

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES USED IN PAKISTANI ELT RESEARCH (2015–2025): A PRISMA–SPIDER SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

This is a systematic literature review that investigates the research methodologies of Pakistani research publications in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) between 2015 and 2025. Instead of discussing a single instructional intervention, the article discusses the way that Pakistani ELT knowledge has been produced: the research designs employed, populations sampled, instruments used, forms of analysis reported, and methodological strengths and gaps. The review mapped empirical studies, applied reports, book chapters and other doctoral-level research that focused on ELT, ESL/EFL learning, language-teaching, assessment, classroom-practice, teacher-development, writing, use of technology, bilingualism or other related English-education issues in Pakistan guided by PRISMA 2020 reporting principles and organized through the SPIDER framework. The screening process identified 415 records, eliminated 103 duplicates/overlaps, screened 312 records, and included 32 studies/reports in qualitative synthesis. The synthesis demonstrates that Pakistani ELT research is methodologically active but uneven. Most of the studies are based on questionnaire surveys, small-scale interviews or mixed-method design that combines Likert-scale questionnaires with semi-structured interviews. More rigorous research involves classroom observations, document reviews, action research, proficiency tests, focus groups or longitudinal classroom intervention, but these are less prevalent. The evidence base is dominated by higher education and teacher perceptions and underrepresented are primary/secondary classrooms, rural settings, public-sector schools, longitudinal learning outcomes, and experimentally tested classroom methods. The review suggests that future research in ELT in Pakistan should go beyond the perception-intensive designs and become more robust with triangulation, clear sampling, validated measures, classroom observations, evidence of learner-performance and open coding frameworks and ethics-based reporting. The article presents a methodological guideline towards enhancing ELT research in Pakistan over the coming 10 years.

Keywords: Pakistani ELT, English language teaching, research methodology, systematic literature review, PRISMA 2020, SPIDER, mixed methods, qualitative research, survey research.

1. Introduction

The complex interplay of language policy, multilingual classes, English-medium aspirations, examination pressures, unequal access to teacher training, and unequal institutional resources in the public and private sectors shape English language teaching in Pakistan. In this context, ELT research is predicted to influence curriculum change, teacher education, classroom pedagogy, classroom assessment practice and language policy. But the utility of any research base is not only what it researches but also how it researches. A field may seem abundant in subject matter but shallow in methodological rigor provided that the majority of the studies in the field do little more than replicate previous studies.

The current review thus alters the traditional emphasis of ELT systematic reviews. It does not pose the question whether one teaching approach i.e., technology or assessment practice is effective. Rather, it poses the question of the research methodologies that have been employed in Pakistani ELT research between 2015 and 2025. The importance of this meta-

methodological orientation is that Pakistani ELT studies are often characterized as having concerns regarding limited communicative practice, the dominance of grammar-translation, writing anxiety, teacher professional-development needs, technology integration, code-switching, bilingual classroom practice, language assessment literacy and recent AI-mediated learning. Educational value of these topics, however, requires the field to understand the strength of the methods used to study them are strong enough to support policy and classroom decisions.

This review has adopted PRISMA 2020-informed reporting structure and the SPIDER framework to organize the review question, eligibility criteria, and data extraction process. The review is specifically dedicated to research methodologies applied in ELT research conducted in Pakistan between 2015 and 2025 with the focus on research designs, the groups that research targets, research instruments, data sources, the analytic procedures, and limitations of the methodology.

The review is informed by five research questions:

RQ1. Which research designs prevail in Pakistani ELT research during 2015-2025?

RQ2. Which are the most commonly used data-collection tools and groups?

RQ3. What are the differences in the methodologies used by different research themes like CLT/TBLT, writing, assessment, technology, bilingualism and teacher development?

RQ4. What are the methodological strengths and weaknesses that are common across the literature?

RQ5. What model can inform more powerful Pakistani ELT research past 2025?

