

Shaping the reality of foreign language teachers' research literacies

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Abstract

Despite benefits ascribed to teacher research, data indicates that most educators do not engage in research-related activities following their formal training. Consequently, opportunities for professional development, innovative pedagogy, and reflective practice are hampered. While qualitative and quantitative analyses indicate that this lack of participation can best be explained by multifactorial models, initiatives to address these obstacles tend to focus on only a few of the underlying issues. "ReaLiTea: Research Literacy of Teachers" is designed to address multiple dimensions of second, additional, and foreign language teachers' attitudes and skills, and identify opportunities related to research activities. Drawing on the global nature of language learning and teaching, as well as on digitally mediated affordances for language teaching and pedagogies, ReaLiTea seeks to improve access to relevant research and knowledge practices. By connecting skill development and opportunities for engagement, the project strives to enhance teachers' ability and willingness to participate in such practices. This contribution discusses the rationale for the project as well as actions to support emerging and practicing foreign language teachers' research literacies. We describe the work we are doing to identify requisite linguistic competences and skills, scaffold access to relevant empirical findings, and develop spaces for the ongoing exchange of ideas and knowledge.

Keywords: *teacher research; research literacies framework; digital affordances; reflective practice; foreign language teachers.*

1. Introduction

Second, additional, and foreign language teaching, always a complex undertaking, faces new questions in light of rapid sociotechnological changes that shape how communication takes place, with whom, and for what purposes. Although technological developments are bound to specific times, addressing innovation in language education requires habits of mind that can be fostered by teacher-led inquiry (van Katwijk et al., 2023). Yet evidence suggests that not many in-service teachers regularly engage with research-related practices. Attitudinal, structural, and

competence-related barriers might account, at least in part, for such discrepancies (Borg, 2013). It is important, then, to address teachers' beliefs and identities as well as their skills and competences regarding research-related activities. This is the goal of the ReaLiTea (Research Literacy of Teachers) project, an ERASMUS+ higher education initiative (www.realtiea.info). It is designed to address second, additional, and foreign (SAF) language teachers' beliefs, skills, and competences regarding research-related teaching and learning, and to create opportunities for these knowledge practices to be enacted. Drawing on the global nature of language education as well as on digitally mediated affordances for professional language learning pedagogies, ReaLiTea seeks to improve both physical and metaphysical access to relevant knowledge practices. By connecting skill development and opportunities for engagement, the project strives to enhance teachers' interest in such activities and the ability to carry them out.

This preproject report discusses the impetus for ReaLiTea by examining the state of SAF language teacher research – how it is conceptualized in theory and how it is received in practice. The rationale for focusing on SAF language learning professionals will be addressed before the interlocking initiatives to foster and support an international teacher-research community are described. Measures designed to systematize conceptualizations of SAF language teacher research literacies, efforts to scaffold access to relevant empirical findings, and sustainable platforms to facilitate a sustainable exchange of ideas will be discussed. Future plans to empirically evaluate the efficacy of these activities are briefly addressed.

2. Thinking about teacher research literacies

2.1. Defining teacher research and research literacies

Teachers' research literacies have been variously labeled and defined, leading to a multitude of overlapping constructs and a lack of definitional clarity. Most broadly, as Kostoulas (2023, n.p.) describes it, teacher research refers to “an inquisitive attitude, an ability for structured engagement with information, and a desire to create new knowledge,” which are

qualities that are core to teaching as much as they are to research. Teachers are constantly confronted with problems that require well-argued answers, and a great part of our job when we teach involves observing our students, trying to understand their behaviour and trying to predict the outcomes of our, and their, actions.

Teacher researchers are those who, in embracing these qualities, enact research literacies. The notion of literacies, in the plural, encompasses the attitudinal beliefs and the practices that comprise teacher research. Teacher research thus includes the requisite skills of searching, selection, analysis, and evaluation of empirical information, as well as research communication competences. Such research incorporates various related forms of practitioner inquiry, such as action research, exploratory practice, lesson study, and reflective practice (Burns & Dikilitaş, 2025). Inherent in all of these activities is an expansive notion of data, the use of evidence to inform practice, rigorous analysis, and a strong reflective component. A literacies approach also incorporates a critical dimension, with acute situational awareness and an ethics-driven commitment to improving practice, which is essential given the close relationship between languaging and power (Fairclough, 2015).

