



*The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language*

## **The Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (*TESL-EJ*): A Bibliometric Analysis of the First 99 Issues**

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**William S. Pearson**

University of Exeter

<wpearson83@gmail.com>

### **Abstract**

February 2022 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)*, set up in 1994 as the brainchild of a group of scholars who saw the need for a freely distributed electronic academic journal covering a diverse array of interests within teaching English as a second language long before the term “open access” was coined. The present study constitutes a bibliometric analysis of the first 99 issues of *TESL-EJ*. Through cross-sectional and historical analysis of a range of key metrics, notably the scale of its output and citations by other authors, frequency of topics explored, most productive and influential author affiliations and countries, and the extent of author collaboration, the study analyzes the growth and development of research activity as reflected in the publication’s output during the period under study. The study found that the nature of the journal’s output has evolved over the years from anecdotal practitioner reviews and thought pieces to rigorous empirical research. As a US-based journal, North American scholarship is well-represented across *TESL-EJ*’s output, particularly in studies contextualized in tertiary-level settings. There has been a consistent tendency towards non-specialist research topics within teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), notably, *EFL*, *writing*, *language learning*, *English teacher*, *English language learner*, reflective of the journal’s large, global readership. The implications for the journal’s stakeholders, the editorial team and scholars considering submission are discussed.

**Keywords:** TESL-EJ, bibliometric analysis, bibliometrics, Google Scholar

*TESL-EJ* (Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal, available at <http://www.TESL-EJ.org>) is an open access (no fees payable), online-only academic journal with a focus on teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), published since 1994. The journal releases quarterly volumes, featuring research articles that cover a wide range of interests within TESOL (notably English as a second/foreign language pedagogy, second language acquisition,

language assessment, applied socio- and psycholinguistics), occasional special issues (most recently on teaching, learning, assessing, and researching L2 pragmatics in honor of Prof. Zohreh R. Eslami), and book, media, and teacher resource reviews. The journal is fully refereed -- each article undergoes an initial review by the editor. If the editor decides that it fits within the guidelines outlined, then it is further reviewed by at least two knowledgeable scholars. Submissions have risen steadily in recent years (from 125 in 2017 to 219 in 2020), with an average acceptance rate of 15%. *TESL-EJ* is indexed by LLBA, ERIC, EBSCO, and Scopus, among others.

*TESL-EJ* was originally established as an extension of TESL-L, an online discussion network hosted by the City University of New York using the Listserv system back in 1991. All aspects of that system were managed by email – the postings themselves, of course, but even subscribing and accessing archived messages. There was no means to make longer articles available, although there were compilations of threads on specific topics such as “Large Classes” (TESL-L, 1991). In 1993, the creator/manager of TESL-L, Anthea Tillyer suggested that the organizing committee established an online journal (Tillyer, 1995), an idea which the committee enthusiastically endorsed. Maggie Sokolik was selected as the editor, and *TESL-EJ* was born. The first few volumes were made available by downloading desired articles from one of four servers located in Berkeley, USA, Kyoto, Japan, Bremen, Germany, and Melbourne, Australia in the user’s choice of MS Word, Word Perfect or text formats – HTML was still in its infancy. It was not until 1997 that the HTML versions of the earlier issues were created, with the browser-based issues becoming the default.

Since the internet, as we know it, was still in its infancy, the audience for the journal was mostly those at universities around the world since they had better connectivity through networks such as BITNET, Arpanet, Usenet or commercial networks such as AOL or Earthlink. While the percentage of users in other educational levels has grown, the bulk of users still tend to be university-based, perhaps since those are the ones under constant pressure to publish. Originally, the article types tended to echo those of TESL-L itself. A “Forum” section summarized one recent discussion thread, for example. “On-the-Internet” was edited by the same person who hosted TESL-CA, the *TESL-EJ* branch for Computer Assisted Language Learning. Book reviews required the editors to maintain a collection of recent publications contributed by publishers and then to distribute them by post to those who requested to review them.

While the journal has always accepted articles on any subfield of English as a second or foreign language teaching and learning, it has avoided articles which were overly technical, with the object of making research findings understandable to the on-the-ground teacher. Similarly, it has also avoided teacher-contributed articles that merely espoused a new way of teaching without empirical evidence that the technique “works”. *TESL-EJ* never was overly concerned with its status vis-a-vis other journals, but with the increasing concern of authors wishing to publish in high-ranking publications, *TESL-EJ* has only in the past few years attempted to get itself listed on the major indices. It is now listed in Scopus, although only a few issues are currently indexed, which renders the statistics rather inaccurate. An application to SSCI (Social Sciences Citations Index) is in its final stages as well. To celebrate *TESL-EJ*’s 100<sup>th</sup> edition, members of the editorial board undertook this bibliometric metric study of the journal’s extant output.

Bibliometric analysis has emerged as a type of quantitative research method used in information science to identify and describe patterns of publication within a particular subject area or body of literature (Swain, 2013; Zhang, 2019). Bibliometric studies typically provide global perspectives on the productivity of authors, institutions, and regions, prevalent topics of interest, dates and

places of publications, and patterns of references (Swain, 2013; Zhang, 2019). The impact of research is evaluated using citation data, a familiar metric to researchers, practitioners, students, librarians, and funding agencies (Zhang, 2019). By factoring time into the analysis (through normalizing citation counts relative to the size of the literature body for a given point in time), it is possible to identify historical trends and the emergence of new areas of interest (Chang et al., 2015; Lei & Liu, 2019a). Bibliometric analysis has recently been applied to the discipline of linguistics in investigations centered on academic journals in the field (Arik, 2015; Lei & Liu, 2019a), on topics such as second language acquisition (SLA) (Zhang, 2019), computer-assisted language learning (Jung, 2005), and “trans-” studies (Sun & Lan, 2021), and on scholarly output from the People’s Republic of China, its special administrative regions, and Taiwan (Lei & Liao, 2017). Such studies have arisen in conjunction with the development and entrenchment of electronic indices of research (e.g., the Web of Science, Scopus, and the SSCI), enabling the efficient construction of datasets that are typically very large (Lei & Liu, 2019a).

