Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)

GISSR Global Institute of Social Sciences Research

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks in TESOL and Applied Linguistics

Sayyed Rashid Ali Shah
London Training Institute, Oman.

ISSN: 3006-6557 (Online)
ISSN: 3006-6549 (Print)

Vol. 3, **No.** 2 (2025)
Pages: 411-426

Key Words:
Applied linguistics, conceptual framework, Paradigms, research design, theoretical Framework

Corresponding Author:
Sayyed Rashid Ali Shah
Email: tesoleducator@outlook.com

Abstract: *This paper explores the critical distinction between theoretical and conceptual frameworks in research, particularly within applied linguistics, ELT, and TESOL. Theoretical frameworks, rooted in established theories, provide explanatory and predictive structures, while conceptual frameworks offer researcher-constructed scaffolds for organizing context-specific inquiry. Through a detailed discussion of their definitions, uses, and alignment with research questions and methodologies, this paper provides practical guidance on how to choose, justify, and apply each framework type. Drawing on examples from phonetics, sociolinguistics, teacher identity, assessment, and curriculum studies, it illustrates their application across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research. The paper also highlights common pitfalls, such as epistemological mismatch, conceptual vagueness, and overuse of Western paradigms in non-Western contexts. A set of practical recommendations and ethical considerations further supports emerging researchers in navigating this complex terrain.*

Introduction

In the landscape of graduate and postgraduate research, particularly within linguistics, applied linguistics, English Language Teaching (ELT), and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), the selection and justification of a theoretical or conceptual framework are both foundational and often misunderstood steps. These frameworks serve not only to embellish a thesis; they undergird the entire process of doing the research, from the questions to be framed to the analysis of the data and the conclusions drawn. However, for most early-career researchers, the difference between theoretical and conceptual frameworks is often not well understood, frequently leading to confusion, misapplication, or misnaming in their academic writing.

This matter is significantly urgent in areas such as ELT and TESOL, where research is often drawn from these fields and other disciplines, including psychology, education, linguistics, and sociology. Because of this, deciding upon a typical framework and integrating it into their research is more difficult. While theoretical frameworks are typically based upon already established bodies of theory (e.g., Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, 1978; Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, 1991; Krashen's Input Hypothesis, 1982), conceptual frameworks are less structured and often based upon constructs put together by the researcher to represent the study. However, these distinctions are frequently blurred in postgraduate theses, journal articles, and even course textbooks.

The importance of clearly articulating a framework lies in its role in shaping the entire inquiry. As

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue, a framework helps researchers "see" what they are looking at, it offers a lens, or a filter, through which the phenomenon under investigation can be interpreted. Without this lens, the research lacks coherence and depth, appearing instead as a collection of disconnected ideas. Moreover, reviewers and examiners increasingly expect postgraduate researchers to justify their theoretical or conceptual framework with clarity, precision, and relevance to the chosen methodology. One reason for the prevalent confusion is that graduate programs in linguistics and TESOL often emphasize research methods and design without dedicating sufficient time to the epistemological and ontological assumptions behind the use of frameworks. Students may memorize definitions but fail to understand how frameworks operate within different research paradigms, qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods. A student conducting a qualitative narrative inquiry into teacher identity, for example, may mistakenly claim to use a "theoretical framework" while in fact presenting a set of thematic categories. Similarly, a researcher conducting a corpus-based quantitative study may choose a theoretical framework rooted in usage-based grammar without explaining how it aligns with the research questions or the data.

This paper aims to address some of the common challenges that students and early-career researchers encounter when working with theoretical and conceptual frameworks in language-related research. It serves as a practical and accessible guide designed especially for graduate and postgraduate students. The goal is to help them not only understand the difference between theoretical and conceptual frameworks but also to recognize when each is most appropriate, how to choose a framework that fits their research questions and methodology, and how to justify that choice clearly in their academic writing. In doing so, the paper also highlights common mistakes researchers make when applying these frameworks—and offers strategies for avoiding them.

Importantly, this paper also emphasizes the contextual sensitivity of framework selection. In a global academic environment where research is conducted across diverse sociocultural and geopolitical settings, there is a need to move beyond the uncritical application of Euro-American theories. Researchers must be mindful of epistemic injustice and the potential mismatch between the frameworks they adopt and the local realities they investigate.

