

Action-Research in Language Education: A Teacher's Challenge or a Common Misunderstanding¹

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a specific experience, highlighting a potential bias in how private language schools and educational institutions perceive and evaluate the role and initiatives of teachers who independently propose to engage in research. To provide context, the introduction describes the circumstances that motivated one of the authors to undertake a spontaneous application campaign for teaching positions in Italian as a foreign language, coupled with a proposal to initiate an action-research project. The responses received served as a basis for a reflection developed on a linguistic and an epistemological level. On one side, the linguistic perspective examines potential ineffectiveness in articulating the research proposal. On the other, the epistemological perspective explores the apparent resistance of institutions in accepting teacher-led research initiatives. As a result, to ensure scientific rigor, the study employs a corpus-based textual analysis of both the application emails sent and the responses received. This methodological approach combines quantitative data analysis with qualitative interpretation to provide deeper insights into the dynamics at play. The findings suggest that research is often perceived as a potential distraction for teachers and as counterproductive to effective teaching. This misinterpretation reflects a broader issue: the reluctance of institutions to regard research as an integral and complementary aspect of teaching practice. Notably, these reflections align with ongoing academic debates concerning the value of research in education and the question of who is best positioned to conduct it. In conclusion, this paper underscores the urgent

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Part of

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need for actionable strategies and awareness-raising initiatives aimed at addressing existing biases, promotes the integration of research into teaching practices and encourages reflective professional development within the field of language education.

1. Research in the Teaching Profession: A Critical Overview

1.1 Framing Teacher Research From an Institutional Perception

Research and teaching have long been viewed as distinct domains, despite ongoing academic discussion about the potential integration of research into educational practice as a means to promote reflective practice (Schön, 1992). As early as 1975, Stenhouse drew attention to the importance of preparing teachers as researchers. Nevertheless, research is still often regarded—by teacher education institutions themselves—as an “add-on” (Klewin & Koch, 2017, p. 60): an optional activity to be pursued alongside regular teaching duties when circumstances allow (Altrichter et al., 2014, pp. 263–264).

This perception is shared by both teachers and the institutions in which they work, whether public or private, where research is often viewed as an additional task to be undertaken outside regular teaching hours (Borg, 2006, pp. 24–25). In the same article, Borg (2006) identifies several key factors that hinder—or even prevent—the integration of research into teaching practice. Among these are the lack of time, a fundamental requirement for teachers to engage in research; the fear that research might expose weaknesses within the educational system; and the widespread belief that conducting research lies beyond the scope of teachers’ professional responsibilities. Teachers are, in fact, still frequently regarded as technicians whose main duties consist of planning lessons, assessing student work, and managing classroom activities.

The legitimacy of teacher-led research remains a subject of debate, particularly regarding concerns about the limited generalisability of its findings and the perceived lack of methodological rigour (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1998). John Hattie², for instance, in an interview with TES Magazine (2015), asserted

2 John Hattie, based at the Melbourne Education Research Center, is the author of one of the most influential works in the field of teacher education: *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, published by Routledge in 2008.

that teachers should concentrate on evaluating their impact on student learning, leaving research to academic professionals. Similarly, Pruett and Sayer (1997, pp. 150–151) contend that research holds greater value than teaching, framing the two domains as competing rather than complementary.

1.2 Reframing Research Within the Teaching Profession

Research is often embraced during the formative stages of teacher education, but it tends to fade as teachers advance in their careers, due to insufficient long-term support and resources.

According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990), research carried out by teachers within their own classrooms is frequently undervalued and remains insufficiently acknowledged. Although it may not always conform to the methodological rigour or generalisability expected in academic research, it offers a distinctive advantage: it captures the lived realities of classroom practice (Celentin & De Luchi, 2023). Teacher-led research holds considerable potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice—between what is planned in pedagogical frameworks and what unfolds in the classroom. For this potential to be realised, teacher research must be actively supported, with environments that encourage inquiry and recognise it as an integral part of teaching practice.

It is therefore important to clarify what is meant by research in the context of teaching. As Altrichter (2014) pointed out, the term encompasses a range of practices. Action research (hereafter AR)—central to the present study—is particularly characterised by its practical and bottom-up orientation, which makes it especially well-suited for application in classroom settings (Koshy et al., 2010, pp. 1–24). Equally important is the collaborative dimension of AR, which can only be fully realised when schools, supervisors, and academic departments collectively recognise its value in advancing pedagogical practice.