While bibliometric research is often undertaken at the disciplinary or sub-disciplinary level, studies of discrete academic publications, undertaken due to a journal’s prestige or uniqueness (Anyi et al., 2009; Mukherjee, 2009), are not uncommon (Bharvi et al., 2003; Garg, 2003; Jung, 2005; Lei & Liu, 2019b; Swain, 2013; Tiew et al., 2001). Anyi et al.’s (2009) review of bibliometric studies of single journals identified no fewer than 82 articles (encompassing 62 unique titles) published between 1998 and 2008. Only 15% fell within the arts, humanities, and social sciences. None could be considered applied linguistics or TESOL, with Lei and Liu’s (2019b) recent bibliometric study of *System* constituting the sole discrete study of an applied linguistics (AL)/TESOL journal that could be retrieved. Nevertheless, the rationale for undertaking a single journal analysis is largely not disciplinary-specific. When an individual journal is studied bibliometrically, a detailed portrait of the journal is created, indicating its quality, maturity, research orientation, and productivity (Anyi et al., 2009). Additionally, such studies serve to enhance the visibility and accessibility of both the journal and significant studies published within it (Tiew et al., 2001). The findings may influence a prospective author’s choice of the journal as a channel to communicate their research as well as the way in which the journal meets the needs of its readership (Anyi et al., 2009). They could also affect the future direction of the journal by impacting on editorial and peer review policies and processes, quality control, and the selection of special issue topics.

The current study aims to provide a comprehensive, top-down view of *TESL-EJ* targeted at practitioners, researchers, and organizations by examining bibliometric data covering the first 99 issues of the journal and answering the following research questions:

1. How has the productivity and impact of the journal changed over the first 99 issues?
2. What are the most cited documents across the journal?
3. Which countries and institutions are most productive and impactful in relation to the journal’s content?
4. What have been the most frequently explored topics?

## **Method**

### **Data Sources**

Data were retrieved from two sources. First, *TESL-EJ*’s database of published content was queried to obtain bibliometric records of all documents published in the first 99 issues. Bibliometric data

pertinent to this investigation encompassed the year of document publication, author name(s), the institutional affiliation(s) and country of origin of the primary author, document type, and title. Article abstracts, used to determine the most frequently explored topics, were extracted manually for all research articles along with other document types when available.

As with other bibliometric studies (Swain, 2013), citation data were extracted automatically from Google Scholar (GS) using the software *Publish or Perish* (Harzing, 2021). Data were retrieved on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2021. Google Scholar is a free online search engine of academic texts that provides citation information. In comparison to the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, Google Scholar crawls a wider range of sources that include books, book chapters, conference papers, unpublished documents, blog posts, and web pages (Harzing, 2014; Zhang, 2019). This additional coverage may account for the further 26% of citations compared with the other indices (Martín-Martín et al., 2021), some of which constitute indicators of early citation impact (Thelwall & Kousha, 2017). While the academic quality and impact of Google Scholar citation sources has come under criticism compared to the Web of Science and Scopus (Aguillo, 2012; Martín-Martín et al., 2021), it is also the case that *TESL-EJ* has always been an open-access, practitioner-orientated journal targeting a wide international audience. In practice, WoS and Scopus were not viable alternatives since, currently, *TESL-EJ* is not listed on WoS and features bibliometric records on Scopus that date back only to 2018.

### **Data Analysis**

To identify the most frequently explored research topics across the timespan of *TESL-EJ*'s existence, the present authors followed the established practice of mining abstracts for recurring keywords rather than taking author suggested keywords at face value (Lei & Liu, 2019a; Zhang, 2019). First, document abstracts were lemmatized using *TagAnt* (Anthony, 2015), a freeware tool that annotates texts with parts of speech (POS) information. The lemmatized abstracts were input into *AntConc* (Anthony, 2018) to be queried for *n*-grams of one to five words in length (Lei & Liu, 2019a; Sun & Lan, 2021). Since research topics can contain a variety of language forms, author keywords for all 2001-2020 articles (totaling 10,125 entries) from 16 high ranking SLA-focused journals (see Zhang, 2019) were initially retrieved using Scopus, lemmatized in TagAnt, and investigated for recurring structural patterns. Thirteen patterns that occurred more than once (coded from keywords that met a minimum frequency cut off of six) were identified through manual examination, outlined in Appendix 1. Then, the corpus of article abstracts was queried using the POS patterns to generate a raw, uncleaned list of most frequently occurring topics.

A minimum cut-off of ten occurrences across the timespan (with no minimum dispersion figure across abstracts) was set to achieve the appropriate balance between item significance and exclusion of important topics. This figure is consistent with Lei and Liu (2019b), although lower than other studies (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Lei & Liu, 2019a; Sun & Lan, 2021) since documents that featured abstracts were less common in earlier iterations of the journal (owing to the high number of reviews and Forum pieces). Using this frequency criterion, a total of 698 *n*-grams were retrieved (combined across the four time periods). Manual checking of the *n*-grams was undertaken to ensure the uncovered items constituted meaningful research topics, generally taken to mean individual or multi-word keywords used in article submissions to academic journals to help the reader identify the focal area of the study (e.g., *automated writing evaluation*, *listening comprehension*) (Lei & Liu, 2019a). Words or clusters where a clear topic was absent (*pedagogical implications*) were straightforwardly excluded before multiple, iterative rounds of checking were undertaken to develop principles to address a number of uncertainties.

As reported elsewhere (see Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Lei & Liu, 2019a), the process of manually excluding items involved a degree of subjectivity, notably in determining whether an item possessed sufficient specificity to be considered a valid research topic and addressing overlapping topic bundles. Single-word instances, such as *students*, *learning*, and *teaching*, were deemed too general, while *accuracy*, *vocabulary*, and *comprehension*, considered pivotal concerns within applied linguistics and TESOL, were not. Uncertain items were cross-referenced with our list of author-supplied keywords from the 16 high-performing SLA-focused journals, with those that did not occur a minimum of six times across the dataset being eliminated. Frequency counts of singular and plural forms were combined (e.g., *language teacher* and *language teachers*), except in instances where only the plural form constituted a valid keyword (*beliefs*, *pragmatics*).