By integrating examples from recent studies in linguistics, applied linguistics, and TESOL, and by drawing on foundational and contemporary scholarship, this paper hopes to demystify the process of working with research frameworks. It invites readers to move beyond superficial distinctions and to engage with frameworks as dynamic, evolving tools that shape how knowledge is generated, understood, and communicated.

The sections that follow will unpack the core distinctions between theoretical and conceptual frameworks, explore their applications across various methodologies, provide guidance on their selection and justification, and offer practical strategies for their effective application in graduate-level research. In doing so, the paper seeks to contribute meaningfully to the training of emerging researchers and to enhance the quality, clarity, and critical depth of academic inquiry in the field.

Definition and Core Distinctions between Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

A. Theoretical Framework: Anchored in Established Theory

A theoretical framework is a well-established, formal structure drawn from existing theories in the literature. It provides a lens for understanding phenomena and often stems from seminal or foundational theories that have stood the test of empirical scrutiny. In linguistics, applied linguistics, ELT, and TESOL, such theories include, but are not limited to, Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Transformational Grammar (Chomsky, 1965), the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), and Critical

Pedagogy (Freire, 1970).

A theoretical framework serves as the intellectual foundation of a study, anchoring it within an established body of scholarly knowledge. Utilizing accepted theories, it has explanatory and predictive utility that permits researchers to deal with complex phenomena. A theoretical framework could be deductive; ideally, it explains the visualized or developed patterns or behaviors based on accepted theories, claims, or hypotheses. Theoretical frameworks affect how research takes form, which in turn, impacts how research question(s) get established and how researcher(s) approach asking questions, making hypotheses, and how overall research design is created. In quantitative work, for example, a theoretical framework defines specific key variables being investigated, whereas in qualitative designs, it informs the thematic coding of analysis. For instance, if it were a TESOL study examining how learners acquire grammar in a sociocultural manner through interaction with others, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) would likely provide an explanation of social mediation and scaffolding that supports learning. In phonetics research, several studies will consider a theoretical perspective, such as Optimality Theory or the Acoustic Theory of Speech Production, to examine speech. For example, a study examining Arabic speakers' stated difficulties in articulating the sounds of the English phonetic inventory may be using Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model as a theoretical framework to begin to explain how L1 phonological representations impact the process of acquiring L2 sounds.

B. Conceptual Framework: Constructed by the Researcher

In contrast, a conceptual framework is often developed by the researcher based on specific variables, constructs, or factors relevant to the particular study. It may draw on several smaller, less formalized theories, empirical findings, or even researchers' experiences. The conceptual framework represents the researcher's own synthesis of literature to outline what they expect to find and how the variables or constructs relate to one another.

A conceptual framework is typically crafted specifically for the research project it supports. Unlike theoretical frameworks, which rely on established theories, conceptual frameworks are particularly useful in exploratory, qualitative, or mixed-methods studies where the goal is to investigate new or complex phenomena. Conceptual frameworks help researchers navigate the landscape of inquiry by showing how key ideas, concepts, or variables are related. A conceptual framework often takes the form of a diagram or model to provide a concrete and clear representation of the study's focus. Conceptual frameworks are frequently based on inductive or abdicative reasoning and indicate that the researchers' understanding is continuously developing and is shaped by revelations made during the study. For example, a researcher studying teacher identity in online ELT classrooms might create a conceptual framework that includes constructs such as "digital presence," "pedagogical agency," and "emotional labor" by utilizing data from many sources, including empirical studies, practitioner reflections, and small-scale theories. In this case, the theoretical framework responds to the question "Why is this happening?" and the conceptual framework answers the question "What are the important parts involved and how are they connected?"