These theoretical considerations provide the foundation for the present study, which examines the reception of teacher-led AR proposals in Italian language education and how these challenges surface in institutional exchanges.

2. A Contextual Overview

This study examines the experience of one of the authors, a teacher who attempted to carry out an AR project while pursuing a Master's degree in Advanced Planning for Teaching Italian Language and Culture to Foreigners (hereafter Itals Second Level) within the ITALS Laboratory at Ca' Foscari University of Venice³.

To better understand the background that led to the present research, it is important to contextualise both the programme in which the teacher-researcher (hereafter TR) was enrolled and the circumstances that shaped the subsequent outreach efforts. The following sections provide an overview of the master's degree and describe the experience that ultimately laid the groundwork for this investigation.

2.1 The ITALS II Programme

The Itals Second Level was established in 2006, and it was designed to address the professional needs of teachers of Italian to allophone students—both in Italy and abroad—pursuing advanced specialisation beyond the Itals First Level, while also reflecting broader reforms in Italian higher education introduced as part of the Bologna Process⁴, which aims to standardise academic pathways across Europe.

The distinguishing feature of the Itals Second Level programme—compared both to its first-level counterpart and to other similar postgraduate courses—is its exclusive focus on in-service teachers, who already possess formal training in teaching Italian to non-native speakers and have at least two years of experience. This already highly professional profile is complemented by a training model grounded in AR, which is considered the true core of the master's programme.

3 The ITALS Laboratory, based at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, offers two postgraduate programmes in Italian language education: a first level master's in *Teaching Italian Language and Culture to Foreigners*, and a second level master's in *Advanced Planning for Teaching Italian Language and Culture to Foreigners*.

4 Given the context of this paper, it is assumed that readers are familiar with the Bologna Process and its Framework. For those less acquainted with the Italian university system, *Master* refers to two distinct postgraduate qualifications: the First-Level and Second-Level Master's Degrees.

Itals Second Level provides two possible specializations, one focused on teaching, the other on project design. For both, the training begins with a tutor-led module introducing the relevant research approaches: AR for the teaching option and project-based research for the project design option. Following this introduction, participants begin developing their own project, which unfolds in three phases under the guidance of an expert tutor: drafting the action plan, implementing and monitoring the intervention, and collecting and analysing data. In parallel, tutor-led modules on subject-specific content relevant to the teaching of Italian as a foreign language support the integration of theoretical insights into participants' evolving research practice.

Conducting a research project (both AR and project-based), as understood in the Itals Second Level, means acting in the context in which one operates to modify (and possibly improve) some aspects that are felt to be "problematic" by the individual conducting the research.

Precisely for this reason, the implementation of a research project should not be confused with an internship, in which normally the aspiring teacher observes what happens in a context that is new to him/her, and the Itals Second Level's regulations require students to be in service at the time they undertake their studies. The transformative power of research can in fact be best expressed in a context in which the master's student plays an active role, in which the student's functions are evident, and they enjoy decision-making autonomy in the setting of their work.

2.2 An Unplanned Turn: Relocating AR After Institutional Refusal

In accordance with the Itals Second Level's requirements, an AR project was proposed for implementation in a class at a private school where the TR was working on a freelance basis. After three months, the proposal was declined, citing misalignment with the school's educational priorities. The decision brought the project to a halt and prompted the TR - following a consultation with the master's coordinator - to seek a new educational setting in which to resume the research under more supportive conditions, even if it did not fully align with the formal parameters outlined in the master's regulations.

2.3 From Rejection to Reflection

The application campaign, carried out between February 2023 and January 2024, involved contacting a range of organisations, institutions, and schools—mainly in Italy and Germany—offering Italian-language courses to foreigners. Communication took place in Italian, German, and English via phone calls, online forms, and email, combining a job application for a teaching position with a proposal to conduct an AR project. While the teaching applications were generally well received, the research proposal often elicited hesitation or resistance, suggesting that some institutions perceived it as a potential deterrent. To explore this further, responses were collected and analysed to identify possible patterns and institutional stances toward the proposed research.

3. From Outreach to Analysis

3.1 Contact and Response—Organizing the Data

This study focused specifically on email applications addressed to 49 professionals in the field of language education, including course coordinators—often teachers themselves. Of these, 19 responded to the initial message, initiating exchanges that involved both job-related and AR negotiations.