2.2. Affordances of research literacies in SAF language teaching

Even though the situated nature of teacher research practices makes it challenging to empirically evaluate the benefits, there is evidence that engaging with existing knowledge and producing new insights can have significant positive effects on SAF language teachers and teaching. Improved self-efficacy beliefs, content knowledge, pedagogy, reflection, and receptivity towards research are among the positive outcomes identified in a systematic review focusing specifically on action research (Edwards, 2021). More generally, research-aligned behaviors play a role in transforming declarative knowledge about language learning and teaching into actionable knowledge, ‘bridging’ perceived gaps between theory and practice (McKinley, 2019). Overall, engaging in research-related

activities fosters a reflective and analytical perspective on teaching, leading to deeper professional awareness and learning.

The beneficial influence of teacher research on SAF language teacher identities has also garnered significant attention (Burns & Edwards, 2025). Participating in research-related practices contributes to the development of reflective teacher selves (Dikilitaş & Comoğlu, 2022), who, among other things, experience a sense of autonomy and are receptive to change (Banegas et al., 2013). Research with preservice English language teachers also provides evidence of changes in emergent teacher identities, including more receptivity towards research findings and research-related practices (García, accepted), with teachers coming to identify themselves as “knowledge generators” (Borg, 2017, p. 128). Similarly, van Katwijk et al. (2023) describe SAFLT research as a way to “future-proof teachers” (p. 435), since it fosters attitudes and practices of ongoing professionalization.

The role of teacher research might be especially valuable for SAF language teachers, and conceptually well aligned with their professional role. Language educators, who by virtue of their training are expected to be receptive to alternative perspectives, arguably have both a propensity for and additional experience with confronting their pre-existing beliefs in light of other ways of being, seeing, and doing. Among the qualities inherent in intercultural communication, an integral part of language education, are the ability to critically examine existing assumptions, demonstrate adaptivity, observe effectively, and connect context and behavior (Dai & Feng, 2025). Thus, many of the prerequisites necessary to be SAF language teachers align with those inherent in teacher research attitudes and practices. As Kostoulas (2023) highlights, the difference between teaching and researching is small – for SAF language teachers, it may be especially diminutive.

2.3. Obstacles to teacher research engagement

Despite the aforementioned benefits, teacher engagement in research-related activities seems low. Some salient barriers include limited time and funding and competing professional priorities (Borg, 2013). Similarly, low salaries, top-down mandates, casual contracts, job instability, inflexible or inhospitable teaching schedules, a lack of recognition, and an absence of support all appear to hinder research engagement (Li & Li, 2025).

At a fundamental level, even simply reading existing findings constitutes research engagement. However, access to relevant knowledge is frequently hindered by linguistic, conceptual, and physical barriers (Li & Li, 2025; Marsden & Kasprovicz, 2017). While many academic journals reportedly aim to connect theory and practice in language education, articles are often written by and for academic audiences, prioritizing the research interests, methods, and phraseology of the research community. As a result, teachers frequently feel that this form of professional knowledge inadequately reflects the issues they face in their classrooms (McKinley, 2019). Where teacher (further) training is not coordinated with local universities or where research in local languages is limited, gaining access to research articles can be a challenge (Li & Li, 2025).

Teachers’ beliefs about what constitutes research further limit their engagement. For many teachers, research involves large sample sizes, experiments or interventions, and statistical analyses resulting in peer-reviewed publications, rather than activities that produce more situated knowledge featuring smaller sample sizes, low generalizability, and qualitative methodologies (Borg, 2013; Kostoulas et al., 2019). Reflective practice, learner feedback, or ongoing analysis of learner data are frequently disqualified as research, because teachers argue that such activities are inherent parts of their professional practice. This definitional mismatch relativizes the amount of research teachers actually carry out and reinforces the image of research as irrelevant or inaccessible, making it harder to empower teachers to conduct practitioner research.

While these obstacles to teacher research may hinder some SAF language teachers from engaging with research, grappling with the notions of what constitutes research, and how to engage with it, is associated with the construction of a teacher-as-researcher identity. It appears that navigating such conflicts plays a crucial role in shaping the teacher-researcher identity (Mumford & Dikilitaş, 2025). The reflective competence, cognitive

flexibility, and receptivity to innovation that emerge from engagement with research in turn also equip these educators to address barriers in initiating research-related practices.