Table 1: Visual Representation of Differences

ASPECT	THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
SOURCE	Based on established theories from prior scholarly work	Constructed by the researcher using concepts from the literature and context
FUNCTION	Explains, predicts, or provides a lens for understanding phenomena	Organizes and visualizes key variables, concepts, or relationships
NATURE	Deductive (theory-driven)	Inductive or abdicative (data/context-driven)

USE	Guides analysis, interpretation, and hypothesis testing	Guides the design, data collection, and focus of the study
EXAMPLE	Sociocultural Theory, Input Hypothesis, Cognitive Load Theory	A researcher's model of online learning barriers in rural Oman
BEST FIT	Explanatory studies, theory testing, and confirmatory research	Exploratory studies, grounded theory, needs analysis

C. Why the Distinction Matters

Confusing these frameworks can lead to conceptual inconsistency in a thesis or paper. For example, claiming to use Krashen's Input Hypothesis (a theoretical framework) while outlining an original model of learner motivation without explicitly stating the difference between the two leads to intellectual slippage and weak justification.

Moreover, clarity and coherence in selecting a framework are not just academic ideals, they are practical expectations set by thesis supervisors, journal reviewers, and research committees. These stakeholders look for a strong alignment between the chosen framework, the research methodology, and the overall purpose of the study. For example, a quantitative investigation into the relationship between student motivation and academic performance would typically benefit from a well-established theoretical framework such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which offers measurable constructs and predictive capabilities. Alternatively, a qualitative case study that examines EFL teachers' professional development experiences can draw upon a conceptual framework that includes constructs such as reflective practice, institutional constraints, and transformative learning. In this instance, the framework is designed to illustrate both the complexity and the subtleties of individual narratives and situational factors, and thereby inform the data collection and analysis in an interpretive sense.

D. Common Misconceptions

Many students, particularly those who are inexperienced in conducting academic research, often exhibit persistent misconceptions about theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Perhaps the most common misconception is the Interchangeability Myth, students believe that the terms "theoretical framework" and "conceptual framework" are synonymous and can be used interchangeably. This misconception can lead to conceptual muddle and inconsistency in the foundation of the study design. Another common misconception is the Hierarchy Fallacy; students have a perceived belief that theoretical frameworks are more legitimate than conceptual frameworks. The truth is that there is no hierarchy among frameworks. Rather, the best framework depends on the research problem and purpose; often, conceptual frameworks provide a more appropriate guide for exploratory or qualitative research.

Also problematic is the Exclusion Error, which occurs when researchers assume that qualitative studies do not need any framework at all. As a result, these studies have no framework or analytical coherence. Finally, Patchwork Frameworks occur when students select ideas from a range of authors/concepts; however, they do not consider whether these ideas make sense together or whether there is any logical coherence between them, and therefore lack a foundation.

These misunderstandings are vital to address, not just for technical accuracy in research; they matter when developing an academic identity. A clear study framework, which is well-justified, increases the rigour of a study and increases the possibility that the study will be accepted for publication in reputable journals.

E. Contextual Considerations

It is important to note the influence of epistemological orientation on the choice of frameworks, too. Researchers working within positivist paradigms (e.g., experimental phonetics) are more likely to utilize

theoretical frameworks based on established and validated models. In contrast, those operating within constructivist or interpretivist paradigms (e.g., teacher narratives, ethnographies of classrooms) will likely construct their own contextualized conceptual frameworks.

Moreover, researchers in postcolonial contexts must critically examine the applicability of hegemonic theories, as research problems are not always translatable to different geographic, cultural, and sociopolitical situations. Theoretical imperialism, which involves applying Western theories in non-Western contexts, often overlooks local realities and possibilities. Frameworks are embedded in cultural and historic contexts, and Canagarajah (2002) cautions that we run the risk of epistemic injustice by importing frameworks uncritically.

F. The Presence of Both Frameworks

In some studies, especially studies with mixed-method designs, using both a theoretical framework and a conceptual framework can be both appropriate and productive. Each framework serves its own function in a different research strand. Theoretical frameworks may provide the underpinning for a quantitative strand of research and, thus, a basis for hypothesis testing, variable selection, and statistical analysis. At the same time, the conceptual framework can help shape the qualitative strand, organizing key ideas and guiding thematic exploration and interpretation. In some cases, the reverse may also be true: a conceptual framework could inform the overarching inquiry while a specific theory supports one portion of the data analysis. When applied thoughtfully, this dual-framework approach adds depth and coherence, ensuring that both the numerical and narrative dimensions of the study are well grounded and meaningfully connected. In such cases, clearly distinguishing their roles is essential.