The resulting corpus consists of 64 texts, including both sent emails and replies. When examining the response rate regardless of language, the data show that 42% of the emails were ignored, while 58% received a reply. These responses were then classified into three categories:

- a) Inconclusive (89%), where the exchange ended in a refusal;
- b) Interview (8%), where a job offer was discussed but not finalised;
- c) Positive (3%), where the position was confirmed, and the AR project was approved.

Taken together, the findings indicate that most institutions rejected the application shortly after the initial contact. To investigate whether this response was linked to unclear communication in the emails or to the nature of the AR proposal itself, a corpus-based textual analysis was conducted on both the messages sent and received (Atifi & Marcoccia, 2020).

3.2 Method of Analysis

The textual analysis began by separating the corpus into emails sent and responses, grouped by language. Due to the limited number of emails in English, these were excluded from the analysis, which focused instead on messages in Italian and German. A free, academically recognized text analysis software, AntConc⁵, was used to examine both corpora.

Each corpus underwent a two-level analysis that combined quantitative and qualitative approaches:

- (1) Frequency analysis (quantitative), focusing on key terms relevant to interpretation;
- (2) Contextual analysis (qualitative), examining co-occurrences and term placement within each message.

More specifically, the analysis of the emails sent focused on assessing the clarity of the job application and research proposal by comparing word frequency in the Italian and German versions, followed by contextual interpretation. In contrast, the analysis of the responses aimed to identify institutional stances toward the research proposal by examining key terms in context, according to the contact language.

4. Findings From the Emails Sent

The data were prepared for textual analysis, with particular attention paid to the clarity of the subject line, the length of the message, and the overall organisation of the text. The initial phase of the analysis focused on determining the most frequently occurring terms within the corpus of emails, revealing five key terms in the Italian messages (Figure 1) and eight in the German (Figure 2).

5 AntConc is a free corpus analysis toolkit developed by Prof. Laurence Anthony, Waseda University (Japan). The software allows users to define how many words appear before and after the keyword, creating a block of text—known as a *token*—that helps identify the context in which the term occurs, along with its inferences and concordances.

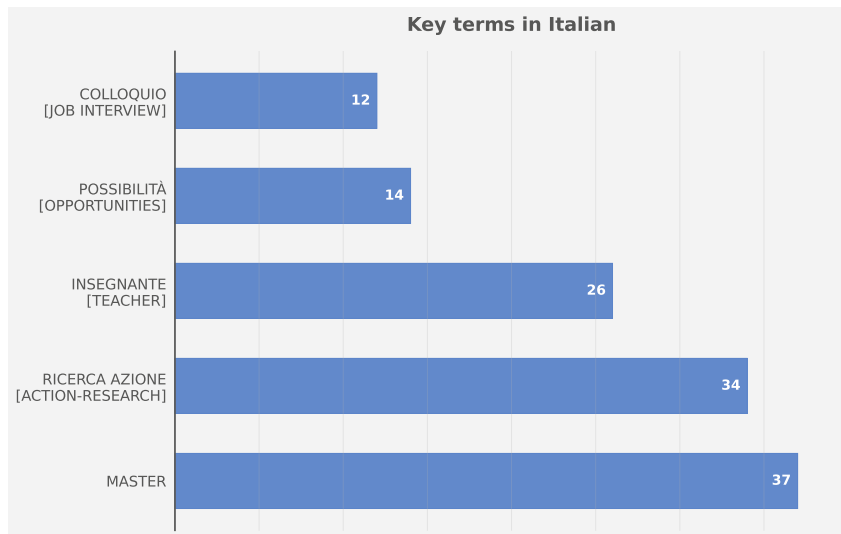


Fig. 1 – Frequency of key terms in the sent Italian messages.