3. Fostering SAF language teacher research literacies in ReaLiTea

While no single initiative can address all the challenges related to SAF language teacher research literacies, ReaLiTea addresses these issues by simultaneously shaping beliefs, skills, and access to opportunities. By enhancing pragmatic and conceptual accessibility, we hope to foster teacher identities that recognize the value of teacher research, strengthen self-efficacy beliefs, and offer resources to facilitate ongoing professionalization. To achieve this, we draw on the affordances associated especially with SAF language teachers (see above), existing initiatives for research engagement, and prevailing models of teacher literacies. In doing so, we follow relevant recommendations about addressing beliefs and structures (e.g., Rose, 2019). More concretely, we are creating a suite of resources to foster research literacy in both pre- and in-service teachers. These include a professional development framework focusing on research literacies (Section 3.1), digital resources for the exchange of research-related knowledge, including a virtual community of practice, research summaries, and language corpora (Section 3.2), and professional development resources for classroom use and self-study (Section 3.3).

3.1. Systematizing SAF language teacher research literacies

One of the contributions of the ReaLiTea project is the creation and ongoing validation of a cohesive framework that systematically describes SAF language teacher research literacies as a multidimensional, developmental construct that spans educational and professional contexts (The ReaLiTea Project, 2025). Addressing both attitudes and skills, it is premised on a perspective of language education that combines professional knowledge, inquiry, and collaboration. This perspective also emphasizes the theoretically grounded and empirically informed nature of language education as a way to ensure that the latter remains principled and coherent even at a time of methodological post-certainty (Kostoulas, 2019). It recognizes that teacher research generates theoretical and practical insights, enriching our understanding of how languages can be taught and learned more effectively.

With this in mind, SAF language teacher research literacies are defined as a multicomponential construct consisting of five interrelated aspects (Table 1). The first of these aspects is the foundational knowledge that teachers have. One of these components is linguistic proficiency, and especially the language skills that are prerequisites for engaging with research and professional publications (see, e.g., Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency; Cummins, 2013). Another element of foundational literacy is schematic knowledge in fields such as applied linguistics, the psychology of language education, and general and discipline-specific pedagogy. All of these provide the background for research engagement to develop. This foundational component also includes knowledge practices, such as the ability to store, retrieve, and synthesize information in responsible and ethical ways in the digital age (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), and knowledge autonomy, i.e., the capacity for self-directed learning and inquiry (Burns, 2009). Developed initially through an analysis of the extant literature and via expert

Table 1. An overview of SAF language teacher research literacy (Kostoulas et al., 2025)

Research Literacies Dimensions	Domains of Research Activity
1. Foundational knowledge	Conceptual and disciplinary grounding for research engagement
2. Engaging with research	Accessing, reading, and critically evaluating existing research
3. Theorizing for practice	Developing context-sensitive insights that link theory and practice
4. Participating in research	Designing and conducting classroom-based inquiry
5. Communicating research	Sharing and disseminating knowledge within and beyond communities

validation, the framework is currently undergoing empirical testing, described more fully in Kostoulas et al., 2025. In this first study, sixteen language teacher educators from around the world assessed the validity of the structure,

with acceptable results in light of the small sample size, diversity of respondents, and absent a rating manual. After revising the framework and developing training materials for use, further validation will be conducted.

Another aspect of research literacies involves the ability to engage with the published knowledge that informs the profession (Borg, 2013). This includes the skills related to locating relevant information, a task that has become both simpler and more challenging due to the proliferation of readily accessible content. It also encompasses skills such as extracting information from publications and evaluating the relevance, authority, and credibility of such information (Jemsy, 2018).

A third dimension of SAF language teacher research literacies includes ‘theorizing for practice’. This refers to generating locally relevant insights based on reading and empirical investigation (Edge, 2011) and translating them into teaching practice. With language education moving away from ‘one-size-fits-all’ perspectives of methodological correctness (Kumaravadivelu, 2001), such theoretical insights need to be sensitive to the particularities of context. Equally essential is the development of reflexive awareness of how personal understandings of language education are shaped by individual experience, values, and priorities.

