

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

Too Much Research? Rethinking Teacher Learning in an Age of Metrics and Rankings

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Abstract

The rapid pace and sheer volume of research publications in today's academic landscape pose a significant challenge for teachers, particularly those who seek to engage with research as a form of professional learning. Although teachers are not responsible for this proliferation, they are nonetheless expected to navigate an ever-expanding body of literature and integrate research-based evidence into their practice. This article identifies the oversupply of publications as a barrier to English as an additional language (EAL) teachers' meaningful engagement with research. After providing some background to the changing publishing landscape, I highlight the importance of fostering teachers' transformative engagement with research-generated knowledge. I propose nurturing EAL teachers' *interpretive capacity*, which encompasses critical reading, contextual awareness, and critical emotional literacy. I conclude the article with some implications for contextualizing theoretical ideas and for developing professional knowledge and competencies that are personally meaningful, locally grounded, and socially relevant.

Introduction

Earlier studies revealed that most English as an additional language (EAL) teachers did not consistently engage with published research for their professional learning and growth (Borg, 2009, Clarke, 1994; Nassaji, 2012). However, governments, professional associations, and school boards have been encouraging teachers to turn to research-based evidence. Digital technologies are also playing a key role in facilitating access to the latest research. As a result, more teachers are now interested in reading academic publications and applying research findings to their classroom teaching (e.g., Hall, 2023; Hosseini et al., 2024; Kowalczyk-Wałędziak & Ion, 2024). In addition to teachers' growing interest in seeking research-based knowledge, researchers are eager to disseminate their findings to a wider audience. For most researchers, a detailed knowledge mobilization plan is now a part of their grant applications.

However, teachers who wish to engage with research often struggle to navigate the overwhelming volume of publications, in addition to other barriers such as paywalls and hectic teaching schedules. In Hall's (2023) study, some teachers expressed frustration with the sheer number of scholarly articles. A primary concern was the difficulty of identifying which research-based recommendations were most relevant to their classroom practice. In this article, I discuss how the emphasis on research productivity, which is driven by a neoliberal business model, disrupts the scholarly ecosystem of education generally and teaching EAL specifically. To address this problem, I propose a strategy centred on developing EAL teachers' interpretive capacity, which will better enable them to critically engage with research-based recommendations. This proposal emphasizes three key areas: critical reading of research publications, contextual awareness, and critical emotional literacy. I argue that cultivating such

interpretive capacity can empower EAL teachers to bridge the often-cited “gap” between research and teaching. I conclude the article by discussing how this approach supports EAL teachers in contextualizing theories of language teaching and learning and in developing professional knowledge and competencies that are both meaningful and transformative within their local contexts.

Continuing Professional Learning and Engagement with Research

The knowledge, skills, and experiences gained during pre-service teacher education programs are invaluable. The quality of pre-service education can have a lasting impact on a teacher’s future learning (Whitehead & Arslan, 2025). However, beyond formal pre-service education, teachers draw from many other sources of knowledge. For example, reflection on classroom practice and daily experiences is a vital part of teachers’ continuing professional learning. While methods and levels of intentionality may differ, all teachers are reflective learners (Farrell, 2022). Another source of teacher knowledge is the memory of being a student. By the time one becomes a professional teacher, he/she/they will have spent hundreds of hours in various classrooms, receiving instruction and mentorship. Understandably, all teachers have role models whose practices and philosophies continue to inspire them and shape their work (e.g., Ben-Peretz, 1995). Conversations with colleagues and students are also an important source of teacher knowledge. Informal chats in hallways or staff rooms often serve as rich opportunities for sharing experiences and ideas that may contribute to ongoing professional growth (Khong et al., 2023). Finally, in most educational systems, some forms of professional development (PD) activities are offered. Research presents mixed findings on the effectiveness of PD workshops, particularly when topics and methods of PD are imposed in a top-down manner. Yet, for many teachers, formal PD sessions can be a valuable source of professional knowledge (Ehlert & Souvignier, 2023).

