

Exploring Barriers in Research Engagement of EFL Teachers in Western Chinese Universities

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Received: April 6, 2026

Accepted: May 22, 2026

Online Published: July 27, 2026

doi:10.5430/jct.v15n3p16

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v15n3p16>

Abstract

This study aims to discuss the problems with EFL teachers' research involvement in Western universities in China. The study was qualitative and a case study that involved nine EFL teachers in semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The results showed that teachers' research activities were limited by the following barriers: at the individual level, teachers suffered from decreased research efficacy, research ability bottlenecks, and physical and mental exhaustion. On a community level, the research communities were underdeveloped and provided little mentoring and collaboration. Research resources, research management dilemmas, and a lack of time for continuous research were experienced at the organizational structural level by the teachers. At the socio-cultural level, tensions between disciplinary culture and the output-oriented culture of research evaluation limited meaningful engagement. The study provides insights into the multi-level and context-sensitive nature of research engagement and provides the practical implications for the improvement of EFL teachers' research development in under-resourced higher education environments.

Keywords: Chinese EFL teachers, research engagement, barriers, Western Chinese universities

1. Introduction

Researchers employ a variety of terms to describe teachers' involvement in research activities, such as teacher research, action research, and practitioner inquiry (Alhassan & Ali, 2020). Regardless of the terminology adopted, teachers' engagement in research has long been recognized not only as a professional responsibility but also as a key driver of professional development in increasingly complex educational environments. Engaging in research equips teachers with the methodological tools and knowledge necessary to make more sensible instructions based on robust evidence, thereby contributing to the development of teaching as an evidence-informed profession (Taylor et al., 2017; Winch et al., 2015) and facilitating meaningful changes in classroom practice (Ahmed, 2015; Lei & Xu, 2022). Also, doing research helps teachers become more curious, thoughtful, and creative (Edwards, 2020). When teachers take time to look closely at their own teaching and think about what they do (Sato & Loewen, 2022), taking part in research over time can help them build a more thoughtful way of teaching and learning from their work (Leat et al., 2015). This is especially important for EFL teachers, because for them, doing research offers a key way to keep growing as teachers.

Around the world, more and more attention is being given to doing research. In China, people now also see research as a main part of a university teacher's job. To support the large population of tertiary EFL teachers, the Ministry of Education (henceforth MOE) issued the *Teaching Guide for English-Related Majors* (2020) and the *College English Teaching Guide* (2020), both of which advocate a range of measures to strengthen EFL teachers' research capacity (Xu et al., 2024; Xu, 2024; Yang & Zhang, 2021) and promote their overall professional development.

National higher education policies now give more weight to research performance. As a result, many universities have set stricter rules for how much research their teachers should produce (Lei & Qin, 2022). This puts a lot of pressure on EFL teachers. Existing studies suggest that language teachers often encounter substantial difficulties in fulfilling the role of researchers (Poole et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2023). More and more studies are looking at teachers doing research. But not much attention has been given to the real problems teachers face when they work in places

with few resources. In these areas, the school setting and working conditions can affect how teachers take part in research in their own way.

Therefore, this study looks into this issue in the context of Western Chinese universities. The study follows a group of EFL teachers working at universities in this region with few resources. It aims to find out what problems these teachers face when doing research. The results will give real-world information that helps us better understand the difficulties these teachers run into. They will also show ways to better support EFL teachers with their research work in Western Chinese universities.

2. Literature Review

Teacher research is seen as teachers doing careful and serious study into their own work (Borg, 2009). It often means a way for teachers to look into things they care about and then use what they find to plan and teach later. In this view, teacher research is often seen as the same as kinds of research done by teachers themselves, like action research or exploratory practice. But these ideas may not cover all the kinds of research work that university teachers are asked to do in higher education systems that focus a lot on research.

Xu (2014) says that from the angle of teacher development, foreign language teachers' research should not be limited to action research or studies that are only about teaching. It should also include academic research that is done in their own subject area. Similarly, Gu (2016) conceptualizes university foreign language teachers' research as part of a broader "research life" system, which includes activities at both the individual and institutional levels, such as academic papers and monographs' writing and publication, research projects application, academic degrees' advancement, and professional titles evaluation.

Based on these ideas, this study takes a broader view of what counts as research engagement for university EFL teachers. Specifically, it sees their research engagement as covering many kinds of research-related work they do throughout their careers. This includes reading academic papers, applying for research projects, writing and publishing articles, looking into teaching-related questions, writing books, and taking part in activities tied to professional evaluation systems. With this definition, we can get a fuller picture of how university EFL teachers in Western China take part in research.