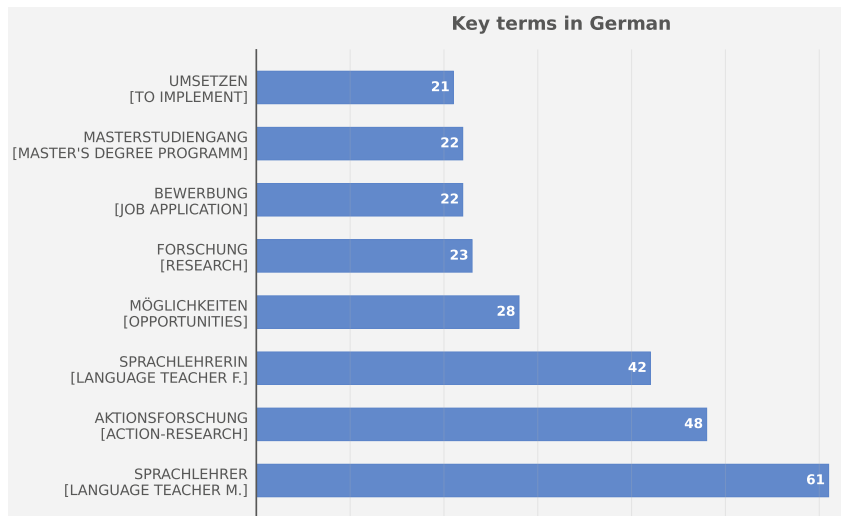


Fig. 2 – Frequency of key terms in the sent German messages.

The results yielded insights into the nature of the messages examined, which appear to follow the conventions of a job application cover letter, suggesting that the teaching proposal was likely clearly expressed.

To assess the clarity of the AR proposal specifically, the next step focused on exploring the positioning of related terms within their respective sentence contexts. The following excerpts illustrate the most representative variations observed in the Italian texts:

(1)

(...) ha portato a cercare nuove possibilità lavorative che possano offrirmi, parallelamente alla docenza, anche la possibilità di mettere in pratica il mio lavoro di ricerca.

[...] led me to seek new job opportunities that could offer me, alongside teaching, the possibility of putting my research work into practice]

(2)

(...) mi dia modo di mettere in pratica il progetto di ricerca-azione, finalizzato al miglioramento della prassi didattica.

[...] gives me the opportunity to implement the action research project, aimed at improving teaching practices]

(3)

(...) sarebbe per me importante affiancare alla docenza un progetto di ricerca-azione con osservazione in classe, utile anche per la formazione dei docenti.

[...] it would be important for me to complement my teaching with an action research project involving classroom observation, which would also be useful for teacher training]

The sequencing of information in examples (1) and (3) indicates that the AR project may be presented as distinct from the teaching activity itself. This impression is reinforced by the use of *parallelamente* [at the same time] in combination with *anche* [also] in example (1), and by the phrase *affiancare alla docenza* [to accompany the teaching] in example (3). Overall, the context remains ambiguous, as no further clarification is provided regarding the specific characteristics of the AR.

Compared to the Italian messages, the AR request appears more clearly articulated in the German-language emails. The utterances (4) and (5) are particularly illustrative:

(4)

Mir ist es weiterhin wichtig, die Aktionsforschung in meinen Unterrichtsstunden zu berücksichtigen.

[It is also important to me to take action research into account in my teaching hours]

(5)

(...) sondern als forschende Dozentin, um meine Aktionsforschung umsetzen zu dürfen.

[...] but rather as a teacher-researcher, in order to be allowed to implement my action research]

Both examples suggest a clearer articulation of the project's purpose, supported by the use of *berücksichtigen* [to take into account] in relation to teaching hours, and the phrase *forschende Dozentin* [teacher-researcher] alongside *Aktionsforschung* [action research] and *umsetzen* [to implement].

Even so, the nature of the AR project is not explicitly defined in the German texts:

(6)

(...) Abschlussarbeit, die auf der Methode der Aktionsforschung basiert ist.

[...] a thesis based on the method of action research]

(7)

(...) eine Lehrforschungsmethode, die vor Ort als Feldforschung umgesetzt werden soll.

[...] a teacher-research method, which is to be implemented on site as field research]

In example (6) and (7) the methodology is referenced using broad descriptors such as *Methode* [method] and *Feldforschung* [field research], without offering any explanation of the specific features that distinguish AR.

The findings suggest that the Italian-language emails exhibit a more ambiguous formulation, which may have increased the likelihood of misinterpretation on the part of the recipient. In comparison, the German-language emails demonstrate a clearer articulation of the research request; nonetheless, in both cases, the nature of the AR project remains undefined.

5. Findings From the Emails Received

The data were prepared for textual analysis, taking into account the findings from the emails sent. These results might lead to the assumption that applications written in German received more responses than those written in Italian—possibly due to greater clarity in the former. To assess this possibility, the number of responses was compared according to the contact language, revealing a response rate of 45% for messages written in German and 55% for those in Italian. Contrary to the initial assumption, the results indicate that responses to emails written in Italian actually exceeded those in German.