Whether through institutionally mandated PD events or self-directed learning, published research can be a valuable source of knowledge for teachers. Pedagogical recommendations emerging from research can help teachers develop, validate, or refine their practice (Winch et al., 2015). In the field of teaching English as an additional language (TEAL)—also referred to as teaching English as a second language (TESL), teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), and English language teaching (ELT)—some researchers have focused on the nature of the research–practice gap. For instance, Borg’s (2009) international study involving 505 teachers from 13 countries revealed that in-service language teachers exhibited very low levels of engagement with academic research. Key reasons cited for this limited engagement included lack of time, restricted access to journals and books, insufficient practical (pedagogical) guidance in published studies, difficulty understanding academic texts, and a general disinterest in research. While some researchers are trying to find ways to bring research and teaching closer, others question the relevance of research for teaching (e.g., Maley 2016; Medgyes, 2017).

Despite criticisms about the relevance of academic research for classroom practice, there is increasing attention to building a nexus between research and practice in ELT (Ahmed & Morgan, 2025). For example, the *BC TEAL Journal* promotes “scholarship as a shared endeavour of everyone in the field” (Douglas, 2019, p. i)—not just of researchers or teachers alone. Reflecting the perspectives shared by many researchers, teachers, and teacher-educators in

British Columbia, the journal views EAL teachers as scholar-practitioners who read the literature “to find connections between teaching and research while growing their abilities to understand this literature with a critical mind and, when applicable, use or adapt it for their own teaching and learning contexts” (Douglas, 2019, p. i). There are also advocacy and initiatives by professional organizations such as TESOL International Association (2024) for raising teachers’ awareness of research. The good news is that EAL teachers are showing growing interest in engaging with research literature as part of their continuing professional learning (e.g., Abbott et al., 2021; Ahmed, 2019; Hall, 2023).

At this point, two questions are worth asking. First, what kind of research is being referred to? Second, what does “research engagement” mean? It is important to acknowledge that not all research in education is intended to improve classroom practice. Some studies are designed to directly inform teaching, while others aim to advance theoretical understanding of certain concepts or phenomena. Whitty (2006), for example, drew a distinction between *education research* and *educational research*. The former is *about* education, whereas the latter is conducted for the purpose of *improving* education. In other words, educational research is intentionally designed to support classroom practice. That said, what qualifies as “educational” research remains open to interpretation. My view is that teachers themselves are best positioned to determine whether a particular piece of research is *educationally* relevant. Another concept that needs clarification is *engagement*. Drawing on Borg (2010) and Eriksen and Brevik (2023), a distinction can be made between *engagement in* research and *engagement with* research. *Engagement in* research refers to the process of designing and conducting studies to generate new knowledge or solve specific problems. *Engagement with* research, on the other hand, involves accessing, reading, interpreting, and applying the findings and recommendations of studies conducted by others.

Despite teachers’ historical reluctance to engage with research (e.g., Kaestle, 1993; Zeichner, 1995), many EAL teachers are now interested in consulting research for professional learning. For instance, Hall’s (2023) study investigated how English language teachers engage with research by examining the extent to which they report reading (a) research in its original, published form and (b) other research-oriented professional literature. The study also explored teachers’ motivation for reading research, the barriers that discourage or prevent them from doing so, and the research topics they prioritize for future inquiry in ELT. Additionally, the study sought to identify strategies for making research findings more accessible and relevant to language teachers. Hall (2023) collected data through a questionnaire completed by 696 teachers from diverse contexts in Europe and Asia. Then, he conducted semi-structured interviews with 384 participants drawn from the survey pool. One of Hall’s conclusions was that “while still a minority within the profession, significant numbers of English language teachers are interested in reading about or learning from research” (p. 41).

However, what stood out in Hall’s study was a concern raised by some participants about the difficulty of identifying the most relevant research for their classroom teaching. The following two comments are illustrative:

- The biggest problem is selecting the research that is the most relevant ... With the proliferation of ideas and publications, that is increasingly hard to do (a teacher from Spain, quoted in Hall, 2023, p. 30).
- I feel there are far more people out there writing about education than necessary, and trying to find something useful is like fishing in a lake that is doubling as a dumping ground. Finding anything of any value is a tedious task (a teacher from Japan, quoted in Hall, 2023, p. 30).

These comments may be symptomatic of a larger problem of research publications: the valorization of productivity in academia and the fast and abundant publication of research reports. I argue that, to advance the conversation on pedagogically meaningful research engagement, people in the field of EAL teaching and learning must address the *over-supply of research publications*.