It was also necessary to merge a number of the results where more than one term was used to denote more or less the same thing (e.g., *English teacher* and *teacher of English*). However, instances where concepts did not fully overlap (e.g., *EFL* and *ESL*, *vocabulary* and *vocabulary learning*) were not merged. Most abbreviated concepts (e.g., *EFL*, *EAP*, *TESOL*) were included but their spelt-out forms omitted to avoid duplication. Additionally, frequency counts of one or two-word concepts contained within longer lexical bundles (e.g., *EFL* within *EFL learner*) were manually subtracted to avoid duplication. Finally, unlike Lei and Liu (2019), we excluded concepts relating to research methods (*interview*, *questionnaire*) from the rank order of topics since we found they did not constitute valid keywords across the list of 10,125 SLA studies. However, we do comment on certain prevalent terms in the results since methodology is of notable importance to applied linguistics and TESOL researchers.

The final list of 145 keywords were input into AntConc to uncover their prevalence in the corpus of article abstracts. Prevalence was measured as dispersion across documents with abstracts. In other words, multiple occurrences of a topic within an abstract were recorded as one. To measure whether there was a meaningful difference in the frequencies of explored topics over the lifetime of the journal, the corpus was divided into three discrete timespans (1994-2007 [130 documents], 2008-2016 [154], and 2017-2021 [169]). Time periods of irregular length were selected largely for reasons of practicality. Early issues of *TESL-EJ* featured few documents with abstracts (i.e., research articles), while dividing the timeframe into four, as in the analysis of document trends, would increase the difficulty in identifying meaningful trends. The final frequencies of keywords were normalized using the formula “raw frequency / total number of documents with abstracts for the timeframe x 100” to account for variations in the output of the journal. Percentage changes involving a timeframe where a topic recorded zero incidences were excluded because it was not possible to calculate the percentage difference.

## Results and Discussion

### Journal Productivity and Trends in Output Types

**Table 1. Distribution of documents and citations across seven-year intervals, 1994-2021**

Interval	Documents		Citations	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
2015-2021	341	22.0%	1,495	8.0%
2008-2014	384	24.8%	4,983	26.6%
2001-2007	497	32.0%	9,972	53.2%
1994-2000	329	21.2%	2,300	12.3%

The pattern of number of citations after 2001 shown in Table 1 is perhaps predictable. Papers tend to accumulate citations with the passing of time, with authors copying references by other authors writing in the same field. This leads to a “snowball” effect for certain papers as they become recognized as “standard” references (Aksnes et al., 2019). It is to be expected that this effect will build at first and then gradually decline (Aksnes, 2003; Tahamtan et al., 2016), with the number of new citations gradually become fewer as the papers become older and are replaced by more recent research (Barnett & Fink, 2008). Thus, it is likely that the number of citations of papers published in the period 2015-2021 will grow with time, while the number of citations of articles that appeared in 2001-2007 will tail off.

While this factor may largely account for the patterns of citation from 2001 onwards, it does not explain the smaller number of citations in the first period. Part of the explanation for this is simple: the infant *TESL-EJ* did not at first appear four times a year. Volume 1, number 1 came out in April 1994; number 2 came out in August of the same year, number 3 appeared in March 1995, and number 4 appeared later that year, though it is actually undated! The first editor, Maggie Sokolik, wrote in her “From the editor” column of volume I, number 4 “With this issue, we finish our first “year” of publication. It took us a little longer than a year to get four issues to you [...] we hope for a more efficient Volume 2”. Despite this optimism, only two issues appeared in 1996; four volumes had been issued by the end of 2000. The year 2001 saw three numbers issued, but from 2002 onward the journal has appeared four times per year, though volume numbers do not match the calendar year.

**Table 2. Distribution of document types across seven-year intervals**

Interval	Articles		Reviews		Media		On the Internet		Forum	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
2015-2021	213	62.5%	71	20.8%	28	8.2%	26	7.6%	0	0.0%
2008-2014	110	28.6%	201	52.3%	45	11.7%	28	7.3%	0	0.0%
2001-2007	88	17.7%	295	59.4%	63	12.7%	27	5.4%	24	4.8%
1994-2000	42	12.8%	219	66.6%	27	8.2%	19	5.8%	22	6.7%

Table 2 shows another probable reason for the smaller number of citations relating to the early period. Here, we see a development in the types of documents published. In the early years, only 42 contributions were classed as “articles” during the entire seven-year period. This may in part be due to the way contributions were classified; some items categorized as “On the Internet”, for example, were actually substantial pieces of writing. Nevertheless, the early years were clearly dominated by items such as book and media reviews and opinion pieces in the “Forum”, reflecting the focus of the journal on the real-world English language teaching problems of practitioner-researchers, similar to early editions of *ReCall* (Blin, 2019) and *TESOL Quarterly* (Mckinley, 2019). It takes time to attract writers to publish their research in a journal (Gould, 2009), and *TESL-EJ* has been no exception. And, of course, the process of carrying out research, writing a paper, having it reviewed, revising it and finally preparing it for publication, all takes time, even once a writer has decided to submit to a specific journal. In “From the editor” in Vol. 2, number 1, Maggie Sololik wrote: “[T]he number and quality of submissions is not yet up to a level we’re happy with. What does this mean? We need your work. If you are presenting a paper this spring, or have some other work you would like to see in print, we would welcome the opportunity to publish your work.” This quotation perhaps also gives a clue to the expected origins of papers; the editors were looking for expanded conference papers as a likely source of articles.

