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Navigating the labyrinth: Iranian mainstream EFL teachers' perceptions and praxis of action research

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Iranian mainstream English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers perceive and practice action research within their mandated professional development responsibilities. Using a sequential monomethod multistrand (QUAL → QUAL) design and thematic analysis, the study identified a persistent duality in teachers' engagement with action research. Four interrelated themes emerged, namely External Systemic Factors, Cognitive Divergence, The Paradox of Agency and Identity, and A Truncated Action Research Cycle. Findings revealed two contrasting enactments: action research as a Performative Façade, reduced to a bureaucratic requirement for evaluation and promotion, and action research as Subversive Praxis, characterized by covert, small-scale inquiries supported by informal digital networks. The study argued that imposing idealized action research models without structural, cultural, and epistemic support fosters superficial compliance and professional disillusionment.

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1. Introduction

The performance of an education system hinges on teachers' continuous professional development (CPD), as it enables them to respond to ever-changing instructional requirements and learner needs. In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT,

henceforth), continuous teacher learning is of paramount importance because it empowers teachers to implement innovative instructional approaches and foster inclusive learning environments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Action research (AR, henceforth) is conceptualized as a cyclical, participatory process where teachers identify challenges, implement interventions, and critically evaluate outcomes to enhance both instructional effectiveness and student achievement (McNiff, 2017). Scholarship underscores the dual potential of AR. Not only does it work as a catalyst for individual teacher development, but it also functions as a vehicle for promoting equity and transformative change in educational contexts (Burns, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Besides, it empowers educators to become knowledge producers and generate context-sensitive theories of practice rather than merely adopt externally imposed models (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). This practitioner-driven inquiry promotes critical reflection and adaptive expertise, hence contributing to sustained professional growth and enhanced instructional quality (McNiff, 2017).

Despite the promising potential of AR to foster individual professional growth and broader educational transformation, its effective implementation remains elusive in many teaching contexts. While AR is widely recognized for bridging the research-practice divide and enhancing student learning outcomes (Burns, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), a persistent gap persists between its theoretical endorsement and practical uptake by educators. Studies of ELT teacher perceptions across diverse settings have found that many practitioners view research as a highly technical endeavor, characterized by large-scale data collection, statistical rigor, and objectivity, thereby distancing themselves from more practitioner-led inquiry (Borg, 2009). These perceptions often render AR impractical within the constraints of everyday teaching (Banegas & Consoli, 2021). Moreover, systemic barriers such as limited time, insufficient methodological training, and restricted access to resources have long been identified as primary inhibitors of teacher engagement in research and AR (Borg, 2010). These challenges are compounded when professional development (PD, henceforth) programs fail to prepare educators for research-informed practice, often lacking the sustained support and context-sensitive training required to make research engagement feasible and relevant (Borg & Liu, 2013).

Although AR is formally recognized as a PD strategy for English language teachers in the Iranian educational context (Dehghan, 2015), its practical implementation has been limited, often due to teachers' traditional conceptions of research as an activity for academic specialists rather than classroom practitioners (Dehghan, 2015). Existing Iranian studies have primarily focused on teachers' conceptual understanding of AR, motivational factors, comparative analyses of AR models, and perceived barriers to engagement (e.g., Mehranirad, 2023). However, there is a notable lack of in-depth exploration of how Iranian EFL teachers actually experience AR in their classrooms, particularly regarding its pedagogical impact, resource use, and evaluation practices. This gap impedes the establishment of targeted, context-sensitive PD programs. To address this, the present study examined the narratives of Iranian mainstream EFL teachers who conducted AR in their instructional settings to provide empirical insights

for stakeholders. Importantly, this study focused on teachers employed by the Ministry of Education rather than those in private institutes, given markedly different institutional mandates. Mainstream teachers operate within a centralized, policy-driven system where professional growth and engagement with scholarly practices are shaped by national regulations (Jalali et al., 2025), whereas private institutes operate under decentralized management and lack formal research requirements (Gholami et al., 2016; Zohrabi & Paydar, 2025). Therefore, examining mainstream teachers' perceptions is essential, as their professional activities are directly aligned with national policies and carry greater implications for system-level instructional reform, ultimately informing sustainable PD models that enhance instructional quality across the public sector (Amiri Shayesteh & Baleghizadeh, 2023; Sadeghi & Ashegh Navaie, 2021).

The study addressed the following research question:

How do Iranian mainstream EFL teachers perceive conducting AR as part of their PD requirements?