Although research engagement has been widely recognized as a significant path for teachers' professional growth, teachers often encounter multifarious obstacles that constrain their research engagement. Teachers' challenges in research engagement have been widely recognized as multifaceted and embedded in institutional contexts. These challenges arise from various sources, including teachers themselves, communities and collegial networks, institutional arrangements, as well as academic culture and evaluation systems (Pham et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2023).

Challenges related to teachers themselves involve issues such as research competence, psychological well-being, research identity, and self-efficacy. Among these factors, insufficient research competence has been frequently identified as a major challenge for teachers' engagement in research. Kyaw (2021), for example, reported that the lack of adequate research skillsets constrained Myanmar teacher educators' research engagement during the teacher education institutions' reformation. Similarly, Deiniatur and Cahyono (2024) noted that time management ability is crucial for Indonesian novice teachers to use digital tools to prepare for the publication of research articles. In addition, Ren and Zhou (2023) found that insufficient research abilities can easily lead to demotivation among college EFL teachers in engaging with research activities.

Some studies have highlighted the influence of psychological well-being on teachers' research engagement. For instance, Myanmar teacher educators were reported to have low confidence in conducting research (Kyaw, 2021). Similarly, EFL teachers in Libya have been found to demonstrate low motivation towards engaging in research activities (Jamoom & Al-Omrani, 2021). Chinese EFL teachers have also been reported to display negative emotions and attitudes toward research engagement (Ren & Zhou, 2023).

In addition, a limited number of studies have suggested that research identity and self-efficacy may also shape teachers' research engagement. For example, Pham et al. (2023) found that feelings of shame and diffidence arose in Vietnamese female language teachers' internal struggles, constraining their engagement in research. Likewise, attitudinal resistance has been identified as an obstacle to foreign language teacher educators' research engagement (Yan et al., 2023).

Challenges related to communities and collegial networks are often manifested in the limited availability of research networks and collaboration opportunities. Chinese EFL teachers have reported unsupportive research environments

(Ren & Zhou, 2023) and have also indicated a lack of research guidance from experts as well as insufficient collaboration with colleagues.

Challenges emerging from institutional arrangements often involve insufficient research resources, rigid administrative management, and time constraints. Numerous studies have highlighted the scarcity of resources as a major barrier to teachers' research engagement. Teachers in the Philippines, for example, report insufficient financial support from their institutions to conduct research (Ulla et al., 2017). Similar constraints in institutional funding have also been identified among EFL teachers in various contexts, including Turkey, the Philippines, Chile, and China (Sakarkaya & Bumen, 2022; Sato & Loewen, 2018; Shehadeh et al., 2009; Tarrayo et al., 2021). In addition to financial limitations, limited access to reference materials and research facilities has also been reported as a significant obstacle for teachers' research practice in multifarious contexts (Ren & Zhou, 2023; Sato & Loewen, 2018).

Several studies have also highlighted the impact of rigid administrative management on teachers' research engagement. In several contexts, EFL teachers encounter unfavourable research policies that significantly constrain their engagement in research activities (Tarrayo et al., 2021). Similarly, Chinese tertiary EFL teachers have identified the managerialist approach in higher education and research management problems as major institutional barriers to their research engagement (Ren & Zhou, 2023; Yan et al., 2023).

Numerous studies have identified time constraints as one of the most significant obstacles within institutional contexts. One issue is that teachers in different countries often have very little time to do research because they have a lot of teaching work (Ulla et al., 2017). Another issue is that, on top of their work duties, female language teachers often find it hard to balance doing research with their family responsibilities (Pham et al., 2023). Also, some EFL teachers say they do not have enough time to look for research materials, read academic papers, or go to research-related conferences (Sato & Loewen, 2018).

The academic culture can also make it hard for teachers to do research. For example, the way teachers and students relate to each other when there is a clear hierarchy can get in the way of collecting data. Take some Chinese EFL teachers. They feel that students may not want to take part in research activities led by their teachers (Shehadeh et al., 2009).

Looking back at what has been discussed over the past decades, scholars have paid more and more attention to the difficulties teachers face. This work has given us useful knowledge about the many things that affect whether teachers do research. But studies that look closely at the problems EFL teachers run into are still not many, even though this matters for understanding how they grow in their work. Existing studies (e.g., Poole et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2023) have primarily focused on the research dilemmas of tertiary EFL teachers in economically developed contexts. Consequently, the research challenges encountered by EFL teachers in under-resourced regions are relatively under-explored. Therefore, investigating these contexts is beneficial for gaining a comprehensive apprehension of the structural and contextual barriers that may constrain teachers' research engagement.

