but not why we basically do all of this, i.e. come up with decisions that serve ours and our students' needs.

+ Add comment

Research in Spanish is 'investigación'

It's interesting that investigation includes the word 'invest'. In my experience, teacher researchers are invested in their teaching, in their students and in improving their practice and learner outcomes (The middlings)

+ Add comment

To experiment

Identify a problem
Turn it into a question
Collect feedback
Reflect on the impact
Share your learning

+ Add comment

The Intercontinentals

Teachers' becoming aware of and understanding what happens in their practice and thinking (and, controversially, acting on it and disseminating it).

+ Add comment

Thoughts about teacher research

Informed decision-making; Activities that allow me to explore myself, my beliefs, my experiences, my actions, etc. and answer the questions/inquiries I have

+ Add comment

The cocktails

Activities that lead to enhance the quality of what I am doing by exploring myself, my actions, beliefs and related experiences to keep me informed by my new learnings. (Seden)
Activities that allow the teachers to explore themselves and make informed decisions (Elya)

+ Add comment

Defining research

Investigating the answers to the questions on how to improve our practices and our students' learning process (observing, curiosity, etc) so this investment makes the researchers empowered.

+ Add comment

My teacher research

Activities that lead to enhance the quality of what I am doing by exploring myself, my actions, beliefs and related experiences to keep me informed by my new learnings.

+ Add comment



Note: Groups sometimes also included their names ('the cocktails' etc.)

+ Post

An inclusive definition (?) and one tool of use

...we understand teacher research as inquiry carried out wholly or primarily by teachers into issues of importance to them in their own work. (Anderson & Smith, 2026)

Teacher research continua (from Anderson & Smith, 2026)

Aspect	Researching -in-practice	↔	Research- on-practice	Key question	
Control	Self-directed	↔	Collaborative	↔	Other-directed • Who decides?
Purpose	Practical	↔			Theoretical • What for?
Audience	Private	↔	Local	↔	Global • Who for?
Formality	Informal	↔			Formal • How systematic?

Example of a personal research activity

“A teacher (head of the EFL department) begins research in response to an immediate and pressing practical challenge such as the switch to teaching online that occurred during the first COVID-19 lockdown. Let us imagine that she needs to decide what additional software to use or recommend for purchase. Her intended audience is local, including only the small community of English teachers in her school. Rather than planning the inquiry carefully (there is no time for this), the teacher is reacting to the challenges of the situation organically, yet also generating informal data (e.g., diary notes) regarding what software seems to be most useful, and which strategies seem to be more effective. As such, her research is somewhat more instinctual than systematic (although both elements are present), making use of data sources opportunistically (e.g., anecdotal feedback from learners, video recordings of colleagues' online lessons) and conducting relatively rapid analysis involving reading, viewing, and reflecting on data. When she feels confident in her key findings, she makes a brief presentation to colleagues with several key observations, which they also agree with (“peer review” of a very different kind than that practiced for journal publication, after valuable “local” dissemination), followed by a recommendation to her headteacher for which software to purchase.”

From Anderson, J. & Smith, R. (2026). Teacher research in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly* (Advance online publication). <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.70114>

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