2. Literature review

2.1. *AR and PD of EFL teachers*

Consistent with contemporary views of PD as reflective and inquiry-oriented, AR positions language teachers as autonomous and self-directed practitioners who iteratively examine and refine their practice so that context-sensitive solutions are developed, and their pedagogical expertise is deepened (Banegas, 2018; Burns, 2010). This process fosters critical reflective practice, recognized as essential for sustained professional growth and pedagogical innovation in dynamic classroom environments (Farrell, 2015; Mann & Walsh, 2017). AR also promotes professional autonomy by encouraging teachers to take ownership of their learning trajectories rather than passively adopting externally imposed reforms (Borg & Liu, 2013). As teachers engage in inquiry-driven cycles, they deepen their understanding of learner diversity and develop responsive teaching strategies (Burns, 2010).

Contemporary PD literature also advocates for AR as a means for enabling teachers not only to improve classroom practices but also to engage in collaborative knowledge construction with peers, contributing to school-wide improvement initiatives (Banegas et al., 2021). This social dimension of AR aligns with the principles of distributed leadership and professional learning communities, which have been shown to positively impact teacher motivation and student achievement (Harris, 2008).

However, despite growing recognition of AR as a vital bridge between educational theory and classroom practice, its implementation in TEFL contexts remains uneven and fraught with challenges. Previous studies have reported significant barriers, including limited teacher preparedness, insufficient research training, and structural constraints within educational systems (Borg, 2009). These challenges underscore the gap between the objectives of AR and the pragmatic realities faced by language educators; therefore,

there is a need for context-sensitive PD and sustained institutional support to realize AR's transformative potential fully.

2.2. *Empirical studies on AR in TEFL*

Among studies addressing teachers' perceptions of action research (AR), Borg's extensive work on teacher research engagement has been influential in establishing that EFL teachers generally hold moderate to positive attitudes toward AR, viewing it as beneficial for professional development (PD), classroom improvement, and student learning outcomes (Borg & Sanchez, 2015**).** However, a critical limitation of Borg's framework is its predominantly Western context**,** which may not account for the centralized educational governance and policy-driven career advancement systems characteristic of Iran (Eslami & Fatahi, 2008). Moreover, Borg's study revealed that teachers' professional identities and traditional conceptions of research can create tensions, particularly when AR is perceived as an academic endeavor disconnected from everyday teaching practice (Borg, 2010). This tension raises a critical question**:** if teachers recognize AR's value but view it as disconnected from practice, what structural factors perpetuate this disconnect? Borg's work suggests supportive structures are needed to help teachers reconcile their roles as practitioners and researchers**. Y**et, it offers limited guidance on how to implement such structures in resource-constrained, centrally-controlled educational systems like Iran's**.**

A growing body of research has examined AR's impact on pedagogical innovation and learner achievement, though these studies employ varying methodologies, limiting direct comparability**.** Manfra's (2019) conceptual analysis concluded that AR enables teachers to enact systematic, intentional changes in instructional practices by positioning themselves as reflective practitioners and researchers. Unlike empirical studies, Manfra's work provides theoretical grounding but lacks empirical validation of these claims in specific contexts. In contrast, Saeb et al.'s (2021) semester-long empirical study involving ten teachers who implemented classroom-based AR found significant improvements in teaching effectiveness, professional confidence, and responsiveness to student needs. The small sample size (n=10) and lack of a control group in Saeb et al.'s design limit generalizability, yet the study's strength lies in its longitudinal tracking of actual AR implementation rather than self-reported attitudes alone. Similarly, Mehranirad's (2017) narrative inquiry into Iranian teachers' experiences of conducting AR revealed that the process broadened pedagogical perspectives, strengthened reflective capacities, and empowered teachers to take more active roles in educational decision-making. Mehranirad's focus on Iranian contexts provides cultural specificity absent from Borg's and Manfra's work.

These empirical findings corroborate theoretical models suggested by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) and Carr and Kemmis (1986), who conceptualize AR as a cyclical process involving planning, action, observation, and reflection. However, the theoretical compactness of these models obscures practical complexities**.** When AR is embedded within collaborative PD frameworks, it fosters continuous instructional improvement.

Still, the literature provides scant evidence on what collaborative frameworks look like in practice or how they overcome institutional barriers.

A more critical examination reveals significant gaps in how barrier studies are conceptualized. Research on barriers to AR implementation consistently identifies insufficient training, limited time, inadequate resources, and ambiguous policy frameworks (Kennedy, 2016). Yet these studies largely treat barriers as universal rather than context-specific, failing to interrogate how barriers intersect with cultural, political, and institutional factors. In Iran specifically, recent research underscores a complex interplay between perceived value and practical constraints, but methodological inconsistencies across studies complicate synthesis. Saeb et al. (2021) found that, while educators recognize AR as powerful for enhancing teaching effectiveness, participation is hindered by limited methodological skills, insufficient training, and a lack of institutional support. Mehranirad (2017) identified similar obstacles and concluded that improved infrastructure and policy reforms are critical. Still, this recommendation remains abstract without addressing the political feasibility of policy reform in Iran's centralized system. Bahrami and Hosseini's (2023) study adds a crucial individual-difference dimension, emphasizing that teachers' research engagement is shaped by motivation, self-efficacy, and identity alignment, thereby shifting the analytical lens from purely structural barriers to psychological and identity-based factors. This represents a significant theoretical advancement over earlier barrier-focused studies, yet the study's cross-sectional design cannot establish causality between these individual differences and actual AR engagement. Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of equipping teachers with both conceptual understanding and practical tools, but the literature offers limited guidance on how to balance individual capacity-building with systemic reform.