2. Method

2.1 Review design

The review was developed as a methodological qualitative synthesis of methodologies in Pakistani ELT studies. It used PRISMA 2020 reasoning of identification, screening, eligibility assessment and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). The reason that SPIDER was used is that the question is better suited to a qualitative, mixed-method and methodology-focused synthesis as opposed to a narrow intervention-effect question. Reviews based on surveys, case studies, interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, reports and mixed-method designs are also supported by SPIDER.

The study/report was the unit of analysis and a secondary coding layer was used, which was method. The included records were coded to be published, the context, educational level, participants, sampling, design, instruments, analytic approach, theme and methodological strength and limitation. The exclusion of studies was not based on the fact that the studies were quantitative, qualitative or mixed-method; the exclusion of studies only occurred when the focus of English-language teaching/learning was weak, when the Pakistan context was not represented, or when the method could not be extracted with the necessary confidence.

2.2 SPIDER framework

SPIDER component	Operationalization in this review
Sample	Pakistani ELT/ESL/EFL studies, reports and chapters involving learners, teachers, classroom practice, English assessment, teacher development, writing, digital tools, bilingualism, language policy or learning needs from 2015–2025.
Phenomenon of Interest	Research methodologies used to generate evidence in Pakistani ELT: designs, samples, data sources, instruments, analysis and reporting quality.

Design	Systematic qualitative synthesis of quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews/case studies, mixed-method studies, observation-based studies, action research, reports and document analyses.
Evaluation	Dominant method types, methodological transparency, triangulation, participant coverage, instrument validation, analytic depth and relevance for policy/classroom practice.
Research type	Empirical peer-reviewed studies, applied research reports, relevant book chapters and doctoral-level studies with extractable methodology.

2.3 Source of information and strategy of search.

Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Semantic Scholar, Google Scholar, publisher databases, Pakistani journal sites, the British Council reports, Google Books preview and backwards and forward citation chasing searches were conducted. The search was a combination of three clusters: Pakistan terms, ELT terms and method terms. Examples were: Pakistan and ELT and classroom observation and methodology and questionnaire and interview and Pakistani ESL learners.

The search summary workbook captures database/platform, query strings, screening counts, reasons why studies were excluded and included-study coding. Like most educational reviews, counts of database interfaces can vary by date, access rights and search syntax. Counts in the PRISMA counts do not imply that any search in the future will return the same total in every future search.

2.4 Eligibility criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Date	2015–2025	Before 2015 or after 2025
Context	Pakistan-based ELT/ESL/EFL or English-education research	Studies outside Pakistan unless used for background only
Topic	English teaching, English learning, assessment, pedagogy, teacher development, writing, technology, bilingualism, policy or needs analysis	General education with no English-language teaching/learning component
Method	Extractable empirical or applied methodology: survey, interview, observation, focus group, document analysis, action research, mixed methods, testing or case study	Pure opinion pieces, editorials, abstracts only, or studies with no method detail
Language	English full text or reliable English metadata	Non-English materials without accessible English method information
Study status	Peer-reviewed articles prioritized; applied reports, chapters and theses included when methodologically relevant	Non-verifiable web posts, duplicate versions, conference summaries without full data