A subsequent step aimed to identify which data could offer meaningful insights by directly comparing the corpora of sent emails and received responses; however, no significant patterns emerged.

The following phase consisted of textual analysis involving an examination of word frequency within the Italian and German corpora. The initial results showed that the most frequently occurring terms conveyed negation or regret, reflecting the overall trend of rejection. Notably, in contrast to the emails sent, several low-frequency terms in the responses—including words that appeared only once—emerged as potentially significant and offered valuable cues for interpretation. Given the nature of this data, the next section highlights these low-frequency terms—grouped by language—and proceeds with the contextual analysis.

5.1 The Responses in Italian

The analysis of the Italian responses identified five low-frequency terms (Figure 3), which reveal notable patterns in lexical choices.

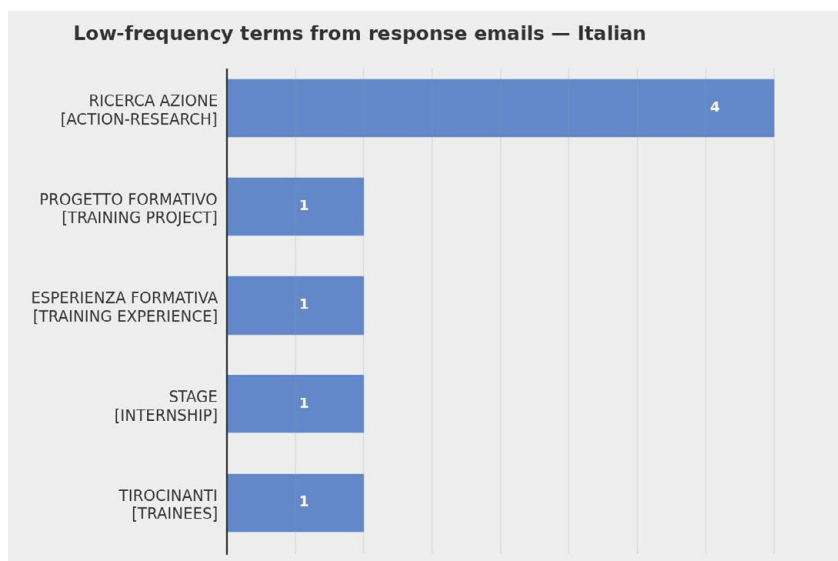


Fig. 3 – Low-frequency terms in the Italian responses.

Words such as *trainees* and *internship* suggest a misinterpretation of the original application, with the teaching position reframed as a training experience, training project, or practical placement.

A closer examination of their contextual use, confirms that the institutions appeared to interpret the teaching application, along with the AR proposal, as a request for a training or internship experience:

(8)

Grazie della sua mail, ma da noi al Centro Linguistico non prendiamo tirocinanti. Ha già provato all'Istituto XXX? Forse lì ci sono altre possibilità.

[Thank you for your email, but here at the Language Centre we do not take on trainees. Have you tried the XXX Institute? There may be other opportunities there]

(9)

Se Lei si interessa a uno stage di orientamento (Hospitanz) in un corso di lingua universitario, Lei dovrebbe rivolgersi ai Centri XX.

[If you are interested in an orientation internship (Hospitanz) within a university language course, you should contact the XX Centres]

(10)

(...) l'Istituto XXX non potrà entrare nel progetto formativo, perché questo tipo di esperienza formativa richiede un accordo già formalizzato tra università.

[(...) the XXX Institute cannot be part of the training project, as this type of learning experience requires a formalized agreement between universities]

(11)

Secondo le nostre informazioni diverse università per stranieri offrono la possibilità di svolgere queste prove pratiche direttamente all'interno del loro insegnamento.

[According to our information, several universities for foreigners offer the possibility of carrying out these practical tests directly within their teaching programmes]

The term *ricerca azione* [action research] appears explicitly in four responses, which might initially suggest recognition of the original proposal. However, a closer examination of the surrounding context reveals a shift in interpretation:

(12)

Per poter individuare un contesto glottodidattico utile per la tua ricerca-azione avrei bisogno di alcune informazioni di base, come il numero di ore previste, il livello iniziale (...)

[To identify a glottodidactic context suitable for your action research, I would need some basic information, such as the number of planned hours, the initial level (...)]

(13)

(...) conosco bene l'approccio della ricerca-azione e la pubblicazione della Coonan, che mi piace molto, e capisco che sia difficile dare informazioni in anticipo.

