

What are the characteristics of a good ELT research paper?

Writing a good research paper is a tough challenge for most English language teachers and researchers. Editors and reviewers assess the quality of research papers based on many criteria including originality, interest, relevance, usefulness, evidence, and references.

What are the characteristics of a good ELT research paper? Richard Smith, University of Warwick, Stephen Krashen, professor emeritus at the University of Southern California, Mohan Raj, former professor at EFLU, Hyderabad, and Shreesh Chaudhary, former professor at IIT Madras, present their views on the topic.



Characteristics of a Good ELT Research Paper

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'Research' can be defined as 'original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding' (<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/teacher-development/elt-research-database>). 'ELT research' can be viewed as 'any research whose data and/or findings relate directly to the teaching, learning or assessment of

English as a Foreign, Second or Additional Language' (*ibid.*). 'Good research' can of course be defined according to questions such as the following (from a recent blog post by AchilleasKostoulas):

- Does the literature review point to a gap in the literature?
- Is this gap worth investigating?
- Do the research questions correspond to the gap identified?
- Are the methods / sample appropriate for the questions posed?
- What are the strengths and limitations of the methods used?
- Is it clear how the data were generated using these methods?
- So what? Now what?

However, in this short piece I'd like to reflect primarily on what makes a 'good research

paper', not just on what makes 'good research'. For this, I think we need to revisit the notions of 'originality' and 'relevance' in the above definitions of 'research' and 'ELT research', respectively, and introduce a third term – namely, 'interest value'.

Firstly, it is of course important that the investigation should be 'original' in the sense of having been carried out by the named author(s) and not copied from somewhere else. On the other hand, it is possible – and often useful – for a research paper to summarise others' research in an original way, or to replicate research procedures carried out by others in a different context. When it comes to teacher-research (where the gap to be filled comes from an issue in the practitioner's experience rather than from the literature), or in the absence of good access to journals, the originality of a piece of research can't necessarily be established by reference to a wide array of previous studies. However, the *interest value* of a research report (involving creation of an *impression* of originality) can be established through provision of a full and rich description of context – the specific setting in which the research is being carried out or which it is intended to address. These days, there is broad recognition both that research findings are rarely universal in relevance, that is, cannot be divorced from the context in which they arise, and that, in previous research, ELT settings in the Global South have been neglected. Hence, ELT research reports which bring alive and attempt to address real issues confronting teachers in India have potentially very

strong and wide interest value, internationally as well as within India, even when they reproduce, replicate or fail to mention many previous research studies.

This brings me to the issue of relevance, and, here again, I think 'interest value' can be seen as an important superseding factor for a 'good' ELT research paper. After all, ultimately, only practitioner-readers can say whether the data / findings presented in a report 'relate directly' to their practice. However, it's unfortunately well known, firstly, that teachers rarely read journal articles even when they do have access to them and, secondly, that many research articles are written in an off-putting, academic style which discourages possible engagement by teachers. This means, then, that writers should try very hard to attract and keep the reader's attention. Again, if you can write interestingly about a local issue, describing your context fully and explaining why the issue is important, then this is likely to catch the interest of teachers elsewhere, including internationally. Finally, if you want practitioners to see your article as relevant, spell out the practical implications of your research quite clearly, and write in a style they can understand.

Note: some good examples of research papers have been published recently by the British Council in its *Explorations: Teaching and Learning English in India* (<https://www.britishcouncil.in/programmes/english-partnerships/research-policy-dialogues/eltrep-papers>) series.