As noted previously, SAF language teacher research literacy also empowers language teachers to become active participants in shared knowledge production about language education. This involves fostering competences for engaging not only with, but also in, research (Borg, 2013). For this, teachers need the knowledge and skills associated with designing research and generating and analyzing data as they apply to classroom-based research. A thorough awareness of situated ethical considerations associated with research activity, including sensitivity to the setting, participants, power dynamics, or institutional rules, is also a crucial part of research literacy.

SAF language teacher research literacy further includes the ability to communicate research, such as the linguistic skills needed to talk and write about empirical work and the findings that it yields. These literacies encompass teachers’ abilities to participate effectively in knowledge-exchange events, selecting suitable venues for dissemination, and responding to peer review. Similar competences relate to teachers’ participation in communities of practice (Wenger, 2004), including networking skills, the capacity to create and sustain professional ties, and the habits of mind to leverage such relationships for collaborative knowledge production. Sharing expertise and knowledge with stakeholders and policymakers through appropriate outreach and interaction is likewise a dimension of SAF language teacher research literacies.

3.2. Capitalizing on digital affordances to shape SAF language teacher research literacies

Many of the aforementioned elements in the ReaLiTea Framework are informed by digital tools, skills, and practices. Digitality (Stalder, 2018) plays a key role in SAF language teachers’ research literacies, both in terms of increasingly variegated texts and communicative practices and in relation to countless research-related tools and resources. Firstly, these digitally mediated innovations are increasingly the subject or the medium for language learning. The ways in which SAF language teaching and learning change as a result are, justifiably, a topic of teachers’ inquiry-based activities (see, e.g., Burns & Kurtoğlu-Hooton, 2016). Secondly, digital resources and platforms offer new ways to engage with inquiry: Video recording and annotation, calculators for statistical analysis, and citation networks are just some technologies that facilitate engagement with research. Finally, changing patterns of interaction can be utilized for collaborative knowledge production. Communication via (asynchronous) video platforms, sheltered social media forums, and AI generate increasingly sophisticated opportunities for shared SAF language teacher learning (Arefian et al., 2024; Blume et al., 2023; Sert & Jonsson, 2025). ReaLiTea addresses and harnesses digital affordances in all of these areas to support SAFLT research literacies, as our virtual community of practice and accessible research summaries, as discussed below, illustrate.

It is especially in the area of communication and collaborative knowledge production that digital affordances intersect with SAF language teacher research literacies. ReaLiTea capitalizes on the global nature of language learning and the tradition of international language teacher communities utilizing computer-mediated communication (Hanson-Smith, 2006) to develop a virtual Community of Practice (vCoP) (see also Knight, 2020).

To that end, ReaLiTea has established a multi-perspectival, participatory, and open ('building as we go') virtual space for collaborative knowledge practices (<https://ogy.de/Realitea-network>). Extending earlier work for developing "communities of research practice" (Cameron et al. 2019, p. 69), we explore vCoPs' potential to foster practice-based research through thematic spaces, expert resources, and links to affiliated sites. Expanding on the core idea of CoP as spaces of social learning, we reject the separation of "knowledge formation processes from individual and social becoming" (Ejsing-Dunn & Pischetola, 2022, p. 799), providing a forum for researchers and teachers to find partners for inquiry, culminating in a virtual community of research practice.

Another resource stems from a partnership with OASIS (Open Accessible Summaries in Language Studies; Marsden et al., 2018), a platform that facilitates access to current research findings. OASIS (<https://www.oasis-database.org/>) provides summaries of indexed journal articles, which distill full-length research articles into one-page synopses written for educated laypersons. By addressing physical and knowledge-related barriers that hinder teachers' use of published empirical reports (McKinley, 2019), they make research reports more palatable to teachers (Borg, 2013; Rose, 2019). Early findings suggest that this approach effectively connects classroom teachers with research practices. In one survey, almost half of respondents (46%) indicated that reading a summary, or summaries, led them to implement pedagogical innovations (Alferink & Marsden, 2023). The summaries have already been widely used to support teacher research literacy, including in national professional development projects (Marsden & Hawkes, 2025) and in teacher training. The partnership with ReaLiTea offers the opportunity to embed OASIS in a comprehensive approach to SAFLT research literacy development.