[(...) I am familiar with the action research approach and Coonan's publication, which I like very much, and I understand that it is difficult to provide information in advance]

(14)

(...) nel suo progetto di ricerca, ma avremmo bisogno di qualche informazione: di quante ore di ricerca-azione si tratta? E devono essere svolte tutte in un corso a livello A2?

[(...) in your research project, but we would need some information: how many hours of action research are involved? And do they all need to be carried out in an A2-level course?]

(15)

(...) qualora tu non avessi ancora trovato un ente di formazione presso il quale svolgere la ricerca-azione, (potresti) rivolgerti alla XXX.

[(...) if you have not yet found a training institution where you can carry out the action research, [you could] contact XXX]

In examples (12), (13), and (14), the mention of AR is immediately followed by requests for predefined details—such as total hours, course level, and participant profiles—suggesting that the proposal may have been understood as a conventional form of structured educational research, rather than its intended context-specific nature.

Notably, in example (13), the respondent refers to the work of C.M. Coonan. In this light, it is worth recalling that Coonan (2000, p. 9) defines AR as situational and context-bound, producing non-generalisable data, with the aim to bridge theory and practice through a bottom-up approach. This raises the question of whether similar patterns emerge in the German corpus.

5.2 The Responses in German

The German responses included five low-frequency items (Figure 4) reflecting similar lexical patterns to those found in the Italian data, with terms equivalent to internship or traineeship suggesting that the proposal was interpreted as a request for practical training.

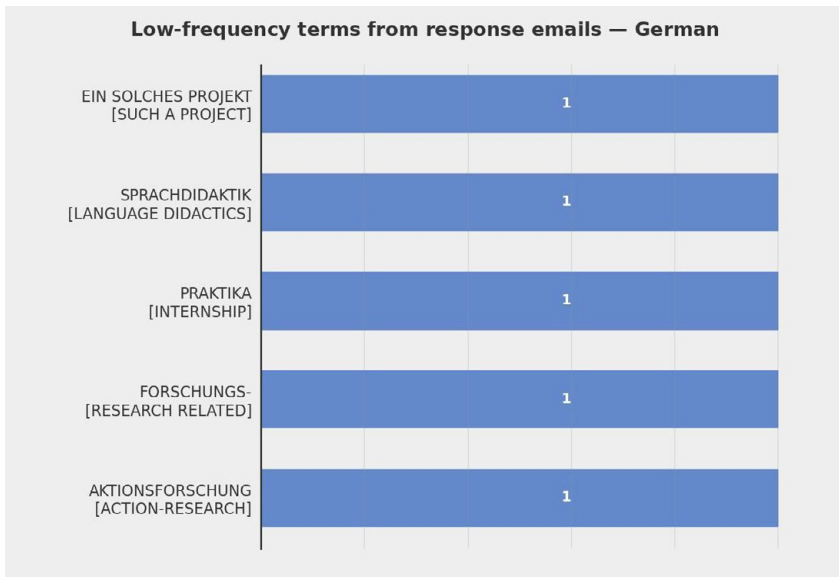


Fig. 4 – Low-frequency terms in the German responses.

AR is mentioned only once under its proper name, although it is also indirectly referenced as “such a project”. The presence of terms like *language didactics* and *research-related* might initially suggest a positive stance toward the AR component.

On closer examination, a more complex picture emerges, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

(16)

(...) wie der Ablauf ist. Es gibt Formulare auszufüllen usw. Mehr Infos zur Aktionsforschung und wie sie konkret im Unterricht angewendet wird, (...)

[(...) how the process works. There are forms to fill out, etc. More information on action research and how it is applied in the classroom would be helpful, (...)]

(17)

Für den aktuell bevorstehenden Intensivkurs jedoch halten wir ein solches Projekt für eher ungünstig, da der Zeitdruck enorm ist.

[For the upcoming intensive course, however, we consider such a project rather unsuitable, as the time pressure is enormous]

(18)

(...) hervorheben, dass das XXX keine Forschungs- sondern eine Serviceeinrichtung ist.

[(...) emphasize that XXX is not a research institution, but a service unit]

(19)

Leider sind aber die Praktika bei uns nur für Studierende.

[Unfortunately, internships with us are only available to university students]

(20)

(...) Sprachunterricht, jedoch nicht Unterricht in der Sprachdidaktik stattfindet. Es ist damit scharf zu trennen (...)

