

CHAPTER 5

THE UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA CASE

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National Context for Teacher Research Literacy Policy

Teacher education is a key priority within Latvia's education policy, driven by persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified educators. These difficulties significantly impact the overall quality of education. To address this, the Regulations on the Education and Professional Qualifications of Teachers and the Procedure for Professional Development of Teachers (hereinafter – Regulation No. 569, 2018) established comprehensive requirements for various teacher roles. These include general education teachers, pre-school teachers, vocational education teachers, special educational needs teachers, social teachers, career counsellors, and speech therapists.

In Latvia, teacher education at the tertiary level follows two models: the concurrent model and the consecutive model. The concurrent model is available to students immediately after completing secondary education. This four-year programme integrates studies in the chosen academic subjects, with courses in education, research methods, psychology, information technology, and other related subjects. In addition, students undertake a teaching practice internship in schools. Upon graduation, students in the concurrent model earn qualifications in two teaching subjects. For example, they may qualify as teachers of English and German or as teachers of computer science and English. In the consecutive model, students first obtain a degree in a specific academic discipline before enrolling in a pedagogical training programme. This pathway typically takes five years and results in qualification to teach one core subject. During the final two study years, students engage in practical teaching experience in schools (Margevica-Grinberga & Odiņa, 2021). The concurrent model integrates pedagogy and subject matter within a single programme, while the consecutive

model separates disciplinary studies from pedagogical training. Further, there are fewer direct pathways. For example, students enrolled in disciplinary programmes such as English studies often are simultaneously employed at school or language centres while completing their degree, thereby gaining practical experience alongside their academic studies.

In accordance with Regulation No.569 (2018), individuals are eligible to work as teachers if they have completed higher education in teaching and hold a qualification in the subject they teach. This provision also applies to persons who first obtain a degree in a core subject and then acquire a teaching qualification. Alternatively, a person may teach if they hold higher education in the subject taught and have completed a professional development programme related to pedagogy amounting to 3 ECTS credits (Regulation No. 569, 2018). This approach has long served as one of the solutions to address the persistent shortage of teachers. Another important aspect is that the scientific work completed upon graduation is related to the content and didactics of the respective subject (Regulation No. 569, 2018).

In accordance with the Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 655 On the Types of State Universities (2021), the University of Latvia has been designated as a university of science. Consequently, research literacy is a core component of the learning outcomes across all study programmes. For future teachers, research literacy is essential not only for successful completion of studies but also for ongoing professional development. Furthermore, it equips them to incorporate research-based approaches into their teaching practice at schools.

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Introduction

Research literacy is defined as “the ability to judiciously use, apply and develop research as an integral part of one’s teaching” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 404). This means that students should be able to access and utilise information, critically evaluate and integrate different forms of evidence within their own context, and conduct their own research. Tatto and Furlong (2015) identify four ways in which research can benefit teacher education programmes. First, programme content can be informed by research-based knowledge and the scholarship of relevant academic disciplines, such as teaching and learning processes; subject matter research; and content assessment. Second, programme design can draw on research into effective approaches to teacher education. Third, teachers and

teacher educators can develop research competence, enabling them to access, interpret, and adapt evidence-based information into their own specific contexts. Finally, teachers and teacher educators can be prepared to conduct their own research (Tatto & Furlong, 2015).

The programmes at the University of Latvia adhere to the above-mentioned “guidelines”. Both teacher education curricula and research-intensive, subject-specific programmes maintain a robust research focus. Throughout their studies, students are expected to engage with and conduct research within their discipline, not only as part of their graduation thesis but also through various course assignments. The long-term aim of such an approach is to encourage students to apply research-based competences beyond graduation, enabling future teachers to integrate these skills into their teaching practice. The English Studies master’s study programme (MSP) spans two academic years and offers a range of courses in general linguistics, literary studies, and English language acquisition. The programme emphasises the integration of theoretical knowledge with the building of practical skills and the ability to undertake independent research. The final semester is dedicated entirely to the preparation of the master’s thesis (30 ECTS) in the students’ area of interest.