The Volume of Research Publications

Today's scholarly ecosystem is undergoing unprecedented changes. In recent years, there has been an exponential growth in the publication of academic books and journal articles (Hanson et al., 2024). Academics are now facing increasing pressure to publish more frequently, and journal editors are struggling to recruit qualified peer reviewers. Researchers are also finding it difficult to keep up with the constant influx of new literature (Parolo et al., 2015). Hanson et al. (2024) have rightly described this phenomenon as “the strain on scientific publishing” (p. 823).

What are the causes of this strain? There are many. A comprehensive discussion is beyond the scope of this article, so I highlight a few key factors. First, the shift toward a neoliberal business model in higher education has prioritized quantity over quality. Professors and graduate students are expected to publish more, yet there is no clear benchmark for what constitutes “more.” The academic environment has become highly competitive, with individuals racing toward an undefined target in terms of publication output. Second, advancements in digital technology have made publishing easier and faster. Many publishers now prefer an online-only publication model, which reduces costs and incentivizes higher publication volumes (Frank et al., 2023).

A third factor is the growing inclusivity toward scholars from the Global South. This openness is a positive step toward achieving equity in academic publishing and decolonizing knowledge production (Hanson et al., 2024). However, this inclusivity has also been exploited by bad actors who view publishing as a profit-making opportunity. This profit motive has led to a rise in predatory journals (Eve & Priego, 2017). Other questionable practices in this age of rankings and metrics include forming citation cartels, i.e., a group of authors who cite each other's works to inflate their citation counts even if some of the citations are irrelevant (Catanzaro, 2024). Finally, there has been a commercialization of academic publishing, particularly by powerful companies with a global reach. The internationalization and commercialization of research that began after World War II has since been accelerated by tools like the Science Citation Index. Today, the monetization of publication and citation data has become a major industry, shaping and, in many ways, disturbing the ecosystem of scientific publishing (Mills, 2025).

All these changes, e.g., digitization, commercialization, intensified data management, and mounting pressure from employers and funders to publish more, are significantly affecting how knowledge is generated and shared. Productivity is not only valorized but also equated with scholarly merit. This equation, however, is deeply “extractive and exploitative—of individual writers, one another, and the larger scholarly ecosystem” (Ahern-Dodson & Dufour, 2023, p. 24). In this competitive climate, the relentless push to produce more writing can, in fact, be detrimental to academic writers’ health and well-being (Laquintano, 2023). Moreover, the rapid pace and sheer volume of research publications in today’s academic landscape present a distinct challenge for teachers: how do they navigate the sea of scholarly publications? This challenge is especially significant given that most teachers are too busy teaching and assessing students to find the time to read and engage with research (e.g., Maley, 2016; Medgyes, 2017).

The Teacher in a Changing Publishing Environment

The disruption in the scholarly publishing ecosystem affects multiple stakeholders, but the group I focus on is teachers. It is reasonable to argue that English language teachers’ engagement with research, as a form of professional learning, is being negatively affected by the publishing industry’s current practices. Although teachers are not responsible for the proliferation of research publications, they are often expected to sift through an ever-growing body of literature and to integrate research-based recommendations into their practice.

Whereas the lack of access to academic literature was a recurring finding in earlier studies in the 1990s and 2000s, that barrier has been substantially reduced thanks to technological advancements, the rise of open-access publishing, and innovations such as plain-language summaries. Instead of blaming teachers for their lack of research engagement, there is growing support within TEAL communities for fostering dialogic, bi-directional, and reciprocal relationships between teachers and researchers (Sato & Loewen, 2022). There is an interest in empowering teachers to access, read, interpret, and apply research through joining professional learning communities and harnessing the affordances of digital technologies (Abbott et al., 2021; Ahmed, 2015). However, what is often missing from these discussions is a strategy for dealing with the *over-supply* of research publications. This leads to a critical question: *How can EAL teachers navigate the flood of research publications and the multitude of models, frameworks, and pedagogical recommendations?* This question is especially timely in a neoliberal academic climate where speed, productivity, and competition have become defining features of scholarship.