As outlined above, international scholarship consistently reveals tension between AR's theoretical promise and practical constraints in school environments (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Manfra, 2019). However, this tension is rarely examined through the lens of power dynamics, i.e., whose interests does mandated AR serve: teachers, administrators, or policymakers? Iranian studies echo these findings but are further shaped by unique cultural and institutional dynamics, including centralized educational governance and policy-driven career advancement frameworks (Eslami & Fatahi, 2008). This centralization creates a paradox: teachers are required to conduct AR for career advancement, yet lack the autonomy, time, and resources for meaningful engagement. Most AR research in Iranian EFL contexts has focused on educators in private institutions, which operate under different constraints than those faced by mainstream teachers employed by the Ministry of Education. These mainstream teachers operate within rigid bureaucratic structures that emphasize research participation for career advancement yet often lack the institutional scaffolding necessary for genuine inquiry. This gap is critical because private institution teachers may have more autonomy, resources, and motivation than their mainstream counterparts, making findings from private institutions inapplicable to the majority of Iranian EFL teachers.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates the experiences, perceptions, and practices of Iranian mainstream EFL teachers regarding AR. By focusing on educators operating within formal regulatory frameworks, this research examines how institutional structures shape teacher inquiry. The findings aim to inform the design of contextually responsive PD programs that promote sustainable AR engagement, moving beyond generic recommendations to specify what supportive structures look like in Iran's centralized system.

3. Methodology

3.1. *Research design*

This study employed a Sequential Monomethod Multistrand (QUAL → QUAL) design (Tashakkori et al., 2020), incorporating interviews and open-ended questionnaires to enhance the credibility of the findings. In both strands, thematic analysis was conducted to explore the narratives of Iranian English teachers about conducting research within their classroom contexts.

3.2. *Sampling strategy and participants*

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who met specific criteria aligned with the study's objectives. The researchers aimed to include English language teachers currently working in Iran's mainstream education system who had prior teaching experience. Participants were contacted directly and invited to participate. Consistent with Corbin and Strauss (2008), data collection continued until saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes or insights emerged. The first strand involved ten English teachers (six females, four males), all actively teaching in the mainstream education system. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 31 years. Participants were aged 24 to 50, with an average age of 36. Educational qualifications included six with Bachelor's degrees and four with Master's degrees.

For the second strand, a group of experienced EFL teachers was selected from a Telegram group with 458 members. Although the initial sampling was purposive, the distribution of open-ended questionnaires in this phase used a convenience sampling approach, targeting those who were active and responsive within the group. Of the 458 teachers, 30 responded to the open-ended questionnaire shared via Telegram. All were involved in English language teaching within the mainstream system, with teaching experience ranging from 6 to 22 years. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 73 years (average age = 47.5). Their academic qualifications included 19 with B.A. degrees, 6 with M.A. degrees, and 5 with PhD degrees in TEFL.

3.3. *Data collection instruments*

In the first strand, semi-structured interviews were conducted with targeted questions designed to explore participants' narratives of conducting AR within their teaching contexts. This format allowed for consistency across interviews while providing the flexibility to probe deeper into emergent themes. Interview questions were developed based on a review of relevant literature (e.g., Borg, 2009, 2010; Dehghan, 2015). To complement and validate the interview findings, in the second strand of the study, a six-item open-ended questionnaire was developed. The target questions in both strands were initially reviewed by two experts, two university instructors, and piloted with two mainstream EFL teachers. The finalized items were used for both strands.

3.4. *Procedure*

To conduct the interviews, the first author contacted educational centers to obtain participant information and coordinated in-person meetings scheduled at the participants' convenience and conducted between September 7 and October 23, 2024. Each interview session lasted 30–55 minutes, was conducted in Persian, and recorded using an MP3 device. Participants were assigned pseudonyms (A–J) to ensure anonymity. Interviews began with warm-up questions to establish rapport, followed by the main items aligned with the study's objectives. Demographic data, including age, gender, academic degree, school type, and teaching experience, were collected in written form. All the interviews were audio-recorded to be later transcribed verbatim. For the second phase, the questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to a Telegram group of Iranian EFL teachers. Data collection in the second strand took one month, from November 14 to December 14, 2024. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to a Telegram group of Iranian EFL teachers.