Study Course: Research Methodologies

In this section, we examine how research-based education principles in applied linguistics – particularly in the field of English language teaching and learning – are evident in the implementation of the study course Research Methodologies. This course is part of the mandatory curriculum of the English Studies master’s programme and is taken in the third semester, prior to data collection for the master’s thesis. Students are first introduced to research during their undergraduate studies. In the initial year of their master’s study programme, they attend various courses, such as *Foreign Language Acquisition Theory and Practice*, *Acquisition of English for Specific Purposes*, *Foreign Language Testing Technique*, *Semantics and Pragmatics for English Studies*, *Discourse and Critical Discourse Studies*, and *Corpus Linguistics*. These courses provide a foundation for developing research interests and preparing for advanced research work. Furthermore, they require students to undertake mini-research projects and produce reports that include a brief literature review, a description of research findings, clearly stated aims, research questions, and an outline of the research design. By the end of the first year, students specify their research topic and formulate a tentative title for their master’s thesis in collaboration with their

supervisors. Thus, before commencing the Research Methodology course, students have already formulated their research focus and established preliminary master's thesis topics.

The course Research Methodologies is designed to develop students' research competence, enabling them to apply acquired knowledge to their research projects during teaching internships at schools or universities and in the preparation of their master's theses. The linguistics module aims to equip students with general research methodological principles, such as validity, reliability, and triangulation. Upon successful completion of the course, students are expected to demonstrate a solid understanding of the research methodology used in their field, critically assess the approaches employed in prior scientific papers, and apply an appropriate methodological framework to their own research work.

Within the English Studies master's programme, two main student profiles can be identified. The first consists of practitioners who focus on researching teaching and learning processes within their English language classrooms. The second comprises students whose research interests centre on exploring various cognitive and sociocultural processes inherent in language. Regardless of the student profile, doing research in applied linguistics requires a clear theoretical perspective from which the phenomena under investigation are approached. Therefore, it is important to first draw students' attention to the generic term "research approach", which may be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method. The term refers to a macro-level perspective of research methodology and incorporates both the overall design of a study, as well as the methods used for data collection and data analysis. The key distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches lies in the nature of the data collected: qualitative data are described in words and typically obtained through interviews, observations, and texts, while quantitative data are numerical, often derived from test scores or responses to Likert-scale questionnaires. Nowadays, mixed-methods research – combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single study – is often employed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Students are trained in various research methods, for example, action research, case study, survey, discourse analysis, and data collection techniques such as observation, interviews, audio and video recording, document analysis, and testing. Discourse analysis, which focuses on interpreting intended meaning within context, requires careful reading and interpretation of textual material supported by linguistic evidence. One of the most commonly used methods is the

qualitative case study, defined as an in-depth examination of a specific instance, typically a class or an individual language learner, within real-world contexts. In applied linguistics research, case studies usually document learners' or users' language performance in instructional settings, examining their linguistic development over time, usually across a semester or an academic year.

The prominence of case studies can be attributed to their ability to allow close observation of individual learners or classes and intensive analysis of phenomena, rather than manipulating variables to determine causal significance, which is typical in quantitative research. In addition to interviews and questionnaires, case studies use two main types of observation: participant observation, where researchers actively engage in the activities being studied, and non-participant observation, where researchers remain detached from the group's activities. For instance, the master's thesis *Enhancing the Use of Cohesive Devices in the 10th Grade Students' Essays in English* examined the use of grammatical and lexical cohesive devices in a corpus of argumentative essays written by the 10th-grade English as a foreign language students at a secondary school. The study used a case study design comprising non-probability sampling, participant observation, and both quantitative and qualitative analyses of a questionnaire administered prior to the piloted lessons. It also included qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis of essays written before and after the piloted lessons. Similarly, the master's thesis *Task-based Material Design for the Acquisition of Articles at the B2 Level Through Distance Language Learning* employed a case study approach and utilised pre-tests, post-tests, and questionnaires as data collection tools. Moreover, students learn that the adopted approach within a particular research design plays a significant role in defining what constitutes valid research. To this end, they are introduced to key concepts such as validity or trustworthiness, which relates to the extent to which research findings can be considered credible; reliability or dependability, which concerns consistency in measuring something of interest; and triangulation, the use of multiple data collection methods, which is especially relevant in qualitative studies.

An important component of the course addresses ethical challenges that students might encounter in studies involving human participants. Prior to data collection, participants must be fully informed about the potential risks and benefits of the research before giving their informed consent. Thus, the course ensures that all research complies with widely accepted ethical principles and familiarises students with the procedures required to obtain approval from the university's ethics board.