New findings also indicate that individual and contextual factors influence EFL teachers' research involvement. Borg and Liu (2013) conducted a Chinese study and discovered that institutional cultures were closely linked to the extent of college English teacher engagement in research, as were promotion requirements and college English teacher conceptions about research. The same conclusions have been drawn in more recent research. Li and Xu (2024) found that institutional support and research mentorship are crucial to enhancing teachers' research capacities, confidence, and engagement within their study of Chinese university EFL teachers. Besides, Ni (2024) found that Appraisal Policy Reform had a significant impact on College English teachers' research activities in a regional university in China, as did "Research culture". Outside of China, Heng et al. (2024) also reported the problems of time shortage, lack of research knowledge, lack of funding, and limited institutional support to Cambodian university EFL teachers, while Mukhatova et al. (2024) found similar issues with rural EFL teachers. These studies indicate that the process of research engagement should be viewed as a process of situative construction, which is a product of the interplay of teachers' capacities and institutional support and evaluation cultures.

However, there is still scope for further research into existing studies. First, the current knowledge about EFL teachers in Western Chinese universities is limited, and research barriers might be exacerbated by the regional differences in the resources. Second, previous studies focus on motivation, competence, or institutional support/policy pressure in isolation, and little attention is paid to the interaction between the barriers at different levels in teachers' daily research activities. This study aims to fill in the lacuna by investigating the difficulties that tertiary EFL teachers face in Western Chinese universities, where the resources are limited, by using a qualitative case study approach.

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges encountered by tertiary EFL teachers in research engagement at under-resourced Western regions of China. Accordingly, this case study aimed to unravel the puzzle by examining one research question: 1) What challenges do tertiary EFL teachers encounter in research engagement in Western Chinese universities? Through the implementation of this study, the existing literature on tertiary EFL teachers' research engagement at under-resourced contexts can be enriched to some extent. The findings are also expected to produce useful implications, informing EFL teachers and university governors as they seek to better support teachers' research engagement in under-resourced contexts.

3. Methodology

Qualitative inquiry is rooted in an interpretive epistemology, wherein researchers engage closely and continuously with participants to understand individual meaning-making of experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Such an approach lends itself particularly well to examining lived experiences, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how participants make sense of the events, processes, and structural conditions shaping their professional lives (Huberman & Miles, 2002). In light of the study's aim to investigate EFL teachers' experiences of research-related challenges, a qualitative research design was therefore adopted to generate rich, contextualized accounts of the phenomenon under investigation.

This study used a qualitative case study approach. This kind of approach helps researchers find common patterns among the people they study, while also paying attention to what makes each person's experience different (Yin, 2014). To collect information, the study used in-depth interviews with some structure, as well as documents. The participants were nine EFL teachers who worked in universities in Western China.

3.1 Research Setting and Participants

Table 1. The Participants' Profiles

Pseudonym	University types	Gender	Professional Title	Educational Background	Teaching Length	Research Field
T1	provincial university A	Female	Lecturer	Master's Degree	3.5 years	English interpretation
T2	provincial university A	Female	Lecturer	Master's Degree	4.5years	Audiovisual Translation
T3	provincial university A	Female	Associate Professor	Doctoral Degree	17years	American literature
T4	provincial university A	Male	Associate Professor	Master's Degree	14years	Business English translation
T5	provincial university A	Female	Associate Professor	Doctoral Degree	16years	English teaching
T6	Local university B	Female	Lecturer	Master's Degree	14years	Linguistics
T7	Local university B	Female	Lecturer	Master's Degree	5.5years	Business English teaching
T8	Local university C	Female	Lecturer	Master's Degree	5.5years	English teaching
T9	Local university C	Female	Associate Professor	Undergraduate Degree	21years	English teaching

Guangxi Province was chosen for the research environment as it is situated in Western China, where it offers a context for exploring engagement in research in less-resourced settings of higher education. The study had been undertaken at three universities, namely UA, UB, and UC. These universities included a provincial university, two local universities, and varied in administrative status. The selection was made to highlight institutional differences in the same regional context and not for statistical representation. Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich cases with first-hand experience of research engagement. Finally, nine EFL teachers were selected who had different genders, educational backgrounds, professional titles, teaching lengths, and research fields. The sample size was deemed sufficient for a qualitative case study, as the intention was not to provide an estimate of the occurrence of research barriers in a larger population, but to provide in-depth and contextually rich accounts of the barriers to research.

3.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were employed in this study. Data was collected with ethical approval. One in-depth, semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant, ranging from 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted from December 2024 to March 2025. The interview protocol centered on teachers' experiences with research engagement, barriers to research engagement, institutional supports, research collaboration, and the connections between teaching, research, and personal life. When participants raised issues that needed clarification, probing questions were used.