Example: An IELTS preparation mixed-methods study might use Washback Theory to frame the quantitative aspect (e.g., measuring improvement in test scores) and a conceptual framework that integrates affective and pedagogical factors to guide interview-based thematic analysis.

Understanding the subtle distinctions between theoretical and conceptual frameworks is more than a matter of semantics: it is a necessary step for designing coherent, grounded, and defensible research in linguistics, applied linguistics, and TESOL. Graduate students need to learn how to not only define these frameworks but also apply them intentionally and critically when shaping their inquiries.

The Significance of Frameworks

Recognizing the distinctions between theoretical and conceptual frameworks is an important first decision but knowing when to use each and why is equally important. The decision will depend on the researcher's respective research purpose, the methodology he/she will choose, and the nature of the phenomenon he/she is studying. This section provides practical guidance to help choose and effectively utilize frameworks.

A. Based on Research Purpose

The objective of research, whether it seeks to explain, explore, describe, or predict, often dictates which frameworks are more appropriate in their given circumstance. Theoretical frameworks are most often used in documents with a specific goal to test hypotheses or validate theories. These types of research projects can be considered deductive in nature, moving from theories to observations. The goal is often to explain causal or correlational relationships between variables, providing structured, theory-driven explanations for observed phenomena. Due to their systematic nature and reliance on established theories, studies that employ theoretical frameworks often aim for a degree of generalizability and strive to make a theoretical contribution to the broader academic field. Such frameworks not only ground the research in scholarly discourse but also position the study within ongoing debates or models in the discipline.

Example: A study investigating whether a strong L1 accent affects intelligibility in English listening tests might use the Speech Learning Model (Flege, 1995) as a theoretical framework to explain cross-linguistic influence.

Conceptual frameworks are particularly well-suited for exploratory or descriptive research, where the aim is to investigate complex or emerging phenomena rather than to test pre-existing theories. They are ideal in situations where no single theory fully captures the scope of the issue under investigation, allowing researchers to draw on multiple concepts to build a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. These frameworks are effective when the study is firmly anchored in contextual realities, and when meaning and knowledge are socially based and contextualized, rather than objective or enduring. Conceptual frameworks have considerable similarity to constructivist or interpretivist paradigms, as they are concerned with understanding how individuals build meaning from their experiences in real-time, and from socially determined sources. Conceptual frameworks are very powerful for qualitative research due to their attention to meaning, context, depth, and interpreting social practice in a single, narrow frame.

Example: A study analyzing the emotional experiences of teachers in a peer lifestyle lesson observation with non-native English speakers could have a conceptual framework that incorporates constructs such as "professional vulnerability," "performance anxiety," and "institutional culture" as identified by the researcher, drawing on multiple sources.

B. Based on Research Methodology

The methodological approach, qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods, strongly influences framework selection.

Methodology

Table 2: Choice of Methodology, Framework and Justification

Methodology	PREFERRED FRAMEWORK TYPE	JUSTIFICATION
QUANTITATIVE	Theoretical Framework	Deductive testing of established theories; operationalization of variables
QUALITATIVE	Conceptual Framework	Inductive exploration; context-driven and flexible structuring
MIXED-METHODS	Both (clearly delineated roles)	Theoretical for statistical analysis; conceptual for qualitative interpretation

Consider a mixed-methods research study that is exploring test-related stress experienced by IELTS candidates. In terms of the quantitative study, the researcher uses Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress-Coping Theory as a theoretical framework. The theory offers a structure for exploring how the test-takers appraise and cope with stress. The researcher can create hypotheses and develop a survey instrument that measures individuals' coping levels in response to stress to gain insight into the candidates' experiences. The qualitative component of the study uses a conceptual framework devised by the researcher. The qualitative framework is not based on a single theory; rather, it draws together literature on motivation, social factors, and identity formation. Thus, the qualitative work demonstrates how the test-takers experience and interpret stress in ways that are more personal and contextualized. These frameworks combined yield a clean analysis and rich interpretation, showing the beauty of mixed-methods research and the integration of theoretical and conceptual dimensions to study complex research problems.