To enhance students' understanding of underlying research concepts and processes, the course incorporates short "case-based tasks" that require proposing solutions within a given timeframe or designing an action research project. For instance, students may be asked to select a learner in their class who struggles with reading comprehension and implement several reading strategies. To track progress over a certain period of time, they design a reading observation checklist and use it to record the learner's engagement in activities aimed at improving reading comprehension. At the end of the pre-selected period, they conduct an interview with the learner to determine whether any changes have occurred. They are also assigned to select two scientific articles in their field of interest and critically analyse the research design and methods used. This activity not only familiarises students with the latest scientific research in language acquisition but also strengthens their ability to evaluate methodological rigor. Through these tasks, students actively engage in discussions about diverse approaches to solving research problems and consider alternative strategies that could have been applied in similar situations. Scientific knowledge developed by previous research is treated as a valuable resource that supports students in understanding practical teaching situations. This engagement with research encourages students to anticipate potential challenges they may face in their own studies and fosters a deeper awareness of their professional challenges. The course is based on the premise that students should not only be research-informed and capable of critically using research evidence but also be able to do research as an integral part of their everyday teaching practice. To achieve this, students are actively engaged in learning processes that encourage them to construct meaning based on their prior experience.

Students have opportunities to receive feedback on challenges or setbacks encountered during the research process by presenting their problems in class. In these sessions, peers work collaboratively in groups to discuss ways of handling issues within the constraints of the student's data collection context. This approach promotes reflective praxis, as students engage in analysing individual professional issues and co-construct solutions to particular problems. Furthermore, research requires a critical engagement with the work of other scholars, thus ensuring that students situate their inquiry within broader academic discourse. Another important element of the course is the literature review, which forms the theoretical foundation for each individual's master's thesis. This review assesses the value and contribution of theories, various scholarly claims, and research designs relevant to the chosen topic. It demonstrates students'

knowledge of the research area and their ability to identify both strengths and shortcomings in previous studies. Moreover, it reflects their ability to analyse, synthesise, and critically evaluate existing scholarship to establish connections among studies, and to articulate their insights in a coherent, discursive prose.

The course provides opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of applied linguistics and enhance their research literacy, thereby preparing them for the design and execution of small-scale research projects. Towards the end of the course, students must design a master's thesis proposal, outlining its theme, objectives, research methods, and formulating research questions or a hypothesis. Despite prior experience with bachelor's thesis writing, instructors and supervisors observe that students often struggle to articulate research goals and questions or to formulate a hypothesis – skills fundamental to any empirical research project.

To support students in this process, the course provides instruction on different types of research goals – exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory – and research questions, including descriptive, explanatory, evaluative, primary versus secondary, main versus contributory, and overarching versus subordinate (see Sunderland, 2010). Students also examine the implications of different research question types for data collection and analysis before formulating their own goals and research questions (or hypotheses). Further, proposals undergo peer and instructor review based on the devised evaluation criteria. Overall, the course combines knowledge of research methods with opportunities for collaborative learning, thereby enabling students to reflect on and discuss their work with instructors and peers. Furthermore, students are supported by their thesis supervisors, who advise on the most suitable research methods and tools for their research.

Conclusions

This study aims to advance understanding of current practices in teaching research methodology within applied linguistics as part of the “English Studies” master's programme at the University of Latvia. It emphasises the central role of research methodology as a core component of the programme, providing students with solid theoretical foundational knowledge and meaningful opportunities to learn and apply research methods. This preparation equips students not only for the successful completion of their master's theses but also for professional contexts where research competence is essential. The course seeks to strike a

balance between student-centred learning, which adapts to learners' evolving needs, and knowledge-centred learning, which fosters awareness of existing scholarship. This dual approach enables students to identify challenges encountered in their teaching practice, analyse these challenges collaboratively with peers and with the instructor, and contextualise them against the academic knowledge gained through literature review. As a result, the course facilitates students' ability to select their own approach to research and improve their overall performance. In summary, upon successful completion of the course Research Methodologies, students have strengthened their research literacy by applying relevant theoretical frameworks, critically evaluating and interpreting collected evidence within context, and conducting individual research within their chosen discipline.

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