The interviews were also conducted in Mandarin, the interviewees' native language, so that they could express themselves clearly and with nuance. Participants were given a brief description of the nature of the study and their right to withdraw, as well as procedures to ensure their confidentiality, before each interview. Permission was sought to audio record the interviews; written consent was obtained, and all interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. Pseudonyms were used for both participants and universities.

Documents have also been gathered to help clarify and validate interview accounts. These documents comprised teachers' publications in articles, monographs, institutional policy documents, and research management documents. The documents offered the researchers background information on participants' research experiences and facilitated comparison between participants' accounts and institutional expectations and research outputs.

Table 2. Details of Participants' Interviews and Documents

Participant Numbers	Interview Duration	Number of Documents
T1	69 min	6
T2	86min	4
T3	70min	8
T4	61min	8
T5	88min	11
T6	62min	4
T7	60min	3
T8	67min	2
T9	77min	9

3.3 Data Analysis

Recurring patterns of meanings can be identified and interpreted across a qualitative dataset when the flexible analytic method is used, which is also known as thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Being considered the most appropriate approach for the study, thematic analysis allows for an in-depth exploration of tertiary EFL teachers' barriers in research experiences at Chinese Western universities.

Interview tapes were transcribed verbatim as soon as the data were collected, which resulted in a corpus of 52,367 words. The researcher then transferred the transcripts into NVivo 14 and applied the process of thematic analysis using an inductive approach. To begin, the transcripts were read repeatedly to get to know the participants' stories. Second, the transcript segments relating to research engagement barriers were given initial codes. Third, conceptually similar codes were grouped into categories, such as research confidence, research training, mentoring,

research resources, time pressure, and evaluation rules. Fourth, a comparison of categories was made across the participants, and categories were developed into four overarching themes. Final themes were kept if they were backed up by findings from multiple cases and if they helped to answer the research question at hand. Coding was not viewed as a numbers game. Rather, the significance of a theme was assessed by using recurrence, intensity, and explanatory relevance.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through a number of procedures. Data source triangulation was first done by comparing the interview accounts with the research output of the participants and institutional documents. Second, member checking was performed by summarizing the interpretation of the interviews with the participants and asking the participants for confirmation, clarification, and/or correction. Third, the researcher cross-checked the manual coding with NVivo-assisted coding repeatedly to verify coding decisions. Fourth, the analytic decisions and revisions of themes were discussed with the transcript and documents to minimize reliance on previous assumptions, since the first author was knowledgeable about the regional context. Since the study was of an interpretive and inductive qualitative design, statistical inter-coder reliability was not calculated. Rather, the consistency was achieved by repeating the coding comparison, member checking, and triangulation.

4. Findings

Before presenting each theme, it is important to clarify how the themes were distributed across the dataset. The four levels of barriers were not treated as separate problems reported by isolated individuals. Rather, they appeared as recurrent patterns across participants' accounts, although their salience varied according to participants' institutional location, career stage, and research field. The quotations below were selected because they illustrate recurrent meanings and explanatory patterns, not because they represent numerical frequency. For this reason, the analysis focuses on how barriers were formed and how they interacted across levels, rather than on statistical distribution. Figure 1 below shows the interaction between different levels of barriers.