3.5. *Data analysis*

The data from both strands of the study were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The first author engaged in repeated readings to identify meaningful patterns. Initial descriptive codes were created to represent recurring ideas and concepts. These codes were then grouped into broader, more abstract themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure clarity and relevance. All narratives and open-ended questionnaires were anonymized before analysis, with participants assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Following a sequential monomethod multistrand design (QUAL → QUAL), the two qualitative strands were sequentially integrated analytically. In strand 1, interview themes were developed first; in strand 2, open-ended responses were then analyzed using a hybrid approach: deductively applying Phase 1 themes, and inductively allowing new themes to emerge. The final thematic framework (Table 1) was

constructed by comparing themes across both strands, identifying convergent themes, phase-specific themes, and complementary insights.

To establish credibility and reduce researcher bias, the researchers used peer debriefing. They asked an impartial applied linguistics university professor to review and evaluate the transcripts, methodology, and identified themes. Additionally, referential adequacy was implemented by reserving a portion of the raw data for independent analysis and comparison of the themes developed by both authors of the study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021).

4. Results

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and open-ended questions uncovered a complex interaction of factors, organized into four main themes. Each theme encompasses some subthemes (Table 1). An explanation is in order. Following common qualitative practice (e.g., Chenail, 2012; Larsen et al., 2025), theme names were selected to capture the central organizing idea of each pattern, sometimes using metaphorical phrasing where this improved communicative clarity and reflected the interpretive nature of thematic analysis.

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes emerged in two phases of the study

Themes	Subthemes	Interview	Open-ended questionnaire
External systemic factors	Prescriptive vs inquiry-based classroom models	7	11
	Resource scarcity	6	12
	The maze of bureaucracy	5	11
Cognitive divergence	Trial-and-error versus systematic investigative processes	8	18
	Intellectual hegemony	9	0
	Instrumentalist conceptions of AR	3	5
The paradox of agency and identity	Subversive agency	5	3
	The complexity of the teacher-researcher role	3	0
	Emotional dimensions of agency	0	4
Praxis of AR: Evidence of a truncated research cycle	Problem identification driven by pedagogical friction	6	8
	Information-seeking in the digital bazaar	5	10
	Bricolage treatment	6	6
	Evaluation reduced to quantifiable outcomes	3	5

The first theme, called *External systemic factors*, addresses the conditions within the educational system, institutions, and resource-related issues that form the backdrop against which AR is perceived and attempted in Iran's mainstream education context. This theme reflects the environment teachers operate in and are expected to research. It includes three sub-themes: Prescriptive vs. Inquiring Classroom, Resource Scarcity, and the maze of bureaucracy.

Seven teachers participating in the first and eleven in the second phase of the study reported a system dominated by a top-down, textbook-focused, and exam-oriented curriculum. In such a context, they believe AR is a foreign concept that conflicts with the "sanctioned methodology" and rigid pace set by the Ministry of Education. The classroom is viewed as a space for implementation rather than innovation. Regarding this, T_f said,

> Teachers ought to be assessed and rewarded based on their effectiveness, publications, and how their students evaluate them. However, the evaluation system used by the Educational Department heavily depends on final exam results. Our career progress depends on those results.

Additionally, T_h said,

> It is extremely challenging, if not impossible, for me to conduct research... Occasionally, schools decrease the time allocated for English instruction to provide more time for Konkor (the entrance exam to universities) and other subjects like mathematics, biology, chemistry, and physics.

Six teachers in the first and 12 in the second phase of the study mentioned a pervasive lack of tangible and intangible resources. The subtheme refers to the limited access to international journals due to filtering, poor internet connectivity, lack of funding, and physical materials, such as broken laptops, lack of labs to implement their treatment or innovation pedagogy. T_d shared, "Once I wanted to conduct AR, I found I had no access to the recent resources. Many sites were filtered, and the costs associated with schools were a major obstacle." The metaphor of the "empty treasure chest", mentioned by T_a, captures the frustration of having the will but not the tool and the gap between expectation and reality.

The maze of bureaucracy emerged from the narrations of five teachers in the first phase and three in the second phase. They described how, once they decided to conduct a study, they were caught in a bureaucratic labyrinth, with difficulty obtaining permissions, limited time allocation, and no formal channels for support or mentorship. In this regard, the failure of principals and district authorities to provide support was a critical demotivator. For instance, T_b said, "The educational system does not provide support for teachers. I know they are aware of the problems in high schools, yet they choose to act as if they are oblivious."

The second theme was named *Cognitive divergence*, because it dealt with how the teachers understand AR. The analysis of transcripts revealed a gap between the scholarly definition of AR and their lived, practical interpretations within the Iranian

context. The theme subsumes three sub-themes, namely, *trial-and-error vs systematic inquiry, Intellectual hegemony,* and *Instrumentalist Conceptions*.