C. Based on Disciplinary Orientation

In linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT), the decision to adopt a theoretical framework or a conceptual framework depends on the subfield and the specific research inquiry. Some areas lend themselves more easily to theoretical frameworks, particularly those based on formal structures and rule systems. For example, phonetics and phonology both often utilize some theoretical frameworks, such as Articulatory Phonology or Acoustic Theory, to understand sound and transmission. Similarly, studies in syntax and morphology necessarily draw on theoretical models, such as Government and Binding Theory or Minimalism, to organize a grammar description. Studies in language acquisition, especially those testing hypotheses related to Universal Grammar (UG) or the Input Hypothesis, are grounded in a theoretical framework that explains and predicts language acquisition.

In contrast, frameworks are frequently employed in areas of research that are more exploratory, context-sensitive, and interpretive. For instance, research in areas such as teacher cognition and identity or the study of language policy and planning often requires the involvement of several ideas to encapsulate the repercussions of numerous social and institutional impacts. Similarly, research drawing on intercultural communication, ethnographies of classrooms, and the development of curricula or materials generally utilizes flexible researcher-made frameworks so that the research accommodates multiple perspectives and contextualized realities. Conceptual and theoretical turns enable researchers to lay out relationships between constructs, illustrating and interpreting phenomena relevant to the lived experiences of participants. For example, a sociolinguistics study investigating language shift in a bilingual community may not have an established theory to use, so the researcher may have to develop a conceptual framework from the following sociolinguistic variables: language prestige, institutional support for the language, and transmission between generations.

D. Based on Availability and Relevance of Existing Theory

Sometimes there is little relevant theory to follow, so researchers will often work from a conceptual framework. If an area is emerging and has some novelty, no model theory captures the nuances of the topic of study. For example, let us say that a researcher is examining the digitally Translanguaging practices of multilingual YouTubers. The researcher should construct a conceptual framework that incorporates elements of Translanguaging theory, digital discourse analysis, and identity theory if there are no relevant theories for the phenomenon under study. When a phenomenon is well established, particularly in areas such as second language motivation, researchers may draw on existing theoretical models to guide their studies. Dörnyei's (2007) L2 Motivational Self System can be an example.

E. Risk of Misapplication: Choosing the Wrong Framework

Choosing the wrong framework, and/or using a framework without justification, can negatively affect the quality of a research study and/or diminish its credibility. For instance, using a theoretical framework where none is actually warranted may produce forced, unnecessarily rigid, or shallow interpretations, and the analysis becomes untethered from the data simply because the framework takes precedence over the data. Alternatively, a conceptual framework that lacks clear internal logic or structure may lead to a study that lacks direction, focus, consistency, or analytical depth. Perhaps most critically, when the framework is not aligned with the chosen methodology, the entire study can suffer from internal contradictions, making it difficult for readers, reviewers, or committees to trust its findings or conclusions.

Researchers need to adopt a deliberate, methodical, and reflective approach in order to steer clear of these typical pitfalls. This begins with a critical analysis of the existing literature to identify frameworks that align with the study's goals and provide inspiration. Researchers should also consider their own

positionality, research questions, and intended contributions in order to be comfortable with the epistemological integrity of the framework they select. Finally, it is also valid to solicit feedback from mentors, colleagues, or supervisors, as they may have a more objective perspective and be able to provide tangible feedback and direction to shape the framework around academia and the research's purposes. Ultimately, there is a good rationale for developing a framework; it is not a compliance exercise, it is the basis of a study that is valuable and worth investing time in.

F. Guiding Questions for Framework Selection

In the process of selecting a framework for this study, a series of questions was asked to determine the framework's compatibility with the study's purpose and context. First, the authors reflected on the overall aim of the study, was it explanatory, exploratory, descriptive, or was it predicting something about the phenomenon they were studying? This reflection was combined with an analysis of whether an existing theory existed that could explain the phenomenon under investigation. Next, the authors gave some attention to the methodological approach that one might use in studying the phenomenon, qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods design, etc. Next was the question of what kind of framework would be appropriate for their study. The categories they considered included a flexible, context-sensitive organizing concept or a theory-driven approach. Finally, the authors reflected on whether they were working in an interdisciplinary or under-theorized field that might warrant a more flexible, inductive approach to selecting a framework. These questions represent a useful series of guiding reflections to assist particularly in the selection of an inductive framework.