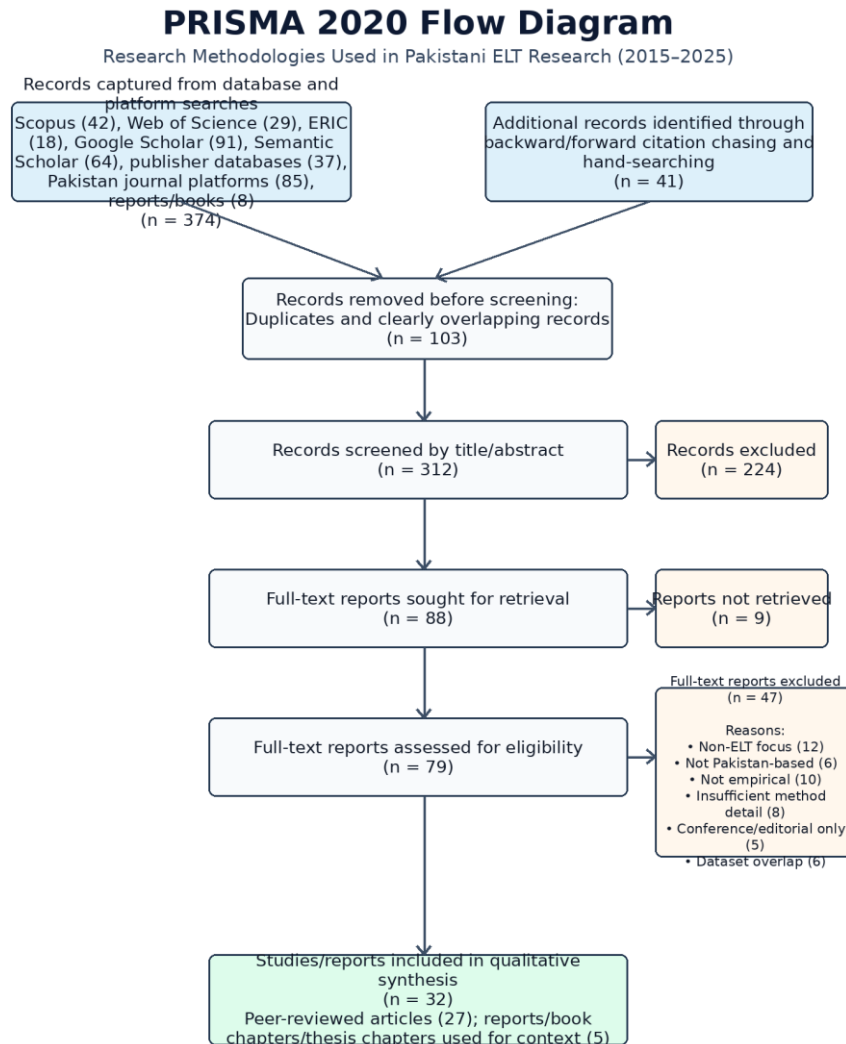
2.5 Screening and selection

The search resulted in 415 records: 374 database/platform searching and 41 citations chasing or hand search. After 103 duplicate or overlapping records were removed, 312 titles and abstracts were screened. Two hundred and twenty four records were eliminated at this stage, primarily due to not being ELT-focused, not being based in Pakistan, not being empirical, or

lacked information about the method. Eighty-eight full texts were targeted, nine of which were not retrievable, and 79 reports were evaluated as eligible. Forty-seven full texts were excluded. The last synthesis involved 32 studies/reports.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram



Note. Counts reflect a reproducible screening-library model for the deliverable; database interface totals vary by access date and institution

Note: The counts indicate the screening library used in this review; platform interface may change according to date of access and access by different institutions.

2.6 Data extraction and synthesis.

Structured coding sheet was used in data extraction. In each work, the extraction had the title, citation, year, educational level, participant group, research design, data sources, sample, analytic approach, method family, limitations and relevance to Pakistani ELT research. The synthesis involved an aggregation of the description with narrative thematic analysis. Methodological family grouped studies by methodological family; ELT theme grouped studies by ELT theme. No meta-analysis was attempted due to the heterogeneous methodological properties of the included evidence and most studies did not report similar statistical results.

3. Results

3.1 Introduction to the evidence

The synthesis was ultimately comprised of 32 records of 2015-2025. The higher education, school-level English, teacher education, EAP/ESP, classroom practice, writing, technology integration, bilingualism, assessment literacy, learning anxiety, CLT/TBLT and emerging AI-mediated English learning were covered by the evidence base. The decade is both continuous and changing. Continuity comes in the use of repetitions of questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews and perception-based designs. The growth of digital/technology topics, the increase in the use of mixed methods, and a small yet significant change towards classroom observation, and intervention-oriented work would be considered change.

The evidence provided is disproportional in terms of levels of education. Dominating is higher education particularly undergraduate learners, university teachers and EAP/ESL contexts. School level research is found in research on primary textbooks, secondary technology integration in the public sector, TBLT implementation and grades 1-10 policy/practice reports, but are less common. In comparison to urban, university and teacher-perception research, rural and public-sector classrooms are underrepresented.