Today, as more and more TESL practitioners undertake higher degrees and carry out academic research projects for Master's degrees and PhDs (Dörnyei, 2007; Hall & Knox, 2009; Richards, 2006), position themselves as researchers in their own right (Hanks, 2019; Mckinley, 2019), or are required to carry out and publish rigorous research projects as part of the requirements of an academic post, the nature of the balance of submissions to *TESL-EJ* has changed. The "Forum" section of the journal, which published various types of commentary and opinion, was officially "retired" at the end of 2007. While the journal is still happy to accept submissions that are "think pieces", these are getting progressively fewer in number. The latest figures shown in Table 2 show that while reviews fell by two-thirds in 2015-2021 compared to the previous seven-year period, the number of articles doubled, providing further evidence of the burgeoning interest in empirical academic research in applied linguistics and TESOL (Consoli & Dikilitaş, 2021; Gass & Mackey, 2012; Lei & Liu, 2019a, 2019b; Mckinley, 2019; Zhang, 2019), particularly in open access online locales (Klus & Dilger, 2020). Additionally, the move away from anecdotes of teaching to empirical TESOL/AL research parallels other practitioner-driven journals, e.g., *Foreign Language Annals* (Spinelli, 2005), *ReCall* (Blin, 2019), and *TESOL Quarterly* (Mckinley, 2019), reflecting the growing maturation of the discipline.

### **The Most Cited Documents**

As we have already seen from Table 1, the period of publication which has produced the most citations to date was 2001-2007, and this is reflected in Table 3 which lists the 20 documents which have received the greatest number of individual citations. Thirteen of these documents were published between the years 2001-2007. Three were published during the early years of the journal, 1994-2000, and four between 2008 and 2014. None of the most-cited documents come from the most recent period, which is hardly surprising; as already noted, it takes time for an article to accumulate a large number of citations, perhaps achieving none in the first one to two years of an article's existence before rising noticeably (Aksnes, 2003; Aksnes et al., 2019; Tahamtan et al., 2016). Today, nearly 200 citations would be needed to gain a place on the list in Table 3. It is perhaps disappointing that there are not more of the early *TESL-EJ* articles on the list, for, although the first seven-year period saw a smaller number of issues than later periods, and thus a smaller number of articles, accounting for the smaller overall number of citations, there has been plenty of time for important individual articles from the early years to build up references in other publications. Some older articles might at some point exhibit the "sleeping beauty" pattern, i.e., go unnoticed for a long time before attracting attention (van Raan, 2004), although this phenomenon is rare and diminishes in likelihood the longer an article remains overlooked (Tahamtan et al., 2016).

**Table 3. Top-20 most cited *TESL-EJ* documents**

	Author(s)	Title	Cita- tions (n)	Year, volume/ issue, country
1	Peter Yongqi Gu	<i>Vocabulary Learning in a Second Language: Person, Task, Context and Strategies</i>	692	2003, 7/2, Singapore
2	Johanne Myles	<i>Second Language Writing and Research: The Writing Process and Error Analysis in Student Texts</i>	690	2002, 6/2, UK
3	Eva Bernat & Inna Gvozdenko	<i>Beliefs about Language Learning: Current Knowledge, Pedagogical Implications, and New Research Directions</i>	551	2005, 9/1, Australia
4	Thomas S.C. Farrell & LIM Poh Choo Patricia	<i>Conceptions of Grammar Teaching: A Case Study of Teachers' Beliefs and Classroom Practices</i>	476	2005, 9/2, Canada/ Singapore
5	Heidi Vellenga	<i>Learning Pragmatics from ESL &amp; EFL Textbooks: How Likely?</i>	389	2004, 8/2, USA
6	Hossein Farhady, Fattaneh Sajadi Hezaveh, and Hora Hedayati	<i>Reflections on Foreign Language Education in Iran</i>	386	2010, 13/4, Iran
7	Dale T. Griffee	<i>An Introduction to Second Language Research Methods – Design and Data;</i>	297	<i>TESL-EJ</i> book 2012, 15/4, USA
8	Zohreh R. Eslami & Azizullah Fatahi	<i>Teachers' Sense of Self-Efficacy, English Proficiency, and Instructional Strategies: A Study of Nonnative EFL Teachers in Iran</i>	294	2008, 11/4, USA/Iran
9	Wafa Abu Shmais	<i>Language Learning Strategy Use in Palestine</i>	279	2003, 7/2, Palestine
10	Zohreh Eslami Rasekh and Reza Ranjbari	<i>Metacognitive Strategy Training for Vocabulary Learning</i>	271	2003, 7/2, USA/Iran
11	David Taylor	<i>Inauthentic Authenticity or Authentic Inauthenticity – the Psuedo-Problem of Authenticity in the Language Classroom</i>	271	1994, 1/2, UK
12	George Jacobs and Thomas Farrell	<i>Paradigm Shift: Understanding and Implementing Change in Second Language Education</i>	270	2001, 5/1, Singapore
13	Costas Gabrielatos	<i>Corpora and Language Teaching: Just a fling or wedding bells?</i>	269	2005, 8/4, UK
14	Adina Levine, Orna Ferenz & Thea Reves	<i>EFL Academic Reading and Modern Technology: How Can We Turn Our Students into Independent Critical Readers?</i>	232	2000, 4/4, Israel
15	Kota Ohata	<i>Potential Sources of Anxiety for Japanese Learners of English: Preliminary Case Interviews with Five Japanese College Students in the U.S.</i>	231	2005, 9/3, Japan
16	Betty Azar	<i>Grammar-Based Teaching: A Practitioner's Perspective</i>	222	2007, 11/2, USA
17	Tim Murphey & Hiroko Arao	<i>Reported Belief Changes through Near Peer Role Modeling</i>	221	2001, 5/3, Taiwan/Japan
18	Graham Stanley	<i>Podcasting: Audio on the Internet Comes of Age</i>	209	2006, 9/4, Spain
19	Loretta F. Kasper	<i>Assessing the Metacognitive Growth of ESL Student Writers</i>	209	1997, 3/1, USA
20	A. Mehdi Riazi and Narjes Mosalanejad	<i>Evaluation of Learning Objectives in Iranian High-school and Pre-university English Textbooks Using Bloom's Taxonomy</i>	180	2010, 13/4, Australia/Iran



Of the top twenty articles in terms of citations, eighteen were “standard” articles. One – number 7 – was published as a separate *TESL-EJ* book and replaced the normal articles in volume 15/4. Finally, number 18 was published in the “On the Internet” section, but nevertheless it took the form of a conventional article, as indeed did many of the documents published in that part of the journal. That section was often at the cutting edge as far as online teaching and other uses of the internet were concerned, but it can be assumed that many contributions there also dated rather quickly as technology advanced, which is perhaps one reason why this is the only “On the Internet” contribution in this list.