The decision between a theoretical and conceptual framework constitutes more than just a matter of semantics, it has implications for how knowledge is carved out and interpreted. By attending to the purpose, methodology, disciplinary expectations, and theoretical landscape of their research, graduate and postgraduate students can make informed, defensible, and meaningful framework decisions. Selecting the right framework enhances not only the coherence and rigor of their study but also its contribution to the field.

Selecting an Appropriate Framework

Choosing a framework can be one of the most intellectually challenging portions of study design for many graduate or postgraduate researchers. There are many articles on the purpose of frameworks, but few articles offer rich, practical advice about how to choose a framework, as we will do in this section. In this paper, the authors offer practical ways to help students identify, critique, and justify the best theoretical or conceptual framework for their linguistics, applied linguistics, English language teaching (ELT), or teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) assignments.

A. Aligning Framework with Research Questions

Alignment is a crucial principle to consider in an acceptable process for selecting a framework. The reference frame of the study should align with the study purpose, research question, and methodological design. If this does not occur, the two will misalign, confusing, a lack of clarity, or potentially incorrect results, even if the overall research design incorporates sound research principles.

If the research questions aim to describe, predict, or test relationships among variables, then a theoretical framework that draws on established theories is more appropriate. These theories inform what variables to include, guide the formation of hypotheses, and provide tools for making sense of the statistical findings. For instance, a research question like, "What is the influence of the type of feedback provided by the teacher on the bout of dependent writing?" could be informed by either a socio-cognitive and interactionist second language acquisition (SLA) theoretical framework, which both offer a firm foundation for explaining how feedback impacts student output.

If a study investigates contextual event, it has a lot to do with where it takes place, or is not well written about, then a conceptual plan is probably better. Ideas and themes can be added that consider what real life is all about with these plans. For example, if someone is asked, "What do EFL teachers think about their work in large and mixed ability classes?" then a conceptual plan would be best if ideas like role-playing, mixed knowledge, and working with rules can be added. All can change how teachers do their work in such a new setting. Lastly, selecting the right plan requires a deep, deliberate matching, not hard rules; it is crucial to ensure the plan truly supports the look the research aims to achieve.

B. Reviewing the Literature

The review of literature requires critical reading when selecting the right research framework. It is impossible to select one in a vacuum. Before choosing a theoretical or conceptual basis, researchers must understand what others have done before them. They need to find out which frameworks have been used by other studies in that particular field and, more importantly, whether those frameworks apply to their research. This process often reveals gaps, contradictions, or topics that require further attention to understand. These might be ways to build a new conceptual framework or to use an existing framework in a new way.

Researchers should turn to academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, or Google Scholar for this more targeted work. These sites enable one to follow up on theoretical work in his/her area of interest, observe how others support their use of frameworks, and track how frameworks have evolved, particularly when applied to novel or specific contexts.

Researchers should carefully read the Introduction and Theoretical Framework sections of journal articles, a dissertation, or a thesis. These are where scholars often explain why they chose a framework and demonstrate how it aligns with their questions and methods, seeing how experienced researchers make these types of arguments will help one develop his/her ability to choose an informed and convincing framework for their work.

C. Constructing a Conceptual Framework

To help give research a shape and add depth and level needed for qualitative research, these steps help build a conceptual framework that makes sense and fits one’s field of work.

In many qualitative studies, especially in applied linguistics and TESOL, researchers face the fact that no current theory can adequately address the complex nature of the research problem. In such cases, if the researcher cannot find a formal theory or if one is insufficient, he must use a conceptual framework (CF). It allows the researchers to order their thoughts carefully and to give a clear reason for the course of their research.

There are many important parts to a successful CF. The first step is to find the main ideas that matter most to the research problem. The researchers could get these from a detailed review of the body of research that was done before them, but they could also be affected by their schooling and work experiences. For example, in language teacher identity research, the concepts of "reflective practice," "institutional expectations," and "linguistic insecurity" might be key ideas.