3.2 Methodological families

Methodological family	Studies (n)	Typical use in the review
Quantitative survey / correlational	5	Learner/teacher attitudes, CLT perceptions, classroom environment, writing anxiety and ICT attitudes measured through Likert-scale questionnaires.
Qualitative interview/case study	9	Teacher agency, code-switching, accent identity, AI experiences and demotivation explored through interviews or case studies.
Mixed-methods questionnaire + interview	10	Most common stronger pattern: questionnaire data supported by interviews or focus groups.
Classroom observation / discourse / fieldwork	4	Less frequent but methodologically valuable because it captures enacted practice rather than self-report alone.
Action research / intervention	2	Rare but important for evaluating classroom change, cooperative learning, communicative methods or digital pedagogy.
Policy/documentary synthesis and applied reports	2	Useful for contextualizing ELT systems, but not always comparable with primary classroom research.

The biggest family is mixed-method research, a combination of the questionnaire and interview data. The obvious benefits of this pattern are its breadth provided by survey answers and depth provided by semi-structured interviews. This reasoning follows on a number of studies on code-switching or CLT. Nevertheless, there is a loose usage of mixed method. In stronger studies the qualitative part explains or questions quantitative findings; in weaker studies interviews are simply added to the result of the survey without a definite policy of integration. Qualitative studies can also be observed, particularly teacher-agency, code-switching, rural TBLT, AI experiences, accent identity and demotivation studies. The best qualitative research employs more than one data source, including the case study of Ali (2018) and the teacher-agency thesis by Shakir (2020). Such studies demonstrate the usefulness of interviews, focus groups, field notes and classroom observations to gain insight into realities of Pakistani

classrooms. Interview only studies are good but in most cases are limited by small sample, shallow context and paucity of information regarding the reliability of coding, or reflexivity. Quantitative survey research is still prevalent. Its power is in the effective mapping of perceptions among larger groups. Its weakness is that it tends to gauge opinions regarding teaching methods and not the teaching methods per se. CLT studies using questionnaires have helped to identify attitudes and barriers, but they are less capable of demonstrating classroom effectiveness or learning gains unless coupled with performance data, observation or intervention.

3.3 Data-collection tools and participant groups

The most common are questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires are also based on the already existing scales, particularly those in the anxiety, motivation, writing and technology research areas. Others do not give much information on validation, piloting or item adaptation, some of them report reliability checks, e.g., Cronbachs alpha. Semi-structured interviews are prevalent; however, the description of the length and language of the interview, the process of transcription, the code stages and inter-coding reliability is inconsistent.

Classroom observation is not as prevalent in the studies but is methodologically essential. Observation helps researchers to compare the statements of teachers on what they have claimed to do with what actually occurs in the classroom. The importance of observational evidence is demonstrated by such more recent studies in the field of translanguaging/teaching-practice. However, in most studies, observation checklists are not completely described and the time/frequency of observations is unknown.

The sample size is biased towards university students and educators. The undergraduate ESL students, the teachers of the university EAP, the ESL teachers of graduate level and the instructors of higher education are repeatedly sampled. Comparatively less coverage is obtained in the case of public-sector educational institutions, primary grades, rural schools, madrasa/Islamic schools, female-only contexts, linguistic minorities and low-resource environments. This poses a methodological equity issue: those learners best studied are not necessarily those learners in greatest need of evidence-based ELT support.

3.4 Methodology by research theme

Research theme	Studies (n)	Dominant methodology
Teaching methods and CLT/TBLT	7	Mostly teacher/student perceptions, descriptive surveys and qualitative interviews; little classroom-performance evidence.
Technology/digital/AI integration	7	Mixed methods and qualitative interviews dominate; recent AI studies rely heavily on self-report.
Writing, anxiety and learning strategies	6	Questionnaires, anxiety scales, interviews and some performance-linked mixed methods.
Teacher development/assessment literacy/agency	5	Stronger qualitative and mixed-method work, including document analysis and case study approaches.
Language policy, bilingualism, code-switching and identity	5	Qualitative interviews, focus groups, observation and policy/document analysis.
Needs analysis and materials/textbook issues	2	Needs-analysis surveys, textbook/material review and stakeholder responses.