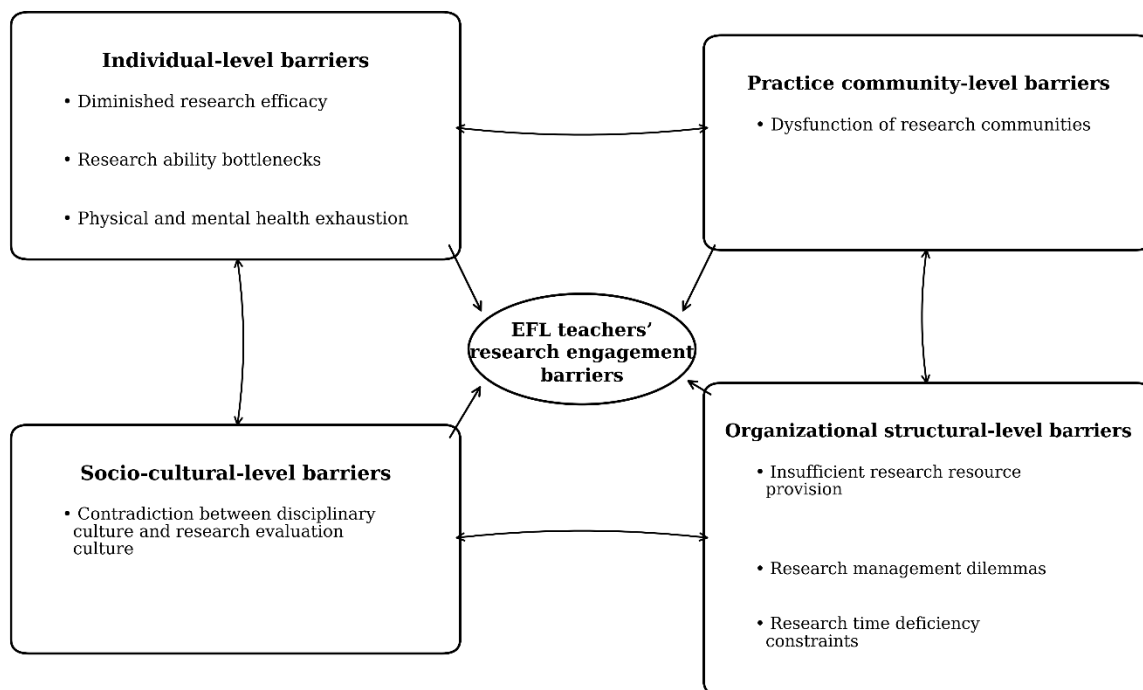


Figure 1. Multi-level Barriers to Research Engagement among EFL Teachers in Western Chinese Universities

4.1 Individual-Level Barriers

The interview data indicate that various individual-level barriers are encountered by EFL teachers when engaging in research at Western Chinese universities. Taken together, three key individual-level hindrances stood out, including diminished research efficacy, research ability bottlenecks, and physical and mental health exhaustion.

4.1.1 Diminished Research Efficacy

Many teachers constantly compare their academic output with the prescriptive standards for professional title evaluation and competitive funding applications. The constant comparison makes them worry about their weakness and uncertainty in research engagement. Except for worries about research output, some other teachers experienced diminished research efficacy, which resulted from a heavy research burden from the outside and less research autonomy.

“I haven’t even published a core article; the scores of my research projects are still not enough. Anyway, I still can’t meet the standards for promotion to associate professors this year.” (T6, interview transcript)

“Some other senior researchers or leaders often distribute a lot of research work to me. Actually, I’m not interested in any of these research activities, including writing papers or applying for research projects. I’ve always been pushed by others to do this work. Till now, I’ve never come up with any valuable research ideas. I’m being drifted away from my favourite English literature, but I cannot do anything.” (T7, interview transcript)

4.1.2 Research Ability Bottlenecks

The findings indicate that research ability bottlenecks are encountered by many EFL teachers. What often arises is EFL teachers’ lack of adequate academic background, including theoretical knowledge and research methodology. Teachers’ feelings of inadequacy become stronger as the research progress goes deeper, resulting in teachers’ less confidence in conducting research by themselves. Additionally, some other teachers had difficulties in positioning themselves in the larger academic field. Their hesitation and self-doubt showed up when encountering competitive research opportunities, such as applications for high-level research projects. Incompetence in research time organization made things even worse. The balance between teaching, research, and administrative work is a challenging job for most EFL teachers.

“I feel my incompetence as I read and write more. I only have a professional master’s degree, and I don’t get enough academic training...And I found that I couldn’t understand a lot of theoretical underpinnings in the articles” (T1, interview transcript)

“As I’m not majoring in education, I never dared to try to apply for education research projects. Actually, many worries surround me. I’m always wondering why they will grant my application if I don’t have enough professional educational knowledge or relevant published articles about education? (T2, interview transcript)

“Some good-hearted colleagues have reminded me of this problem. However, it doesn’t work. Some people may be really good at managing time well and can do many things at the same time. But I really can’t be a versatile person at work, I just cannot do it.” (T2, interview transcript)

4.1.3 Physical and Mental Health Exhaustion

The heartbreaking truth for many EFL teachers is that they feel exhausted all the time after so many years of ongoing heavy teaching loads and research responsibilities. Some extremely serious cases illustrate teachers’ severe physical and mental health problems, making an impact on their research engagement. They felt drained and burned out from time to time, making it more difficult for them to delve into complicated research activities.

“I was under immense pressure then—preparing lectures until midnight every day while also drafting grant proposals and reading references. My sleep was severely inadequate, and I was constantly irritable.” (T2, interview transcript)

“I was clearly exhausted. Logically, I should have kept working on research, but I was too tired... I just wanted to scroll through short videos to relax.” (T3, interview transcript)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that individual-level barriers were not simply personal weaknesses. Teachers’ low research efficacy, perceived methodological inadequacy, and exhaustion were formed through repeated encounters with demanding evaluation rules, scarce support, and limited recovery time. In this sense, the individual level functioned as the immediate site where broader institutional pressures were experienced by teachers as anxiety, self-doubt, and reduced capacity for sustained inquiry.