Trial-and-error vs systematic inquiry, mentioned by 26 teachers in both phases of the study (see Table 1), indicates that the teachers conflate AR with simple trial-and-error and informal reflection. It reveals there is a clear gap in understanding AR as a systematic, cyclical, and data-driven inquiry. For them, it is what a good teacher naturally does, not a formal research process. Eight teachers in the interview and eighteen in the open-ended questionnaire mentioned they either self-initiate an innovation that pops into their mind, or, after coming across an innovation or solution on social media, they search online resources and apply the ideas in a trial-and-error manner to find the best solutions. Seventeen teachers noted, in their response to open-ended questions, that they conduct research after gathering information from platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Telegram, and they attempt to implement actions to overcome obstacles. It appears that mainstream EFL teachers do not meticulously plan their methods by focusing on participants, the environment, or cultural and situational aspects; instead, they view these actions as experiments to identify the best results for overcoming their challenges. In this regard, T_d stated, "I engage in a lot of AR in my classes because some students struggle with learning. This situation creates various problems. I search the internet for solutions and implement them in class."

Intellectual hegemony denotes the situation where academic or university-based forms of knowledge are considered superior or exert control over practical, lived, or classroom experiences of teachers in the mainstream educational context. Teachers perceived a hierarchy where knowledge produced by university academics was valued as "real research". In contrast, the practical, contextual knowledge generated by their own inquiries was dismissed as "anecdotal" or "unscientific." This created a sense of inferiority. T_a reported, "Unfortunately, conducting AR is associated with higher education institutions in Iran rather than the mainstream educational system." This subtheme emerged from the interview phase of the study.

Instrumentalist conceptions, mentioned by ten teachers in both phases of the study, suggest that Iranian EFL teachers perceive research in the educational context as a means to ensure their yearly promotion rather than a means of transformation. They fail to perceive the role of AR as instigating an ongoing change in teaching practice and professional identity. As such, rather than address real educational challenges, AR in the Iranian educational context helps the teachers fulfill institutional requirements or career advancement metrics. This limited view can reduce research to a bureaucratic task disconnected from actual classroom improvement or professional growth. T_J shared,

> The truth is, I designed a study on the effect of gamification over one weekend. I ran the 'gamified' quizzes for three weeks; the kids were mildly more interested, maybe, and then I wrote up a 25-page report with charts and a bibliography. All to get this stamp from the research committee.

The third emerging theme was called *The paradox of agency and identity*. It emphasizes the intersection of identity and agency with the challenges and tensions inherent in practicing AR. It steers away from the subthemes mentioned earlier, which are basically cognitive or perception-related issues. The theme encompasses three subthemes: *Subversive agency in AR*, *The complexities of the teacher-researcher role*, and *Emotional dimensions of agency*.

Subversive agency in AR, mentioned by five interviewees and three respondents to the questionnaire, includes the interesting discovery that some Iranian EFL teachers conduct AR in secret and make small-scale changes without official approval, thereby finding moments of freedom within a limited educational system. This form of agency is marked by its covert, fragile nature; it operates beneath formal structures and often resists institutional norms or policies, allowing teacher-researchers to challenge and negotiate power dynamics subtly. Such subversive agency helps practitioners maintain their professional identity and pursue meaningful change while minimizing risks. In this regard, T_d shared,

> The book is outdated and sometimes culturally tone-deaf. So, in my class, we 'officially' use the book. But I have developed a parallel set of activities and discussion topics based on my own notes. I never photocopy them; that would leave a trail.

The complexities of the teacher-researcher role emphasize the dynamic and sometimes contradictory nature of agency and identity for teacher-researchers conducting AR under constraints. For some interviewees (n=3), this identity serves as a source of professional pride, offering a pathway to intellectual renewal, peer respect, and a sense that their voice extends beyond the confines of the classroom. In contrast, for others, it is an additional, unrewarded imposition on top of their already heavy workload, an uncompensated, unrecognized extra task. For example, T_c said, "Teacher-researcher? Give me a break. They love these fancy terms. My job is to teach my students, manage a classroom, grade papers, and call parents. That's more than a full-time job right there."

Emotional dimensions of agency reflect teachers' fear of failure and social judgment. About four teachers in the second phase of the study wrote about their fears that if their AR projects failed to produce clear, recognizable results, they would be perceived as incompetent or inadequate by their colleagues. This fear of public failure and negative judgment acts as a powerful deterrent to taking risks or fully engaging in research activities. They experience stress and vulnerability and are concerned about loss of respect and professional standing within the community. As T_G summarized, "Trying something new and having it fail in secret is a learning experience; having it fail in front of everyone is a professional setback." This fear acts as a powerful barrier, discouraging risk-taking and encouraging a retreat to safe, conventional teaching practices.