Table 3 indicates that some papers published in *TESL-EJ* have become important documents in their particular fields. Though perhaps none of them are cited frequently enough to describe them as seminal studies (to compare, Canale and Swain’s [1980] *Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing*, Schmidt’s [1990] *The role of consciousness in second language learning*, Lyster and Ranta’s [1997] *Corrective feedback and learner uptake: Negotiation of form in communicative classrooms* have accumulated 14,854, 7,961, and 3,944 GS citations respectively), they have certainly become regular entries in bibliographies. In total, the top five papers account for 2,798 citations, or very nearly fifteen percent of all the 18,750 citations mentioned in Table 1 for documents published in *TESL-EJ*. This would appear to indicate that *TESL-EJ* has achieved sufficient status to attract attention and good standing for papers published in it. Perhaps almost as much a measure of the status of the journal is that if we assume that all the citations refer to articles (not quite the case in reality, but almost), then on average each article published in *TESL-EJ* has attracted 41.39 citations to date. Promisingly, as of November 2021, only 74 articles have not yet been cited anywhere at all, and of these, 70% were published in 2020-2021 and can scarcely be expected to have attracted much attention to date.

The range of topics in Table 3 is wide and quite impressive. Grammar, vocabulary, writing, reading, language learners, language teachers, authentic materials, learning strategies, textbooks – it is evident that *TESL-EJ* is cited in a broad spectrum of fields related to second language teaching and learning, akin to *ELT Journal*, *the Modern Language Journal*, and *TESOL Quarterly* (Egbert, 2007). But there are also some striking gaps related to oral language – there are no frequently-cited papers on speaking skills, pronunciation or listening skills, consistent with the findings of Zhang’s (2019) bibliometric study of SLA research. In part this may be a reflection of the number – and possibly even the quality – of the articles published in different fields in *TESL-EJ*. Searching for various terms in the titles of published documents in *TESL-EJ* does reveal a clear imbalance. Looking at the traditional “four skills”, we find 129 mentions of the word “writing” in titles, 84 of “reading”, 35 of “speaking” and 42 of “listening”. Searching for “grammar” throws up 53 mentions, “vocabulary” 39 and “pronunciation” only 22. However, numbers of citations in the literature may say as much or more about language teaching and learning research in general than it does about the balance of topics in *TESL-EJ*. The articles most frequently cited will reflect not the frequency with which certain topics appear in *TESL-EJ*, but rather the most frequently researched areas in TESOL (see Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Lei & Liu, 2019a), the fields in which papers are most frequently published in all journals.

One reason for the popularity of research relating to written English (see also Hyland & Jiang, 2021) may be that researchers in language teaching and learning are often based in tertiary level institutions, and students learning English as a second language at such institutions may often be focusing on written language skills for academic purposes (Flowerdew, 2016). Such students may be handily-available subjects for research (the term “academic” scores 62 hits among *TESL-EJ*

article titles). In addition, it may be that samples of student written language are easier to collect and analyze than those of spoken language. However, while people whose work involves research obligations may be most interested in teaching written language skills, teaching oral language skills forms an important part of the work of practicing language teachers. It might therefore behoove *TESL-EJ* editors to actively encourage more submissions related to the field of oral language.

Obviously most experimental research will involve students in a single location, and in many instances, these will be students in monolingual groups. It may well seem relevant sometimes to mention the location of the research in the title of the paper (Cheng et al., 2012; Pearson, 2020). It is thus not particularly surprising that five of the articles listed in Table 3 name specific geographical locations in their titles. What is rather unexpected is that no less than three of these five article titles mention Iran. Table 4 shows that Iran comes rather high up in the list of countries of the affiliation of the first author among papers published in *TESL-EJ*, namely in fifth place, but nevertheless such documents represent only just over two percent of the papers published. The presence of three articles specifically related to teaching in Iran in the top twenty papers cited – fifteen percent of the papers on the list – therefore suggests a very high level of interest in the language teaching that takes place there, whether among researchers in the country or internationally. Once again it must be pointed out that numbers of citations are indications of the topics of papers being produced in the research community at large, rather than reflections of the balance of papers published in *TESL-EJ*.

### **Country and Institutional Productivity and Influence**

**Table 4. Prevalence of country affiliations of the primary author**

	Country of first author	Documents		Citations	
		( <i>n</i> )	(%)	( <i>n</i> )	(%)
1	United States	167	10.8%	4386	23.4%
2	Japan	51	3.3%	1397	7.5%
3	United Kingdom	36	2.3%	1551	8.3%
4	Canada	32	2.1%	2184	11.6%
5	Iran	32	2.1%	593	3.2%
6	United Arab Emirates	29	1.9%	597	3.2%
7	Australia	27	1.7%	1208	6.4%
8	Taiwan	21	1.4%	888	4.7%
9	Turkey	16	1.0%	266	1.4%
10	Spain	14	0.9%	640	3.4%
11	Singapore	13	0.8%	1162	6.2%
12	India	13	0.8%	125	0.7%
13	Hong Kong	9	0.6%	188	1.0%
14	Israel	8	0.5%	470	2.5%
15	New Zealand	8	0.5%	350	1.9%
16	Vietnam	8	0.5%	199	1.1%
17	Korea, Republic of	7	0.5%	98	0.5%
18	Brazil	6	0.4%	275	1.5%
19	Malaysia	6	0.4%	129	0.7%
20	Italy	5	0.3%	401	2.1%