4.2 Practice Community-Level Barriers

At the practice community level, interview data reveal a range of collaboration-related challenges that English teachers at Western Chinese universities encountered in their research activities. Analysis across the cases indicates the dysfunction of research communities.

4.2.1 Dysfunction of Research Communities

A prominent concern among EFL teachers was a lack of senior scholars who could provide consistent research guidance and mentorship in the research communities. Therefore, the reality is that most early- and mid-career teachers navigate research demands largely on their own. Beyond the absence of mentorship, some teachers pointed to highly fragmented research areas within teaching-research offices, which prevented collective efforts from taking shape. In addition to these deficiencies, participants also described the absence of collaboration within the nominal research communities. Many teachers deem the research communities in their department as a castle in the air. Teachers in the research communities never cooperate or share ideas.

“We don’t have a research community in the true sense of the word. Nobody has ever helped me in research, even when I have countless questions.” (T6, interview transcript)

“Each person does their own kind of research. So even though we all work hard, we can’t build a real research group.” (T9, interview transcript)

“The college has officially set up research teams, but they don’t actually work as teams. Everyone still only works on their own research. There is no working together on research at all.” (T3, interview transcript)

These data indicate that the dysfunction of research communities resulted from the interaction between weak institutional organization and uneven research capacity among teachers. Although research teams existed formally in some departments, they did not provide regular intellectual exchange, mentoring, or shared projects. As a result, teachers had limited access to collective knowledge and often had to interpret research requirements individually. The absence of a functioning community, therefore, intensified individual uncertainty and weakened teachers’ motivation to continue research.

4.3 Organizational Structural-Level Barriers

Interview data show that English teachers at universities in Western China faced several problems that come from the level of the organization and structure. Looking across the nine cases, three main problems stood out at this level: not having enough research resources, issues with how research is managed, and not having enough time to do research.

4.3.1 Insufficient Research Resource Provision

This showed up in two ways: a lack of resources within their own universities and a lack of working together with other universities. A common issue was that institutional academic resources were hard to come by. Teachers cannot get access to worldwide mainstream research databases or funding for the research projects from the universities where they work. Additionally, they have never seen a formal research collaboration between their universities and other universities. Without this formal and official research support from other universities, it’s more difficult for teachers to build research networks with other pioneering teachers and get their support.

“It is said that our university has already bought the CNKI database. The awkward thing is that we still cannot download articles by ourselves. The research resources are so limited, not to mention the Elsevier database.” (T8, interview transcript)

“There is only one spot for provincial teaching reform projects for the whole foreign language department.... Usually, five will be sent by the whole university, but only one applicant can get the project finally.” (T6, interview transcript)

“My project was delayed by a whole year because of funding issues.” (T2, interview transcript)

“University of Science and Technology is our main school, but it has given us no support at all. We’ve never heard of any research work together between them and us.” (T6, interview transcript)

4.3.2 Research Management Dilemmas

What troubled teachers the most in doing research was unreasonable research policies. These included rules for applying for projects, standards for evaluating research, and criteria for promotion. In addition, the standards used for judging whether someone should get a promotion were often seen as not right. Teachers faced fixed requirements based on numbers, which made them feel more pressure to perform. Even worse, some promotion procedures did not

take into account that different fields of study are different. As a result, certain kinds of research work were seen as less valuable by the institution.

“The university requires each teacher to publish at least two papers every year. If you cannot publish two articles in one year, your salary will be in disaster.....The heavy stone of publishing or perishing keeps grinding us every year.” (T7, interview transcript)

“The faculty’s dean expects more applications from teachers. However, the reality is that many teachers focus more on teaching, and few teachers apply for the research projects. Hence, the dean appointed many teachers to apply for the research projects. I’m the lucky dog who has been assigned the task, because they think I should focus more on the research activities.” (T7, interview transcript)

“My major is curriculum and pedagogy, so we usually write about teachers or students. However, the personnel office deems articles related to teachers or students as non-research articles. This is a really big problem.” (T6, interview transcript)

Except for the research policies problem, there are more realistic problems that bother teachers a lot. For example, the universities’ research project reviews division focuses too much on some specific research fields, leaving little space and opportunities for scholars of other fields. Moreover, owing to the imperfection of feedback mechanisms, teachers cannot get any useful feedback after their research application was turned down. What makes things worse are the frequently changing policies for professional title evaluation. It adds difficulties for teachers’ advanced preparation for research engagement.