The fourth theme was named *The praxis of AR: A truncated cycle.* It underscores how they employ their knowledge about AR (see theme 2) and make adaptations in their professional practices. Rather than enact the full iterative cycle of AR, they often implement a simplified and selective version of the process, one that aligns more

practically with their institutional constraints, classroom demands, time limitations, and most importantly, their own definition of AR. This truncated enactment of AR not only signals a deficiency in methodological rigor but also a pragmatic negotiation between idealized frameworks and the situated realities of teaching. The subthemes of this major theme essentially represent the phases of AR that practitioners engage in their contexts: *Problem-identification driven by pedagogical friction, Information seeking in the digital bazaar, Bricolage treatment,* and *Evaluation reduced to quantifiable outcomes.*

Six teachers in the first phase and eight in the second shared how and when they decide to run an AR. The subtheme *Problem-identification driven by pedagogical friction* indicated that the AR cycle starts authentically, triggered by a real problem in the classroom, such as learners' inability to memorize something or the teacher's difficulty in teaching something. However, five teachers in the first phase and ten in the second phase mentioned that, as the second step, rather than reviewing scholarly literature, they *seek information in the "Digital bazaar."* This is pragmatic, accessible, and offers ready-to-use "packages" rather than theories to adapt. Four participants reported using ChatGPT as a new entrant in this bazaar.

Bricolage treatment, mentioned by twelve participants in both phases, refers to the implementation phase of their AR, which often involves combining whatever tools, knowledge, and ideas they discovered in the Digital Bazaar and putting them immediately and directly into practical motion to see how they work. T_F mentioned, "[...] I read about their applications, sites, and methods on the Internet, and creatively use them to find the best solution that fits my context."

The final step in the Iranian EFL teachers' AR was called *Evaluation reduced to quantifiable outcomes.* The subtheme that was mentioned by three participants in the first phase and five in the second phase of the study suggests that the reflective and iterative spirit of AR is lost. Evaluation becomes a summative, binary judgment rather than a formative inquiry. The process is to provide answers for two questions: "Did the learners' grades go up?" and "Was it easier for me to teach?" If the answer is "yes," the method is added to teachers' repertoire; if "no," it is discarded. This approach lacks documentation, formal reflection, or sharing, stripping AR of its transformative potential. In this relation, T_E said, "I always explore different methods and continue those that have a positive effect on student grades." Similarly, T_C shared, "[…] and after the intervention, all my students received good grades. All of my evaluations were quantitative rather than qualitative [...]."

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Iranian mainstream English teachers regarding conducting AR in their professional contexts. The findings in relation to *External systemic factors* reveal a context in which AR is structurally constrained, aligning with, yet intensifying the challenges documented in the international literature. The sub-theme of a *Prescriptive vs. inquiring classroom* indicates a fundamental conflict

between AR's nature and the realities of some educational systems. As Dusty (2024:2) notes, AR is "a tool for learning and creating change; it also provides a framework to facilitate practitioner inquiry to adopt a more participatory, collaborative, and democratizing approach." However, the Iranian teachers' portrayal of a rigid, exam-driven procedure reflects what Safari and Rashidi (2015: 8) identified as "the prevalence of the transmission" model in teacher education programs where teachers are positioned as technicians implementing a fixed curriculum rather than as reflective practitioners. This engenders a profound incongruity; while AR requires a space for pedagogical experimentation, the system prioritizes conformity and measurable outcomes. This finding resonates with broader critiques of "the field of judgment" (Gore et al., 2022: 2), where performativity, i.e., the effects of accountability on teachers that stem from judgment, comparison, and control (Ball, 2003), is accentuated by the promotion of a teacher quality agenda, and as a result, teachers are reduced to technicians. Furthermore, the intersecting sub-themes of *Resource scarcity* and the *maze of bureaucracy* compound these barriers with severe practical impediments. While lack of time and resources is a near-universal complaint in AR literature, the Iranian case presents acute manifestations: filtering of academic sites, a complete lack of funding, and broken equipment. The "empty treasure chest" metaphor starkly illustrates the gap between policy rhetoric encouraging teacher development and the reality of deprivation. The bureaucratic labyrinth, where teachers struggle for permissions and receive no mentorship or recognition, further institutionalizes isolation. This absence of supportive structures contrasts sharply with literature emphasizing that successful AR depends on "collaborative support systems" and "institutional recognition" (Edwards & Burns, 2016: 10). The teachers' experience of receiving no points or support for professional achievements exemplifies a system that not only fails to facilitate inquiry but actively demotivates it. Consequently, these systemic factors collectively construct an environment where AR is perceived not as a tool for professional development, but as a burdensome extra task, highlighting a significant disconnect between the emancipatory ideals of AR and the constraining realities of centralized educational systems.