Transformative Engagement with Research

I propose that EAL teachers become critical and creative readers of research publications. In an era where teachers are increasingly expected to meet predefined curricular goals and performance standards, research engagement can easily become a mechanical exercise without meaningful reflection. As Ball (2003) warned over two decades ago, neoliberal performativity compels teachers “to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations... and live an existence of calculation” (p. 215). This culture of performance may lead to feelings of inner conflict and inauthenticity among educators. Amid the global push for evidence-based

practice in education, I argue that teachers' engagement with research must be *transformative* rather than performative.

Building on Kowalczyk-Walędziak and Ion (2024), transformative engagement with research can be conceptualized as a deep, multidimensional commitment that becomes integral to a teacher's professional identity and purpose. Here, the aim is not only to improve one's own classroom practice but also to reshape the teaching profession and the education system more broadly. This form of engagement is driven by a clear, future-oriented vision that reaches into schools, communities, and institutional cultures. Teachers who engage transformatively with research not only seek out information, but also critically examine current practices and imagine and enact innovative approaches. Their motivation stems from a sincere commitment to utilizing research as a catalyst for change. For these reasons, transformative engagement—according to Kowalczyk-Walędziak and Ion (2024)—involves the integration of affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions. Ultimately, it aims to empower teachers to embed research meaningfully and sustainably into their everyday practice, which allows them to play a leading role in reshaping the pedagogical landscape.

The Need for EAL Teachers' Interpretive Capacity

To engage with research in transformative ways, I propose that both initial teacher education programs and in-service professional learning activities place a greater emphasis on fostering teachers' *interpretive capacity*. In other words, the question must be asked: *How can teachers read, interpret, and apply research findings in ways that will transform their pedagogies and support students' learning?* An interpretive approach is particularly necessary in the current context of neoliberal performativity, a culture of individualism and competition, and an over-supply of research publications.

To cultivate teachers' interpretive capacity, I advocate for promoting critical and reflective practices of reading, where the goal is not simply to read more, but to read more *strategically* and *meaningfully*. This approach should focus on the following interrelated dimensions:

1. **Critical reading of research:** Encouraging teachers to thoughtfully evaluate research findings for pedagogical innovation.
2. **Contextual awareness:** Supporting teachers in interpreting research within the realities of their specific teaching contexts.
3. **Critical emotional literacy:** Recognizing and addressing the affective dimensions of connecting research and teaching.

First, reading research for pedagogical innovation demands deep and critical engagement with the research text—whether written, visual, or auditory. When multiple teachers read the same article or curriculum resource, they may interpret it differently. The interpretations and meanings will depend on the teacher's *mode of engagement*, that is, how they interact with the resource, understand its content, and integrate it into their prior knowledge. Thus, engagement may be shaped by individual beliefs, experiences, visions, and epistemological views (Remillard, 2012).

Insights from reading theory and literary criticism may be useful here. For instance, Rosenblatt's (2005) transactional theory highlights how meaning emerges through dynamic interactions between readers and texts in particular contexts. Her work emphasizes that readers bring their unique experiences to a text, and that understanding is co-constructed through an active, reciprocal exchange between the text and the reader. This theory can help understand how teachers engage with curriculum resources (Remillard, 2012) and how such engagement might influence their instructional practices (Ryan & Dagostino, 2017).

Additionally, valuable insights can be gained from critical literacy as a way of reading (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005). Inspired by the Frankfurt School and grounded in the Freirean tradition of transformative education, critical literacy enables readers to read the text in its social, historical, economic, and political contexts. Readers see not only what is written in black and white but also what is not written (the hidden, silenced or implied meanings). Thus, meaning-making becomes an ethical project with a vision for a better, more equitable world (Ahmed, in press). There are various models of critical literacy that can be instructive here. One example is a model proposed by Freebody and Luke (1990), which can offer valuable guidance for developing an interpretive stance. Freebody and Luke's framework—known as the Four Resources Model—has been widely applied across diverse curricular and classroom contexts. According to these authors, individuals engaging with texts typically adopt the following roles: (1) breaking the codes of texts, (2) participating in the construction of meaning, (3) using texts functionally, and (4) critically analyzing and transforming texts. These roles were later conceptualized as resources. Freebody and Luke (1990, p. 7) emphasized that:

A successful reader in our society needs to develop and sustain the resources to adopt four related roles: code breaker ('how do I crack this?'), text participant ('what does this mean?'), text user ('what do I do within this, here and now?'), and text analyst ('what does all this do to me?').