The research project review division expects more teachers to focus on certain research fields. If you don’t follow their appointed trend, you cannot get the research funding. No one cares about the genuine diversified flourishing of research in this university.” (T2, interview transcript)

“I tried to communicate with the research project reviews division and ask for the experts’ feedback. However, the feedback they give me is like this: ‘Expert 1: reject; Expert 2: approve; Expert 3: reject’. That’s totally equal to no feedback at all.” (T2, interview transcript)

“We can understand the changing of these policies. However, you changed these rules so often, making teachers’ preparation for the research engagement an extremely hard place.” (T9, interview transcript)

4.3.3 Research Time Deficiency Constraints

Except for these responsibilities, teachers also have to deal with the hidden students’ affairs obligations, which also take up too much of their already-squeezed research time. With all these responsibilities and obligations, engaging in more meaningful research activities becomes even harder for EFL teachers, especially for female teachers.

“As the vice dean of the foreign language department, teaching administration is my main work responsibility. But I’m still an English teacher, I still have to fulfill my teaching and research obligations, which are also parts of my individual jobs. Therefore, under the pressures of the three big mountains, I have become a spinning top woman, who craves more time every day.” (T6, interview transcript)

“The whole family depends completely on me---my children are young, my parents are elderly, and my husband is always away on official business... I become the spinning top once I get back home. I cannot stop for even one minute before I go to bed. I have no energy left for writing papers or doing research... So, I feel that for women, family responsibilities take up a huge portion of career development time.” (T9, interview transcript)

These organizational barriers help explain why many participants experienced research as an imposed obligation rather than a sustainable professional practice. Limited funding and database access narrowed the range of feasible projects, while rigid evaluation policies increased pressure to produce measurable outputs. At the same time, teaching, administrative, and family responsibilities reduced the uninterrupted time needed for reading, data analysis, and writing. Therefore, the organizational level not only restricted external resources but also reshaped teachers’ daily rhythms in ways that made deep research engagement difficult.

4.4 Socio-Cultural-Level Barriers

Interview data reveal that EFL teachers at Western Chinese universities encountered systemic constraints in their research activities at the socio-cultural level. Analysis across the nine cases identified the contradiction between disciplinary culture and research evaluation culture.

4.4.1 Contradiction Between Disciplinary Culture and Research Evaluation Culture

Teachers engaged in long-cycle research noted that their work often failed to produce immediate, measurable results. Beyond the temporal mismatch, some teachers encountered the challenge of innovation saturation in mature fields, where fundamental breakthroughs were difficult to achieve despite ongoing research efforts. Pedagogy researchers, in particular, faced the limits of methodological novelty. Teachers in classical literature studies similarly encountered constraints in identifying novel research topics within well-established paradigms.

“English translation yields result quickly and abundantly. But pedagogical research is extremely slow—even yielding nothing at times.” (T5, interview transcript)

“I don’t think pedagogy can be fundamentally innovated. At its core, all teaching methods aim to maximize learners’ exposure to language through various means... I eventually realized true innovation in teaching methodology is impossible.” (T9, interview transcript)

“I used to work on American literature... But so much has been written—it’s overdone, exhausted. Genuine innovation in American literary studies is no longer possible.” (T3, interview transcript)

This theme reveals a deeper cultural tension behind the more visible institutional pressures. In some fields, meaningful research requires long-term accumulation, slow interpretation, and familiarity with disciplinary traditions. However, short-cycle evaluation systems tend to privilege novelty, speed, and measurable outputs. Teachers, therefore, faced a contradiction between what their disciplines regarded as rigorous scholarship and what institutional evaluation systems recognized as valuable research productivity. This contradiction made research engagement particularly difficult for teachers working in mature or slow-cycle fields.

5. Discussion

The results indicate that the barriers to EFL teachers' research engagement should be viewed as an interdependent ecology, rather than independent variables. Institutional conditions such as resource constraints, inflexible assessment systems, and time constraints were among the factors that generated individual challenges like lower effectiveness and fatigue. Similarly, poor research communities were not only a matter of collegial attitude but also of inadequate institutional support and an inconsistent research experience for teachers. This multi-level relationship also suggests that single interventions – e.g., asking teachers to publish more or providing brief training sessions – will not increase research engagement if not supported by continuous mentoring, resource support, and workload changes.

On the individual level, the results align with the studies that have found limited research competence, low confidence, and negative emotions hinder the involvement of language teachers in research (Kyaw, 2021; Pham et al., 2023; Ren & Zhou, 2023; Yan et al., 2023). This study, however, also implies that such issues cannot only be understood as issues within teachers. Self-doubt was strongly linked to the number of times participants compared their research production with the institutional standards of promotion. Their exhaustion was also associated with the number of teaching, administrative, and family obligations they had. So, individual barriers can be thought of as manifestations of institutional and cultural pressures. It builds on previous research by demonstrating how structural factors are manifested in psychological and physical stresses in under-resourced Western Chinese universities.