The emergence of *Cognitive divergence* reveals a multifaceted misunderstanding of AR among Iranian mainstream EFL teachers, which critically undermines its potential as a tool for professional development. Confusing AR with informal trial-and-error, as detailed in the first subtheme, underscores a significant gap in understanding AR as a disciplined and systematic inquiry. This perception of AR resonates with broader critiques in the literature, where AR is often mistaken for everyday problem-solving rather than a form of practitioner knowledge generation (Banegas & Consoli, 2021). Such a limited view prevents AR from being employed as a means for sustained professional growth and instead relegates it to an ad hoc activity. This conceptual ambiguity is exacerbated by what teachers perceive as an *Intellectual hegemony*, where university-produced knowledge is valued over practitioner-generated insight. This dynamic creates a sense of inferiority and disincentivizes teachers from viewing their own systematic inquiry as legitimate, a barrier noted in studies of teacher research engagement in various contexts.

Furthermore, this divergence is institutionalized through *Instrumentalist conceptions* of AR. When teachers approach research primarily as a bureaucratic requirement for promotion, i.e., a "ticket" for career advancement, its potential is nullified. This finding resonates with critiques that AR can become a performative exercise when divorced from authentic, teacher-driven questions and supported only by compliance-based incentives (Manfra, 2019; Saeb et al., 2021). The outcome is not a reflective, emancipatory cycle but a practical test designed to meet external benchmarks. As a result, the fundamental aim of AR as a tool to empower teachers to understand and enhance their own settings is lost (Johnson et al., 2025).

The third theme, *The paradox of agency and identity,* reveals the tension between the empowering potential of AR and the constraining realities of the Iranian EFL context. The finding in relation to *Subversive Agency*, where teachers conduct covert, small-scale inquiries, exemplifies a critical form of ecological negotiation which may imply that "agency denotes a quality of the engagement of actors with temporal–relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves" (Biesta et al., 2015: 626). Teachers' secretive adaptation of materials and methods represents a strategic assertion of "occupational professionalism," a commitment to long-term, principled practice, within a system that often enforces a compliant, "organizational professionalism" (Evetts, 2009, as cited in Peiser et al., 2022: 2). This covert praxis allows teachers to maintain a professional identity rooted in pedagogical values, even as their agency remains fragile and hidden from official view.

This subversive agency can be linked to *The complexities of the teacher-researcher role,* which is represented as a source of identity empowerment for some and a burdensome imposition for others. For those who embrace it, engaging with research provides a pathway to "develop attitudes that seek continual professional renewal" (Peiser et al., 2022: 2). Conversely, for teachers who see AR as an uncompensated extra duty, the identity is rejected, reflecting a perceived disconnect between theoretical activity and the overwhelming practical demands of teaching. This dichotomy may suggest that the teacher-researcher identity is not uniformly internalized but is instead a site of conflict, shaped by whether the work is experienced as intrinsically meaningful or as an extrinsic, bureaucratic burden. On the other hand, the *Emotional dimensions of agency*, particularly the fear of public failure and social judgment, provide a crucial psychological lens for understanding these paradoxes. The described anxiety over being perceived as incompetent directly relates to the framework of epistemic emotions, emotions arising from engaging with knowledge (Peiser et al., 2022). The teachers' fear is a potent epistemic emotion triggered by the antecedent of perceived low control over outcomes and high complexity, coupled with the high value placed on professional respect within their community. As Peiser et al. (2022: 4) note, "antecedents, however, can also result in more positive emotions which subsequently lead to more favorable views of research." This fear incentivizes secrecy, making subversive agency not only a political choice but an emotional refuge. It contrasts with the positive epistemic emotions (e.g., enjoyment, curiosity) fostered in supportive, collaborative environments like the Master's program studied by Woore et al. (2020), where structured support and a

community of practice reduced perceived risk and enhanced the value and control antecedents.

The fourth theme, *The praxis of action research: a truncated cycle*, highlights how Iranian EFL teachers operationalize their understanding of AR. Unlike the structured, cyclical model often depicted in theoretical frameworks, these teachers enact a simplified, selective version of the process. This truncated enactment also reflects a pragmatic negotiation between idealized AR methodologies and the situated constraints of their institutional environments, time limitations, and personal definitions of AR. For Iranian EFL teachers, the AR cycle often begins authentically, triggered by immediate classroom challenges such as students' difficulty in memorizing vocabulary or the teacher's struggle with explaining a grammatical concept. This contrasts with the Chinese context described by Chen (2022), where teachers' problem identification was frequently guided or endorsed by external authorities, such as municipal teaching researchers. In China, teachers "tended to draw on authoritative information to steer their collaborative action research" (Chen, 2022:6), whereas Iranian teachers' point of departure was more directly rooted in daily pedagogical friction. Rather than engaging deeply with scholarly literature or seeking guidance from educational authorities, Iranian teachers reported turning to digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, Google, and increasingly ChatGPT for solutions. This practice stands in stark contrast to the Chinese teachers, who relied on "professional support from higher educational authorities who share their teaching experiences and understand the practical problems confronting frontline teachers" (Chen 2022: 9). The Iranian approach is more decentralized, immediate, and oriented toward readily applicable "packages" rather than theory-driven inquiry.