Table 4 contains few other surprises. It should be remembered that this table relates to all documents, not just articles, and the dominance of the USA may in part reflect the fact that the journal is based in America, and that editorial staff may have called on colleagues to contribute book reviews and the like, particularly in the early stages of the journal's existence. The editors may also have encouraged people they knew to submit research papers to the journal. Japan is in second spot for origin of contributors, even if it is well behind the USA. This high placement in the list is not easy to explain. It may be in part a reflection of the importance attributed to English language teaching in the country and the size of the sector. There may also be a link to the number of highly-qualified expatriates in Japan working in English teaching there. Conspicuously absent are contributions from the large, emerging Chinese scholarship, perhaps because Chinese authors are reported to target high-impact SSCI-indexed journals (Lei & Liao, 2017). Furthermore, contributions from scholars situated in Central/South America and Africa are very low in number (Lei & Liu, 2019b). To continue to serve as an inclusive global venue for emerging and established TESOL researchers, it will be important for TESL-EJ to increase contributions from these two continents

**Table 5. Prevalence of institutional affiliations of the primary author**

	Country of first author	Documents		Citations	
		( <i>n</i> )	(%)	( <i>n</i> )	(%)
1	Texas A&M University, US	11	0.7%	870	4.6%
2	Petroleum Institute, UAE	11	0.7%	426	2.3%
3	Texas Tech University, US	10	0.6%	397	2.1%
4	Brock University, Canada	9	0.6%	660	3.5%
5	Higher Colleges of Technology, UAE	9	0.6%	108	0.6%
6	University of Hawaii, US	7	0.5%	125	0.7%
7	Islamic Azad University, Iran	7	0.5%	111	0.6%
8	National Institute of Education, Singapore	6	0.4%	782	4.2%
9	Bar-Ilan University, Israel	6	0.4%	455	2.4%
10	University of Salford, UK	6	0.4%	359	1.9%
11	British Council	6	0.4%	291	1.6%
12	Kanda University of International Studies, Japan	6	0.4%	71	0.4%
13	Kyoto Sangyo University, Japan	5	0.3%	252	1.3%
14	Macquarie University, Australia	5	0.3%	226	1.2%
15	California State University, US	5	0.3%	167	0.9%
16	University of South Florida, US	5	0.3%	125	0.7%
17	Washington State University, US	5	0.3%	119	0.6%
18	Brigham Young University, US	5	0.3%	76	0.4%
19	Indiana University of Pennsylvania, US	4	0.3%	144	0.8%
20	Ohio University, US	4	0.3%	83	0.4%

As found in other studies (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Lei & Liu, 2019a, 2019b), papers authored in English-speaking countries figure prominently in the journal's output. This may in part reflect the fact that a great deal of English language teaching takes place in English-speaking countries, and many universities in English-speaking countries boast departments of Applied Linguistics or the like. Regrettably, it may also be a reflection of the greater ease with which English speakers are often able to prepare papers for publication in an English-language journal. Highly advanced speakers of English as a second language may still find the task of writing an academic paper in English a daunting one (Yu & Jiang, 2020), and unfortunately the journal, while it can take care

of minor errors at the copy-editing stage, is not able to offer a full-scale language editing service to prospective authors. This effect is probably greater than Table 5 might suggest, since a number of authors working at institutions in non-English speaking countries actually have English as a first language. Admittedly the reverse situation is also present – some of the authors affiliated to institutions in English-speaking countries do not have English as their first language. However, they will also generally have easier access to help with language editing, should they need it, than is the case for writers in institutions in non-English speaking countries.

### **Trends in Explored Topics**

Table 6 shows the top ten most frequently explored research topics across 1994-2007, 2008-2016, and 2017-2021. It is striking that six of the most prevalent topics (*EFL*, *instruction*, *writing*, *language learning*, *English teacher/teacher of English*, and *beliefs*) featured in the top ten across all periods, suggesting the direction of the journal has remained largely consistent over the years. In terms of rank position, two topics (*EFL*, *instruction*) remained constant, two fluctuated (*language learning*, *English teacher*), while *writing* and *beliefs* declined. *Interaction* and *EFL learner* (appearing during 2008-2016) and *attitudes* (after 2017) exhibited sizeable gains, displacing several topics that endured across the journal’s lifespan. However, *interaction* lost momentum in 2017-2021, decreasing by 8.9% and falling out of the top ten. It was uncommon for popular topics to exhibit a normalized decrease in prevalence compared to the prior time period (Lei & Liu, 2019b), with *reading* and *EFL* posting the most substantial losses of 39.7% and 27% from 1994-2007 to 2008-2016 respectively (although the latter comprehensively reversed in the subsequent timeframe).

**Table 6. Most frequently explored topics in *TESL-EJ*, 1994-2021**

1994-2007			2008-2016				2017-2021			
	Raw	Normed	Topic	Raw	Normed	% change	Topic	Raw	Normed	% change
EFL	37	28.46	EFL	32	20.78	-27.0%	EFL	59	34.91	68.0%
instruction	25	19.23	instruction	30	19.48	1.3%	instruction	42	24.85	27.6%
writing	24	18.46	English teacher*	23	14.94	49.4%	language teacher*	28	16.57	70.1%
reading	21	16.15	writing	21	13.64	-26.1%	language learning	25	14.79	26.6%
language learning	19	14.62	EFL learner*	19	12.34	78.2%	second language	24	14.20	45.8%
beliefs	18	13.85	language learning	18	11.69	-20.0%	EFL learner*	23	13.61	10.3%
ESL	18	13.85	beliefs	17	11.04	-20.3%	attitude*	23	13.61	109.6%
English teacher*	13	10.00	interaction	16	10.39	92.9%	writing	22	13.02	-4.5%
language teaching	13	10.00	language teacher*	15	9.74	58.3%	beliefs	20	11.83	7.2%
awareness	12	9.23	reading	15	9.74	-39.7%	English teacher*	19	11.24	-24.7%

\*Incorporates plural form.