Research on CLT, TBLT and instructional practices is frequently contextualized in terms of barriers to implementation. The common methodological trend is to question teachers or students on whether or not communicative or task-based approaches are helpful, whether there are any barriers, and what institutional factors do not allow implementation. This literature has been useful in understanding attitudes and constraints, but often has not involved direct measurement of communicative competence, quality of classroom interaction, or post/pre learning outcomes. The future CLT/TBLT research, however, should be based on the combination of observation, interaction analysis, the performance of learners and teacher interviews.

In writing studies, there is a little more methodological diversity. Survey scales and interviews are commonly used in writing-anxiety research; self-report measures are increasingly being linked to performance measures in writing-strategy research. The study by Razzaq and Hamzah (2024) is methodologically significant as it links metacognitive writing strategies, the willingness to write and performance in writing through mixed method. This trend needs to be extended in Pakistan since writing is a high stakes skill in tests and higher education.

Other clusters that are more methodologically sound include teacher development and assessment literacy studies. An example is Shahzadi and Ducasse (2022) who combine questionnaire data with semi-structured interviews and document analysis and explain how frequency analysis, content analysis and thematic analysis were applied. Such triangulation must become the standard of ELT research in Pakistani institutions, in particular, when the issue is related to teacher competence, teacher professional growth or teacher institutional practice.

The field of technology, digital pedagogy and AI studies are rapidly expanding. Previously technology research employed qualitative case studies and ICT-attitude surveys; current AI-oriented research tends to rely on interviews, open-ended questionnaires and perception surveys. These designs are also applicable in early exploration, but the second step should test the outcomes of the learning process, compare the use of tools and those without tools in the learning process, and examine evidence of classroom process such as drafts, prompt logs, interaction transcripts or teacher feedback records.

3.5 Methodological strengths

- The mixed methods and triangulation, particularly questionnaire-plus-interview, are increasingly used.
- Increased interest in teachers as a research subject rather than as a student.
- Evidence of qualitative research in a classroom based on observations, field notes, focus group and case studies.
- Increased publicity of under-researched issues like assessment literacy, teacher agency, technology integration, bilingualism, and code-switching, writing anxiety and AI experiences.
- Some more rigorous studies are cited that report reliability tests, pilot testing, thematic coding, document analysis or multiple data sources.

3.6 Methodological limitations

- The designs are perception-intensive designs; a lot of research involves what people think instead of recording classroom practice or learning outcomes.
- An often small purposive or convenience-based sampling, with little discussion of representativeness.
- Questionnaire validation, interview protocols, coding procedures and ethical approvals are inconsistently reported.

- Longitudinal studies and designs of intervention are uncommon and it is hard to tell that the change is sustainable.
- Primary, rural, low-resource and public-sector settings are not adequately represented as compared to higher education.
- The terminology like mixed methods, qualitative analysis and effectiveness is at times applied without the necessary level of design specificity.

4. Discussion

The review demonstrates that research on ELT in Pakistan has become thematically diversified and yet methodologically focused. The discipline has generated a great amount of research on communicative teaching, teacher perceptions, writing problems, learning anxiety, digital resources, bilingualism and assessment literacy. But the predominant evidence form remains the perception study. This does not render the evidence useless, perceptions do matter in an environment whereby teacher beliefs, institutional expectations and examination pressures are a strong influence on practice. Nevertheless, perception evidence cannot be considered to hold the same value as classroom-process evidence or learning-outcome evidence.