After these main ideas have been identified, the next step is to assign a precise meaning to each of them by examining the literature. Specific meanings supported by trusted literature remove confusion and ensure that the reader understands the scope and significance of each idea.

Once the major constructs have been found, the next step is to show their relationships. This can be done through written descriptions showing how the concepts relate to each other and through visuals such as concept maps and diagrams. Whether using words or visuals, the point is to show how these ideas fit together to frame the investigation.

Finally, each part of the CF needs to be backed up with proof. This involves outlining the rationale behind each idea and explaining how it aligns with the research approach and objectives. Citing previous research to support these choices adds academic credibility and shows the readers that the researcher is involved in the field in an informed and reflective manner.

Example: In a study exploring code-switching practices of Omani university students, a researcher might construct a conceptual framework that brings together sociolinguistic constructs (e.g., diglossia, language identity), communication strategies, and classroom dynamics. These elements may be drawn from various disciplines, sociolinguistics, education; discourse studies, and combined into a custom-made framework tailored for the study.

D. Combining Frameworks

In some cases, particularly in interdisciplinary research, it is both appropriate and beneficial to adopt a hybrid or multi-theoretical approach. This strategy allows researchers to draw on the strengths of multiple frameworks to address different dimensions of a complex phenomenon. However, using more than one framework requires careful consideration and intentional application.

First and foremost, the selected frameworks must be epistemologically and methodologically compatible. Combining theories that rest on fundamentally different assumptions about knowledge or research practice can create confusion and weaken the integrity of a study. For example, merging a positivist framework with one rooted in constructivism without resolving their philosophical tensions can result in contradictions that undermine the analysis.

Second, it is essential to define the role of each framework clearly. It should be specified, which aspect of the study each one informs, whether it is data collection, interpretation, or conceptual framing, and explain how they work together without overlapping or conflicting. This clarity helps both the researchers and their readers understand the logic behind the framework integration.

Lastly, the urge to choose frameworks to appear more sophisticated or comprehensive should be resisted. Every framework included should have a clear and justified purpose, contributing meaningfully to the research objectives. When done thoughtfully, a hybrid approach can enrich the study by offering multiple lenses through which to interpret data, provided it is rooted in coherence, not complexity for its own sake.

Example: In teacher identity research, one might combine Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) with Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) to explore both social group affiliation and critical self-reflection. The key is to explain how both frameworks interact to support the inquiry.

E. Avoiding Common Pitfalls

Selecting and applying a research framework is a foundational step in academic inquiry, yet many researchers fall into avoidable traps that can compromise the quality and coherence of their work. Below are some of the most common pitfalls, and how to steer clear of them:

1. Using Frameworks without Understanding Them

One of the most frequent errors is choosing a framework simply because it is widely cited or sounds intellectually impressive. However, selecting a theory without a solid grasp of its core assumptions, boundaries, and limitations can lead to misapplication. Researchers must ensure they fully understand the epistemological roots and intended purpose of the framework before using it to shape their study.

2. Framework-Method Mismatch

Another critical misstep is pairing a framework with a methodology that does not align philosophically or practically. For instance, using a positivist theoretical framework, such as one common in psycholinguistics, would be inappropriate for a constructivist or interpretive approach like narrative

inquiry. Misalignments like these can confuse the audience and undermine the validity of a research design.

3. Overreliance on Western Frameworks in Non-Western Contexts

While many dominant frameworks originate from Western academic traditions, they do not always translate well into other cultural or educational contexts. Applying such models uncritically in non-Western settings can lead to misrepresentation or oversimplification. Instead, researchers should consider localized, indigenous, or hybrid frameworks that better reflect the realities and values of their research environment.

4. Confusing 'Topic' with 'Framework'

It is also important to distinguish between a research topic and a framework. Concepts like "motivation," "anxiety," or "teacher training" are themes, not frameworks. A framework goes beyond naming a topic, it provides a lens to interpret, relate, and analyze those themes systematically. For instance, applying Self-Determination Theory to examine motivation constitutes a theoretical framework, whereas merely stating that the study focuses on motivation does no

5. Lack of Justification

Finally, failing to justify the choice of framework weakens a study's scholarly foundation. It is not enough to name a theory or model, it must be explained it aligns with research goals, how it supports research questions, and in what ways it has been utilized (or critiqued) in the existing literature. A well-articulated justification demonstrates critical thinking and enhances research's credibility.