Thus, critical literacy takes a stance against any reading practices that search for a stable and universal meaning, insensitive to the context where the text is written or read.

When it comes to teachers' reading of research as a form of professional learning and growth, another model of critical and creative reading that Ada and Campoy (2017) have proposed may also be productive. This model consists of four interconnected phases:

1. Descriptive Phase
2. Personal Interpretive Phase
3. Critical/Multicultural/Anti-Bias Phase
4. Creative/Transformative Phase

The descriptive phase focuses on understanding the literal content of the text by identifying the who, what, when, where, why, and how. This phase lays the foundation for reading comprehension. In the personal interpretive phase, readers connect the text to their own histories, experiences, and emotions. It brings personal perspectives to the act of meaning-making. Next, the critical/multicultural/anti-bias phase invites readers to examine the text through a critical lens: questioning assumptions, identifying biases, and exploring ideas of justice and equity.

Finally, in the creative/transformational phase, readers act on their critical insights and apply them to make positive changes in their lives and communities. This phase promotes readers' agency and aims to support broader goals of social and educational transformation.

Overall, this model of reading presents text-engagement as a dialogic process, rather than passive consumption of information. It involves interaction, interpretation, and reflection. I must note that these phases are not intended to be linear. As Ada and Campoy (2017) have clarified, the phases may be interwoven, and more than one phase can occur simultaneously. Although the primary audience of Ada and Campoy was students, I believe that their model of critical and creative reading offers insights and guidance for teachers seeking to engage with research texts for pedagogical enrichment and professional growth.

Implications and Hopes

First, EAL teachers can draw on models of critical reading to engage more meaningfully with research literature by moving beyond surface-level comprehension. By reflecting on how research findings relate to their own experiences (*Interpretive Phase*), critically analyzing the underlying assumptions and power dynamics in research (*Critical Phase*), and considering how to apply new knowledge to improving their practice (*Transformative Phase*), teachers can become active participants in meaning making and in their own professional growth. Adopting such critical reading practices can foster personally meaningful and transformative professional learning. It may also encourage teachers to see themselves as reflective and empowered agents of educational change.

Second, while it may sound like a cliché, context truly is everything in education. There are numerous examples of inappropriate application of theories and research-generated strategies that were removed from their original contexts. The evidence-based practice movement in education has drawn criticism for promoting the universal application of so-called “best practices” without adequate attention to local conditions (Biesta, 2015). In my previous research (Ahmed, 2019), I found that teachers usually attend closely to their professional context when reading and interpreting research publications. One participant observed: “*I think the teaching context is very important because, even if you understand research findings, you cannot use them if they do not match your context: students, books, living area, type of school, financial means and so on*” (p. 183). Drawing on this and other reading strategies employed by teachers participating in my study, I conceptualized reading research as an act of *attending to contextual circumstances*¹.

I recommend that teachers keep their classroom context in mind when engaging with research. The context of knowledge production (e.g., the research setting) may differ significantly from the context of knowledge use (e.g., the classroom). As Eraut (1994) noted three decades ago, teachers are the only meaningful validators of research knowledge within their classrooms. Similarly, commenting on the relationship between theory and practice in language education, Widdowson (2003) wrote:

¹ The three other ways of reading research that I discussed were: reading as interrogation, reading as dialogue, and reading as drawing upon prior experiences. See Ahmed (2019) for details.

The validity and relevance of theoretical ideas, however, do not necessarily transfer to times and places other than those of their origin. They are valid given certain conditions, relevant to certain circumstances. So they need always to be critically reviewed, and revised or rejected in the light of different local conditions and circumstances. (p. 25)

In light of these observations, I encourage EAL teachers to read research through the lens of their own classroom conditions and to evaluate the applicability of research in accordance with the realities of their specific teaching contexts.

Third, the topic of emotion is often overlooked in academic discussions. For a long time, research has been viewed primarily as a rational activity in pursuit of objective “truth.” Although emotions are “an inevitable and unavoidable part of the research process,” the role of emotions in knowledge construction has historically been neglected (Widdowfield, 2000, p. 205). Only recently have scholars across disciplines begun to recognize the nexus of emotions and knowledge construction (e.g., Kenway & Youdell, 2011; Xu & Stahl, 2025).