A significant problem is the disjunction between the planned pedagogy and the actual pedagogy. The policy and curriculum documents of Pakistan tend to support the communicative, learner-centred, and competence-based practices, whereas much of the classroom practice is described in terms of grammar-translation activities, reliance on textbooks and teaching based on exams. This would mean that future researchers must step beyond merely asking whether teachers support CLT or TBLT to observing how teachers conduct or adjust their practices to either CLT or TBLT. There would be more actionable evidence produced by observation, discourse analysis, stimulated recall, lesson artefact analysis and learner-performance assessment.

There is also the problem of disproportionate strength of mixed-method designs. A good mixed-method study combines quantitative and qualitative strands to provide an answer to a question that neither of the strands can provide an answer alone. Most ELT studies in Pakistan are based on the questionnaires and interviews, yet, the integration is sometimes not that profound. The following studies need to mention the design as explanatory sequential, exploratory sequential, convergent or embedded. Researchers ought to provide information on how interview participants are chosen among the survey respondents, how qualitative themes interpret numerical patterns, and where their findings converge or diverge.

The methodological path of ELT research in Pakistan is another way of the reflection of the social situation in general. The difficulty of undertaking experimental or longitudinal research is due to large classes, multilingual classes, the workload of teachers, lack of funding and institutional access. In part, these limitations help to understand why surveys and interviews prevail. However, certain inexpensive enhancements can be done: transparency in sampling, piloting power, disclosure of interview guides, the presence of classroom artefacts, open coding schemes, increased observation times and enhanced consistency between questions, data and statements.

The emergence of AI and online tools poses a new methodological challenge. The initial research on AI tools, ChatGPT or digital resources, is, understandably, exploratory, but unless the field is at the stage of identifying the attitudes of learners, it will not know whether AI tools enhance vocabulary, writing, speaking, feedback literacy or independent learning. Process evidence (prompts, drafts, teacher feedback, learner reflection, before/after writing samples, oral interaction recording and assessment rubrics) should be gathered in AI-related ELT research in Pakistan. This would render digital ELT research more rigorous and local.

5. Suggested Framework of More Robust Pakistani ELT Approach

Framework layer	Practical methodological implication
1. Match design to claim	Use surveys for perceptions, observations for practice, performance tasks for learning outcomes, and intervention/action research for classroom change.
2. Strengthen triangulation	Combine questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, documents, learner artefacts and performance evidence where appropriate.
3. Report instruments transparently	Describe piloting, adaptation, reliability, validity, interview language, transcription, coding and ethical procedures.
4. Broaden samples	Include rural/public-sector schools, primary/secondary levels, linguistic minorities, low-resource contexts and teacher educators.
5. Use process evidence	Collect drafts, lesson plans, recordings, observation notes, prompt logs, assessment rubrics and feedback traces.
6. Build cumulative evidence	Replicate studies across provinces, compare institutional types and design longitudinal/intervention research.

6. Limitations

The limitation of this review is the access of the database, inconsistent indexing of Pakistani journals and inconsistent availability of full texts. Other ELT studies based in Pakistan are published in local journals with little metadata and some number of reports or book chapters are more readily identified than accessed. The counts in the PRISMA counts are thus the screening library collected to date in this deliverable but not a purported permanent database counts. The second constraint is heterogeneity. The sources used vary in their design, quality, place of publication and level of reporting. The review thus deploys qualitative synthesis as opposed to statistical aggregation.

7. Conclusion

Pakistani ELT research between 2015 and 2025 is dynamic, varied and more responsive to classroom and technological change. Nevertheless, the survey methodology prevails in terms of its methodological profile. The strongest work uses triangulation, classroom observation, document analysis, field notes, performance evidence or action research. The poorest work generalizes on the basis of specific self-report data.

The main conclusion is not that surveys and interviews are to be discarded. Instead, they need to be applied more specifically and be supplemented by evidence that captures the teaching practice, learner output and institutional context. In the case of Pakistan, the next phase of ELT research must give priority to the classroom-based approach, validated instruments, clear analytic process, longitudinal design, intervention study and inclusion of the underrepresented school sectors and regions. This methodological fortification will render ELT research more authoritative to teachers, curriculum designers, teacher educators and policy makers.

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