The results corroborate previous studies on the lack of support and guidance for research and low collaboration among EFL teachers at the practice community level (Li & Xu, 2024; Ren & Zhou, 2023). Not that teachers in this study didn't have collaborators to work with was the issue in this study. Instead, some nominal research teams missed the necessary routines, joint work, and mentoring that would enable them to be considered a community of practice. This is significant because a formally structured research group does not necessarily imply the presence of an effective academic community. Regular feedback, distributed expertise, and opportunities for collaborative problem solving make a research community meaningful.

On the level of organizational structure, the results are consistent with previous studies that show that insufficient institutional support, limited funding, and time constraints are the main barriers to teacher research participation (Heng et al., 2024; Li & Xu, 2024; Sato & Loewen, 2018; Tarrayo et al., 2021; Ulla et al., 2017). The current research has the benefit of showing that these constraints function in conjunction with one another. Teachers' capacity to create viable projects is limited by limited databases and funding, while managerial evaluation policies drive the need to publish, and heavy teaching or administrative workload cuts the time that teachers have to respond to those demands. Organizational barriers, hence, are not distinct but rather cumulative. They set up a context where teachers should be productive researchers, but have no resources, time, or collaborators to be productive researchers.

The socio-cultural aspect of the study is a dimension of teacher research engagement that is seldom discussed. Past studies have explored how social relationships and hierarchy might impact data collection and participation in the research process (Shehadeh et al., 2009). Another paradox emerged from the current results: between disciplinary cultures and output-oriented evaluation cultures. Pedagogical teachers, and others in more established disciplines, saw incongruity between the incremental building of knowledge necessary to make meaningful contributions to the field and the need for novelty, and immediate measurable outcomes, of the short-cycle of the school environment. It indicates that research assessment systems might penalize certain types of EFL research if they are used similarly for the different disciplines of knowledge.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This qualitative case study, drawing on semi-structured interviews and documents, explored the research challenges encountered by nine EFL teachers in Western Chinese universities. The findings indicate that the research engagement of EFL teachers at Chinese Western universities is not impacted by single levels of challenges. On the contrary, the research engagement of EFL teachers at Chinese Western universities is constrained by challenges at four interrelated levels: individual level, practice community level, organizational structural level, and socio-cultural level. At the individual level, teachers experience research efficacy dilemmas, research capability limitations, and physical and psychological exhaustion. At the practice community level, dysfunction of research communities hinders collaborative knowledge construction. At the structural-organizational level, insufficient research resource provision, research management dilemmas, and research time deficiency constraints restrict teachers' research engagement. At the socio-cultural level, the contradiction between disciplinary culture and research evaluation culture further complicates teachers' research participation.

The results indicate that the barriers to EFL teachers' research engagement should be viewed as an interdependent ecology, rather than independent variables. Institutional conditions such as resource constraints, inflexible assessment systems, and time constraints were among the factors that generated individual challenges like lower effectiveness and fatigue. Similarly, poor research communities were not only a matter of collegial attitude but also of inadequate institutional support and an inconsistent research experience for teachers. This multi-level relationship also suggests that single interventions – e.g., asking teachers to publish more or providing brief training sessions – will not increase research engagement if not supported by continuous mentoring, resource support, and workload changes.

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Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was based on nine EFL teachers from three universities in one western province. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as contextually situated rather than statistically generalizable. Second, the study relied mainly on interview accounts and documents. Although these sources provided rich evidence, future research could include longitudinal observation, research diaries, or larger-scale surveys to examine how barriers change over time. Third, this study did not report numerical participant-by-theme distributions because the purpose of thematic analysis was interpretive rather than quantitative. Future mixed methods studies could use a broader coding matrix or survey design to examine the prevalence and relative weight of different barriers among EFL teachers in under-resourced regions.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to sincerely thank the EFL teachers who participated in this study and generously shared their experiences, reflections, and time during the interviews. The authors also acknowledge the support received during the data collection and manuscript preparation process.

Authors contributions

Mingya Zhang was responsible for the study conceptualization, research design, data collection, document collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and preparation of the original manuscript draft. Fahainis Bt Mohd Yusof contributed to supervision, methodology guidance, validation of the research design, interpretation of findings, critical review, and manuscript revision. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Competing interests

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Disclosure of AI use

The authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT only for language polishing and clarity improvement. All AI-assisted text was reviewed and verified by the authors, and the authors take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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