While paying attention to the emotional dimensions of conducting research is important, I argue that it is also important to consider the emotions of those who read and utilize research. This consideration is vital because most studies on knowledge mobilization and evidence use have investigated the research-practice relation “from a rational rather than an emotional standpoint” (Hornung & Smolnik, 2022, p. 109). In language education, teachers’ emotions can serve as a catalyst for developing a stronger research–teaching nexus (Ahmed & Morgan, 2025). For example, English language teachers who participated in Yang and Sato’s (2025) study mentioned that engaging with research offered them emotional support. These authors described how anxiety about discontent with teaching methods and instructional designs compelled a participant—Xiaohui—to re-evaluate her role. When faced with “intense negative feelings” (p. 12), she sought knowledge and comfort through “engagement with theoretical literature” (p. 12). As a result of her engagement with research and reflective journaling, she felt “joyous, uplifted, and accomplished” (p. 13). Similarly, in their investigation of success stories of teachers’ engagement with research, Kowalczyk-Walędziak and Ion (2024) found that teachers valued research not only for its practical insights but also for the enjoyment, fascination, and satisfaction it provided. Although research in this area remains limited, these recent studies suggest a growing need to acknowledge and explore the emotional dimensions of teachers’ engagement with research.

I propose that greater attention be paid to the role of emotion when teachers interact with research for pedagogical improvement. In particular, everyone in the field of EAL teaching and learning should consider the kinds of emotional stance EAL teachers might adopt to sustain active and critical engagement with research. As a starting point, ELT may benefit from developing teachers’ *critical emotional literacy*. Here, Winans’s (2012) definition of critical emotional literacy offers guidance:

the ability to understand how emotions function, particularly in terms of the ways that they inform identity, impact our relationship to social norms, and guide our attention. ... It offers the capacity for exploring how emotions function in terms of constructing

knowledge, beliefs, and (intersectional) identities, and, in turn, impacting actions. (pp. 155–156)

Both initial teacher education and in-service professional learning initiatives can be harnessed to nurture this kind of emotional literacy. Teachers' emotional awareness can help them navigate the overwhelming volume of research publications. For instance, rather than blaming themselves for not being able to keep up with every new article or research trend, they can reflect on the broader structural and economic factors that contribute to the overproduction of publications. They can also recognize that transformative professional learning is not about reading *more*, but about reading more *strategically* and *critically*, with an awareness of their own emotional responses.

Conclusion

The three key concepts—critical reading, contextual awareness, and emotional literacy—should be foundational for cultivating an *interpretive capacity* among EAL teachers. Such a capacity is essential in this era of rapid increase in research publication. As teachers are increasingly expected to perform in alignment with standards, targets, and indicators (Biesta, 2015), they may experience inner conflict and a sense of inauthenticity (Ball, 2003). In the context of a neoliberal academic climate that emphasizes productivity and competition, teachers who wish to engage with research may feel overwhelmed deciding what is important and what is trivial in the endless production line of research publications.

In response to the above problem, I have argued that teachers need to be strategic, creative, and critical readers of research publications. They need to develop an interpretive capacity that enables them to identify relevant research and judiciously apply, and adapt when necessary, its findings to their local contexts. To support the development of this capacity, I have proposed three interrelated strategies: engaging in critical and creative reading, developing contextual awareness, and cultivating critical emotional literacy. Together, these approaches can empower teachers to meaningfully bridge the oft-cited “gap” between research and practice. These strategies may also help teachers manage the anxiety of keeping up with emerging research and take a more focused and reflective approach to professional learning. Ultimately, this interpretive capacity is likely to support teachers in contextualizing theoretical ideas (Taşdemir & Karaman, 2022) and developing professional knowledge and competencies that are personally meaningful, locally grounded, and socially relevant (Blömeke & Kaiser, 2017). Both pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development programs can cultivate this capacity. How best to achieve this will vary across contexts, and I invite readers to consider effective ways of fostering teachers' *interpretive capacity* within their own settings.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2025 Annual BC TEAL Conference in Vancouver. I would like to thank the attendees who offered questions and insights, as well as the editor and the two anonymous reviewers of the *BC TEAL Journal* for their valuable feedback.

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