Another challenge teachers face in accessing research, the lack of familiarity with the conventions of academic genres (Borg, 2013), is addressed by explicating the discursive practices of researchers. In pursuit of this objective, ReaLiTea has analyzed specific features of common research genres in English language teaching research. Two specialized corpora, focusing on writing and speaking, have been created, describing the rhetorical and linguistic conventions in research output, such as the aforementioned OASIS summaries, but also including research articles, conference abstracts, reflective reports, conference presentations, and video abstracts. All texts were chosen with a focus on quality and impact, authenticity, recency, availability, and teacher relevance. We examined these genres from two perspectives: rhetorical functions using a move-step analysis approach and linguistic features by identifying common lexical patterns. The former reflects how certain communicative purposes are commonly realized in research communication. The latter uncovers what specific phrasal patterns re-occur across multiple texts within the same genre, serving specific communicative purposes and reflecting how meaning is conventionally expressed in that genre (Ringel et al., accepted; Saricaoglu et al., under review). Together, these analyses contribute to understanding how specific rhetorical functions are typically performed through recurrent linguistic forms, offering insights into the relationship between form and function in professional writing. With this data, the language used in existing research findings becomes more accessible to teachers. Moreover, teacher-researchers are better positioned to employ genre conventions when contributing to these and similar knowledge-sharing formats.

3.3. Creating openly accessible materials to foster SAF language teacher research literacies

The aforementioned resources offer some insight into the largely untapped potential of digital affordances for fostering SAF language teacher research literacies, but the challenge to ensure meaningful uptake remains. One obstacle in the development of sustainable research literacies among language teachers is the piecemeal nature of available resources. Many materials have as their target full-time researchers rather than in-service teachers (see, e.g., McKinley & Rose, 2020), reinforcing teachers' narrow definitions of research (see Section 2.3) and obscuring the role of research literacies for professional practice. Other resources focus on action research without addressing foundational research literacies (see, e.g., Dikilitas & Bostancıoğlu, 2019). To address this lacuna, ReaLiTea has developed a series of modules in line with the research literacies framework presented in Section 3.1. While each module stands on its own, the sequence moves participants from foundational elements of research literacy to productive engagement in various knowledge practices (see Table 2).

Table 2. Overview of ReaLiTea modules for professional development

Module	Focus	Target audience
Becoming research literate	Shaping beliefs and attitudes	University students and pre-service SAFLTs
Engaging with research in practice	Research assessment and evaluation	Pre- and in-service SAFLTs
Conducting research in practice	Classroom-based research (e.g., action research); communicating research	In-service SAFLTs

Each module consists of a core unit, conceptualized as an instructor-led teaching event, and several extension units. The latter can be implemented in self-study or within formal or informal learning networks. In addition to indicating the target group for these materials (e.g., university students, pre- and in-service teachers, teacher educators), information about how each of the units correlates to specific competences within ReaLiTea Framework is provided (see Section 3.1). This allows teacher educators and interested SAF language teachers to make an informed selection of units to focus on based on their professional needs and interests. It also ensures the greatest possible flexibility; individual units might be included in existing teacher education materials or used in self-study, whereas a teacher educator might combine modules to create a comprehensive research course.

4. Conclusion: Supporting sustainable SAF language teacher research literacies

Systemic barriers have a tangible influence on teachers' research engagement. However, limited engagement also emerges in relation to how teachers define research, whether they believe research can provide solutions to actual classroom problems, as well as their self-efficacy beliefs. Finally, teachers' goals and perceptions of their professional roles also play a role. Developing research literacies thus entails the cultivation of conducive epistemological and ontological stances alongside practical measures to foster research-related practices. If research is seen as an accessible tool that helps teachers address challenges and questions relevant to their practice, such knowledge practices are more likely to become part of their role identities.

Sustainable research engagement requires a multifaceted approach. Highlighting the proximity of teachers' practices to research can emphasize how the two complement each other to improve student learning. It also underscores the democratic nature of teacher research, challenging assumptions about sources of expertise and empowering SAF language educators (Dikilitaş, in press). While it is too early to assess which of the initiatives being pursued by ReaLiTea will most effectively engage teachers in research, it is anticipated that the emphasis on both practical integration and professional habits of mind will be conducive to teacher research. Incorporating self-learning materials and resources for teacher educators, the project provides easy access to all of its elements through open access publications, local, regional, and international dissemination events, and multilingual outreach efforts.

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