Widespread *TESL-EJ* article topics appear to fall into three broad categories. The most common group consists of general, well-established concepts situated within English as an additional language learning and teaching (e.g., *EFL*, *instruction*, *writing*, *reading*, *second language*,

*language learning*, Lei and Liu, 2019b) that reflect the large, non-specialist readership of the journal (Egbert, 2007). Interestingly, there appear to be no pre-eminent topics across the three time periods that could be considered teaching/research practices that have recently gained attention, for example, related to sociocultural issues (Lei & Liu, 2019a) or methodological synthesis (e.g., Plonsky, 2013). This might indicate stakeholders (i.e., co-editors, reviewers, readers) have a preference for well-established themes, or that more innovative research is submitted elsewhere. The consistently high prevalence of *EFL* over *ESL* (which disappears from the top ten after 2007) reflects the fact that much published research is situated in countries where English is not the dominant language. A second prevalent group of topics consists of participants in the process of English language teaching and learning (*EFL learner, English/language teacher*). The absence of *language/English/EFL learner* in the journal's first 13 years may reflect an emphasis on language education pedagogy and the concerns of teachers in the journal's early volumes. This changed notably in the second time period, where *English teacher* and *EFL learner* exhibited a 49.4% and 78.2% increase respectively. There appears to have been a renewed emphasis on teachers in the most recent timeframe, although the more general *language teacher* is preferred over *English teacher*, perhaps because *EFL* provides the necessary contextualization.

A third category of popular topics encompass two important qualities that underscore how participants in English language teaching and learning think and behave, *attitude(s)* and *beliefs* (the latter of which features in the plural form only in the original list of SLA keywords from authors). While teacher and learner attitudes and beliefs, framed as 'individual differences', have long been notable research concerns within TESOL and applied linguistics (Kormos 2012), only within the last ten years has their role in mediating language learning begun to be better understood (Ellis 2010), with a recent contribution in *TESOL-EJ* from Bailey and Rakushin-Lee (2021). It should also be noted that two research methods, *interview* (normed frequency rising from 16.92 in 1994-2007 to 24.85 in 2017-2021) and *questionnaire* (10.77 to 17.16), featured prominently. While not topics per se (they were eliminated since they did not feature on the list of SLA keywords from authors), they do inform about changes in research activities over the timeframe (Hyland & Jiang, 2021). The increased importance attributed to methodological clarity in the abstract may stem from changing priorities in peer review or could reflect enhanced awareness of and concern towards methodological issues in TESOL/applied linguistics (Byrnes, 2013; Phakiti et al., 2018), though discussion of methodology has traditionally been considered a useful area of the journal (Richards, 2009). Furthermore, the increase in normalized frequency and rank of *interview* from 1994 to 2021 shows a rise in qualitative research across the journal, indicative of wider trends in AL (Benson et al., 2009; Richards, 2009). However, it should be remembered that *TESOL-EJ* has long been considered a "good source of qualitative studies" (Richards, 2009, p. 170).

A number of topics showed substantial increases in incidence over the three periods, most notably *Iranian* (demonstrating a rapid increase in interest after 2007), *accuracy*, and *teacher educator*, all posting above 500% gains. *Academic writing*, *target language*, and *qualitative data* also became more widespread, although the raw frequencies of articles featuring these topics were, nevertheless, only six each in 2017-2021. A number of topics that indicated the largest increases are associated with traditional practice-orientated issues in TESOL (Lei & Liu, 2019b), that is, *accuracy*, *teacher educator*, *academic writing*, and *target language*. It is perhaps odd that such enduring topics were not widespread during the first time period, but it is likely that there were other priority areas not revealed in the analysis, perhaps by virtue of not meeting the cut-off. Additionally, conspicuous in their absence are topics related to digital tools and computer-mediated learning, perhaps because research investigating these concepts is directed at the

increasing number of venues specializing in computer-assisted language learning (Lei & Liu, 2019b).

Table 7 shows the eight research topics that exhibited the largest increases and decreases and remained the most constant across the three time periods. Since the minimum frequency was set to 10 across the whole lifespan of the journal, one noticeable feature of these topics is that they tend to be more specialist (e.g., *academic writing*, *vocabulary learning*, *retention*) than the most popular topics overall. As found in other AL/TESOL bibliometric studies (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Lei & Liu, 2019b, 2019a; Zhang, 2019), topics of three-to-five-word bundles were rare, largely because their greater specificity meant they were not able to meet the minimum threshold. While the size of the increases comprehensively outstrips the decreases, this is to be expected, as most research builds upon the prior work of others (Dörnyei, 2007). Another explanation is that it is unlikely for a research topic to quickly become obsolete. Instead, outmoded practices or information often remain as a frame of reference.

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**Table 7. Research topics that exhibited the most notable changes in prevalence over the research period or remained constant**

Topic	1994-2007		2008-2016		2017-2021		% change
	Raw	Normed	Raw	Normed	Raw	Normed	
<b>Most significantly increased</b>							
Iranian	1	0.77	11	7.14	12	7.10	823.1%
accuracy	1	0.77	1	0.65	10	5.92	669.2%
teacher educator*	1	0.77	1	0.65	10	5.92	669.2%
academic writing	1	0.77	3	1.95	6	3.55	361.5%
qualitative data	1	0.77	3	1.95	6	3.55	361.5%
target language	1	0.77	3	1.95	6	3.55	361.5%
planning	2	1.54	3	1.95	10	5.92	284.6%
teacher training	1	0.77	4	2.60	5	2.96	284.6%
<b>Remained constant</b>							
Japan	5	3.85	11	7.14	7	4.14	7.7%
comprehension	8	6.15	10	6.49	11	6.51	5.8%
achievement	3	2.31	6	3.90	4	2.37	2.6%
autonomy	3	2.31	1	0.65	4	2.37	2.6%
language learner*	6	4.62	5	3.25	8	4.73	2.6%
vocabulary learning	3	2.31	3	1.95	4	2.37	2.6%
language learning	19	14.62	18	11.69	25	14.79	1.2%
language teaching	13	10.00	13	8.44	17	10.06	0.6%
<b>Most significantly decreased</b>							
dictionary*	4	3.08	1	0.65	2	1.18	-61.5%
gender	8	6.15	1	0.65	3	1.78	-71.2%
international student*	3	2.31	4	2.60	1	0.59	-74.4%
reader	11	8.46	3	1.95	3	1.78	-79.0%
methodology	4	3.08	2	1.30	1	0.59	-80.8%
teacher development	4	3.08	2	1.30	1	0.59	-80.8%
retention	6	4.62	4	2.60	1	0.59	-87.2%
western	7	5.38	4	2.60	1	0.59	-89.0%

\*Incorporates plural form.

