

Mapping the Maze: Strategies for Effective Literature Reviews in TESOL

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Abstract:

This reflective piece offers practical guidance for English language teachers engaging in literature reviews within TESOL research. Based on the author's experience as an Australian academic working closely with Vietnamese institutions, it outlines strategies for navigating the often-overwhelming volume of scholarly work. Central to the approach is building a clear conceptual framework, using research journals, and mapping ideas to identify key themes, gaps, and connections. The article also emphasises the importance of critical reading - questioning assumptions, methods, and socio-political contexts - particularly in a field shaped by colonial legacies and global inequalities. Collaborative reflection and peer dialogue are presented as essential tools for clarifying research focus and sustaining scholarly motivation. Rather than viewing literature reviews as a purely academic task, the author positions them as processes of personal and professional growth. This piece aims to empower Vietnamese educators to approach literature with confidence and contribute meaningfully to the TESOL research community.

In my experience as an Australian teacher educator and TESOL academic, conducting literature reviews for research has been both an intellectual and deeply personal journey. Working at a highly ranked university in Australia has afforded me access to extensive digital library resources and interdisciplinary networks, yet I often recall my early days of scouring journal databases with uncertainty about where to begin. Over time, I have refined strategies

to help streamline the process, drawing on a blend of systematic approaches, critical reflection, and collaborative dialogue - methods I believe will resonate with English language teachers in Vietnam aiming to engage more deeply in research.

A key strategy in my review process involves building a clear conceptual framework before diving into the literature. I typically start by mapping out - often visually - the central questions or themes I wish to address. For instance, if my focus lies in exploring the sociolinguistic dimensions of English language education, I identify leading thinkers - such as Pennycook or Canagarajah - and locate their seminal works via databases such as ERIC and ProQuest. Rather than reading each source in isolation, I maintain a research journal where I note recurring theories, methods, and findings. Such journaling practice allows me to see emerging (and often invisible) connections, spot gaps in existing scholarly conversations,

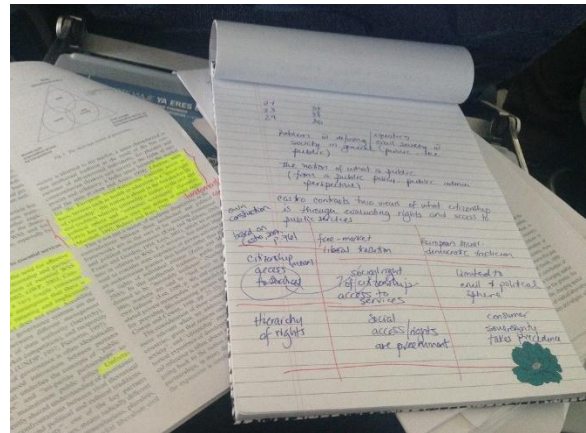
and formulate critical questions about issues such as power, race, and the socio-political contexts surrounding language teaching and learning.



Another essential element in my approach is ongoing critical analysis. Merely summarising studies is insufficient; I interrogate each source's underlying assumptions, methods, and conclusions. As an academic with interest in critical theories, adopting such critical stance has taught me to look for the social and ideological contexts informing the research, a practice especially pertinent in TESOL where English often intersects with colonial histories and global inequities. While this analytic lens can initially feel daunting, it ultimately enriches my writing by compelling me to evaluate the implications of each study for diverse classrooms.

I have, of course, also encountered numerous challenges along the way - notably managing the vast volume of literature and ensuring my review remains both comprehensive and focused. One solution involves setting a clear scope (inclusion and exclusion criteria) - prioritising peer-reviewed articles and key theoretical pieces while noting, but not delving too deeply into,

'peripheral' literature. When I find myself overwhelmed by the breadth of material, I return to my original conceptual framework or reach out to peers for discussion. These conversations often serve as a catalyst for refining research questions and clarifying my stance.



I have discovered that literature reviews are as much about personal growth as they are about academic rigour. Cultivating a balance between systematic organisation, critical interpretation, and collaborative reflection has been crucial in my experience. I hope my experiences encourage colleagues in Vietnam to explore literature with confidence. Finally, I believe a clear research focus, application of critical analysis, and an engagement in peer dialogue, can help us navigate the complexities of TESOL scholarship and contribute nuanced insights to our shared professional community.



Dr Raqib Chowdhury works in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Australia and is a Senior Fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy and a member of the Bilingualism Matters Advisory Group (UK). Raqib has published extensively in the areas of languages education and TESOL. His latest book is *The Privatisation of Higher Education in*

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