That Iranian EFL teachers truncate the AR cycle resonates strongly with the barriers identified in Mehranirad and Behzadpoor (2022). Their survey of Iranian EFL teachers highlighted that "restrictive educational policies" (93) and "lack of systematic partnership" (79) between researchers and practitioners hinder full research engagement. Similarly, they note that teachers often rely on "web-based materials and books in which research findings are often presented in a digested form" rather than academic journals (87). This mirrors our subtheme *Information seeking in the digital bazaar*, where teachers turn to ready-to-use solutions. Moreover, this reliance on readily accessible, often nonacademic digital resources reflects a broader trend where teachers, facing time constraints and a lack of access to formal research, are encouraged to "seek directly applicable knowledge for quick and particular workplace solutions" (Peiser et al., 2022: 2–3).

The implementation phase was characterized by *bricolage*, a creative, improvisational combination of ideas, tools, and methods sourced from the digital bazaar. While demonstrating agency and creativity, this approach contrasts sharply with the disciplined, systematic process envisaged by AR theorists. McNiff (2017: 11) emphasizes that AR should be a "disciplined, systematic process" following a notional plan of "take stock," "think of a possible way forward," "try it out," and "monitor the action by gathering data." The teachers' bricolage, while pragmatic, often bypasses this systematic

planning and data collection design, moving directly to trial. This aligns with the finding that many teachers conflate AR with informal trial-and-error, a conceptual gap that prevents the methodological rigor required to generate valid knowledge (Borg & Sanchez, 2015). Finally, *Evaluation reduced to quantifiable outcomes* implies that success is judged solely by improved grades or teaching ease. Without the skills or time to engage in meaningful analysis and reflection, the rich, qualitative understanding of why a change worked is lost. Consequently, as one teacher noted, evaluations remain "quantitative rather than qualitative," which stands in stark contrast to the purpose of AR, i.e., to "generate new knowledge, which feeds into new theory" (McNiff, 2017: 18).

6. Conclusion

This study offers an in-depth exploration of the complex reality of conducting Action Research as perceived and enacted by Iranian mainstream EFL teachers. The findings demonstrate that the canonical, cyclical model of AR, envisioned as a vehicle for transformative teacher empowerment and systemic improvement, undergoes a fundamental re-contextualization within the Iranian mainstream setting. AR in this context manifests not as a unified practice but as a context-generated duality. First, it exists as a performative, instrumental façade, a bureaucratic commodity to satisfy promotion metrics, prioritizing report production over the process and hollowing out AR's reflective core. At the same time, AR survives as a subversive praxis, characterized by covert classroom experimentation, reliance on the informal digital bazaar for solutions, and a truncated cycle of inquiry focused on immediate, pragmatic problem-solving. Teachers, therefore, are not merely struggling implementers; they are pragmatic bricoleurs and covert agents, navigating a labyrinth of systemic contradictions by internalizing a diluted, instrumentalist understanding of research while channeling their professional commitment into hidden acts of pedagogical innovation. The findings may imply that top-down mandates that impose idealized AR models without concomitant, radical investment in supportive infrastructures are not merely ineffective but actively counterproductive, fostering cynicism and performativity. The path forward requires a paradigm shift from standardized compliance to contextualized cultivation. Policymakers might establish non-bureaucratic funding streams for teacher-led action research and formally recognize successful AR projects as equivalent to published papers in promotion criteria. Schools and teacher education centers could create voluntary, low-stakes AR support networks, for example, quarterly peer-feedback sessions, and provide free access to curated digital resources to replace reliance on unvetted social media content.

The findings of this study should be seen in light of some limitations. While this approach revealed complex themes of constraint, cognition, and agency, it limits the generalizability of the findings, as the insights are not statistically representative of a broader population. The reliance on self-reported data from interviews and open-ended questionnaires, while standard in the qualitative research paradigm, also introduces

potential limitations. Another related limitation concerns the second-phase sampling strategy.

Although the demographic heterogeneity of the sample, particularly the wide age range (22–73 years) and varying academic qualifications, B.A. to Ph.D., reflects the reality of the Iranian EFL teaching context, it may reduce the comparability of participants' perceptions and praxis of action research. Moreover, the convenience sampling via a single Telegram group introduced potential self-selection bias, limiting representativeness. Future research could overcome these issues through quantitative designs employing stratified random sampling (to control for age and qualifications), and probability sampling across multiple settings, or through mixed-methods approaches that integrate large-scale surveys with purposive qualitative follow-ups.

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