[(...) language teaching takes place here, but not instruction in language didactics. A clear distinction must therefore be made (...)]

In example (16), the respondent requests further information, possibly indicating an openness to negotiation. However, the subsequent responses reveal more restrictive positions: in (17), the request is declined due to lack of time, implying that involvement in research might interfere with teaching responsibilities; in (19), an internship is explicitly refused; and in (18) and (20), the focus shifts to institutional boundaries—distinguishing between bodies responsible for research and those tasked with language instruction. This distinction suggests a perceived separation between the roles of teacher and researcher.

5.3 Comparing Sent Emails With Replies

Extending the findings, the textual examination of the emails sent highlighted ambiguities in several messages, particularly in those in Italian. Nevertheless, the AR methodology remained unclear, which may have unintentionally reduced the perceived importance of this component. This is particularly relevant given that effectively formulating a request in formal communication often requires careful rhetorical structuring, particularly when aiming to maintain politeness and deference across potential cultural boundaries (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989).

This becomes even more relevant when considering formal email as a communicative genre which, despite adhering to norms of politeness and indirectness typical of other formal registers, occupies a hybrid space between spoken and written language and generally favours brevity (Crystal, 2001, p. 51). Features associated with formal email communication have been shown to affect intelligibility and pragmatic effectiveness in professional exchanges (Kruger et al., 2005; Atifi et al., 2011).

These communicative constraints help contextualize the patterns observed in the responses, which revealed a recurring set of misunderstandings across both language corpora. Despite geographical and cultural differences, three common aspects emerged: (i) the AR methodology was largely unfamiliar and in only one instance was a request for clarification made; (ii) the application for a teaching position was frequently interpreted as a request for an internship; (iii) teaching and research were perceived as distinct activities.

These findings invite reflection on how AR proposals and the role of the TR are perceived within educational settings.

6. Key Patterns and Interpretation

The analysis has highlighted several recurring features that characterise the context of teaching Italian to foreigners, particularly when AR is introduced into institutional discourse. We identified three main patterns that reflect institutional challenges and perceptions commonly associated with teacher-led AR.

6.1 Terminological Confusion

A first notable issue concerns the widespread terminological ambiguity surrounding AR, both in how the methodology itself is conceptualised—often not clearly distinguished from empirical or experimental research—and in how its main actors are defined. In several cases, the role of the TR appeared to be conflated with that of a trainee, suggesting a lack of clarity around the purpose and identity of the AR practitioner.

6.2 Institutional Scepticism

The analysis also reveals a prevailing attitude of reluctance toward the figure of the TR, whose role is frequently perceived as both hybrid and ambiguous. Teachers involved in AR are often seen as underqualified to conduct research and, at the same time, as less engaged in instructional duties. Institutions appeared to fear that involvement in research might detract from teaching, with educators devoting less time to lesson planning and delivery due to the demands of data collection and project monitoring.

6.3 Impact on Learners

Extending these institutional perceptions, the presumed conflict between teaching and research was seen to affect students directly. When research is viewed as a diversion from teaching rather than a complement to it, learners may be perceived as at risk of receiving reduced pedagogical support and struggling to meet the objectives outlined in the syllabus. This concern reflects a broader institutional narrative in which the educational value of teacher-led research remains insufficiently acknowledged.

7. Conclusions and Potential Directions for Future Research

Although exploratory in nature, this study offers insights into the reception of the TR within the field of teaching Italian to foreigners for non-native speakers, suggesting several lines of inquiry for continued research and institutional dialogue. An important insight arising from the comparison of

the findings is the role that cross-cultural dimensions play in shaping formal communication. Even in contexts where institutions share similar characteristics and professionals working in education are experienced in intercultural interaction, communicative frameworks remain deeply influenced by the local cultural context—including textual structure, stylistic conventions, and pragmatic norms.

Furthermore, if independently conducted research plays a meaningful role in the professionalisation and enrichment of the teaching profession—as postulated by this study—, then active support for such initiatives should be prioritised. This commitment should be systematically promoted both within the institutions where teachers are employed and through partnerships with external organisations willing to host research projects. Strengthening collaboration between teacher education programmes and institutions responsible for teaching Italian as a foreign language is essential to ensuring the sustained development and recognition of teacher-led research.

A preliminary step in this regard should involve the development of a transparent and internationally shared terminology that clearly defines the roles, objectives, and methodologies underpinning teacher-led research.

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