The research topics that were found to be the most consistent performers fell within a narrow 5.2% range. Unlike the topics that increased most substantially, those that remained constant were better dispersed across documents with abstracts (with the exception of *autonomy* [8], *vocabulary learning* [10], and *achievement* [13]), with two featuring consistently in Table 6 (*language learning*, *language teaching*). Of consistent performers that featured a higher dispersion (i.e., above 15), *comprehension*, *Japan*, *language learner*, *language learning*, *language teaching*, and *vocabulary learning* could be considered long-standing, pre-eminent focal areas of the journal, and nearly all constitute practice-orientated issues. As with topics that gained the most traction since 1994, there were no instances of cutting-edge areas of interest among topics that remained constant, largely because they were not likely to have been present in the earlier research.

Finally, a number of research topics declined over the years, although it should be noted that several incidences were poorly dispersed across articles (*international student*, *methodology*, and *teacher development* all with appearances across seven or eight article abstracts only), and so could not be considered common topics in *TESL-EJ* articles; further, a fall of only two or three occurrences was sufficient for them to qualify as reducing in prevalence, meaning the significance of these drops is questionable. One interesting concept to decrease was *western* (-89%), perhaps because increasing amounts of scholarly research is situated within EFL learning contexts. *Reader*, a prominent topic in 1994-2007, witnessed a steep decline (-79.0%). Yet given that *reading* featured in the top ten during 1994-2007 and 2008-2016, this could suggest a reduction in writing research focused on the reader. An important caveat to apply to all of the identified trends is that the changes may reflect evolution in authors' preferred terminology rather than a shift in topic focus per se. *Accuracy* (+669.2%) may have superseded *retention* (-87.2%) and *errors* (-32.7%), *teacher educator* (+669.2%) and *language teacher* (+169.2%) appear to be more favored by authors compared with *English teacher* (+12.4%), while *study abroad* (rising from zero to seven appearances) has perhaps displaced *international students* (-74.4%). The fact that certain patterns of keyword change -- e.g., the rises in *study abroad*, *EFL learner*, *academic writing* and the flatlining of *vocabulary learning* (or *acquisition*) -- have been reported in other studies (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Lei & Liu, 2019b, 2019a) suggests such trends are not unique to *TESL-EJ*.

## Conclusion

This study has shown bibliometric analysis is useful for examining research trends within a discrete academic publication. Yet the approach is not without limitations. Despite the incorporation of large numbers of quantitative data, subjectivity was introduced through decisions of what data to incorporate into the analysis and what constituted a research topic (Lei & Liu, 2019a). Citations, while a ubiquitous measure of scholarly impact (Martín-Martín et al., 2021), are a crude indicator that does not ensure the citing author has retrieved or read the work and can be skewed by unethical self-citation or citations being replicated by subsequent authors (Zhu et al., 2015). Incompleteness in the Google Scholar dataset (Kiduk & Meho, 2006) meant it was not feasible to retrieve reference lists for all document types in order to identify highly influential cited sources among the research documents (Zhang, 2019). To validate the results of this bibliometric analysis, it may be useful to survey or interview practitioners and researchers who contribute to or read *TESL-EJ* (see Egbert, 2007). Lines of inquiry such as why professionals choose to cite particular articles or submit their manuscript to the journal, their perceptions of journal and article quality, and how they come to learn of the journal and particular articles could help explain the trends identified in this study.

This bibliometric analysis uncovers areas of much change across the 99-issue, 27-year lifespan of *TESL-EJ*. From auspicious beginnings in 1994 as a free-to-access online journal created before the concept of open access was even invented, *TESL-EJ* has matured into Scopus-indexed, Scimago Q2 journal (in language and linguistics since 2019). Along the way, the journal has radically altered the nature and amount of its output, moving away from content dominated by anecdote-focused practitioner reviews and thought pieces, in line with other well-known TESOL journals (Mckinley, 2019), to larger and larger amounts of empirical research (with 55 articles in 2021 alone). Its most cited documents, while falling short of what could be credibly claimed as seminal TESOL or applied linguistics publications, have accrued a large number of GS citations, indicating the journal's influence across professional and student forms of academic output. In other areas, much about the journal has remained constant. There has been a tendency towards consistent,



generalized research topics (*EFL, writing, instruction, language learning/teaching, English teacher*) that appeal to a non-specialist AL/TESOL readership likely located within higher education settings. Additionally, in spite of the increasing globalization of scholarship (Hyland & Jiang, 2021), much content is dominated by authors located in Anglophone countries (particularly the US), with work needed to be done to address a lack of content from China, an emerging powerhouse in linguistics (Lei & Liao, 2017), as well as South America and Africa.

### **About the Author**

**William S. Pearson** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the Graduate School of Education at the University of Exeter. His research interests include candidate preparation for IELTS, teacher written feedback on L2 writing, and pre-sessional English for academic purposes preparation programmes. He has been a copyeditor for TESL-EJ and is now one of its co-editors. ORCID: 0000-0003-0768-8461

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### Appendix 1 – Structural Patterns of Research Topics

Form	Example	POS string
Noun	<i>engagement</i>	_NN
Noun + noun	<i>target language</i>	_NN _NN
Noun plural	<i>beliefs</i>	_NNS
Noun + noun plural	<i>speech acts</i>	_NN _NNS
Noun phrase	<i>EFL</i>	_NP
Noun phrase + noun	<i>ESL writing</i>	_NP _NN
Noun + coordinating conjunction + noun	<i>teaching and learning</i>	_NN _CC _NN
Noun + determiner + adjective	<i>teacher of English</i>	_NN _DT _JJ
Adjective	<i>American</i>	_JJ
Adjective + noun	<i>academic writing</i>	_JJ _NN
Adjective + noun + noun	<i>second language acquisition</i>	_JJ _NN _NN
Adjective + noun plural	<i>English teachers</i>	_JJ _NNS
Comparative adjective + noun	<i>higher education</i>	_JJR _NN

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