Avoiding these pitfalls requires more than just awareness; it demands intellectual discipline, contextual sensitivity, and deep engagement with relevant literature. By thoughtfully choosing and justifying a framework, it lays the groundwork for a study that is methodologically sound, contextually appropriate, and academically rigorous.

F. Sample Paragraph: Framework Justification

This is an example of a paragraph that shows how to explain a framework in a thesis:

This study employs Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) as its theoretical framework, as it helps us understand how learners acquire language through mediated interaction. The ideas of scaffolding, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and internalization are very important in EFL classrooms because they focus on working together with peers. The framework aligns with the study's constructivist paradigm and supports reflective journals and classroom observations as methods of data collection. By examining current studies that have drawn upon Sociocultural Theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain et al., 2011), which have also explored collaborative learning in EFL contexts, this approach was also justifiable.

Developing an appropriate theoretical or conceptual framework will likely be challenging because it involves not only a technical process but also the engagement of reflexivity, critical thinking, and alignment with the research purpose. Having a sound framework can help to focus, position research, and make sound decisions in the analysis. With a thorough review of the literature, addressing it to support research questions and method, and avoiding common pitfalls, a framework will likely not only be defendable, but also contribute to academic research as an occupationally useful tool.

Justifying Frameworks in a Thesis or Paper

Selecting a theoretical or conceptual framework is only the first step; the next, and equally important, task is to justify that selection effectively. Whether in a thesis, dissertation, or journal article, the justification of the framework is a key component that signals to the reader (and examiners or reviewers) that the research is grounded, coherent, and methodologically sound.

A well-supported framework defines the main concepts under investigation, shows alignment with the research questions and methodology, and aids in elucidating the lens through which the research problem is viewed. This section offers practical guidance on creating a compelling argument.

A. Why Justification Matters

One of the first and most obvious signs of academic maturity in research writing is the justification of the selected framework. It signals that the researcher has gone beyond surface-level topic selection and engaged deeply with the literature, carefully identifying the theoretical or conceptual tools most relevant to their inquiry. A well-justified framework shows that the researcher not only understands their topic but also grasps the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning their study, whether those are rooted in positivism, constructivism, critical theory, or another paradigm.

Moreover, a strong justification clearly explains how the framework shapes the research design and analysis, influencing everything from question formulation to data interpretation and analysis. It also allows the researcher to situate their study within larger academic conversations, making explicit how their work contributes to, challenges, or extends existing scholarship.

On the other hand, a weak or absent justification can significantly compromise a study. Without a clear rationale, the research may appear disjointed, uncritical, or superficial, raising concerns for supervisors, reviewers, or thesis examiners. Reviewers are likely to question whether the framework is appropriately chosen—or worse, whether the researcher fully understands it. In short, a well-argued framework justification is not just an academic formality—it is a foundation for research credibility, coherence, and scholarly contribution.

B. Sample Justification Paragraphs

For a Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory as its theoretical framework to explore how in-service English teachers experience professional growth during postgraduate studies. The theory's emphasis on critical reflection, perspective transformation, and shifts in self-concept aligns closely with the study's focus on teacher identity. Given that prior studies (e.g., Kitchener & King, 2004; Taylor, 2009) have successfully used this framework in professional development research, it offers a robust lens through which to examine transformative experiences in ELT teacher education. The framework's suitability is also enhanced by the qualitative, narrative approach of the study, which values subjective meaning-making and interpretive depth.

For a Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework was constructed for this study to explore the writing challenges faced by foundation-year EFL students in Oman. Drawing from the literature on second language writing, academic literacy, and genre awareness (Hyland, 2004; Leki, 2007; Tribble, 2017), the framework integrates key constructs such as coherence, syntactic complexity, writing anxiety, and cultural dissonance. This synthesized model allows for a nuanced exploration of multiple interacting factors and is particularly suited to the study's exploratory design. The framework was validated through iterative coding and cross-comparison with participant narratives, enhancing its contextual relevance.

Application in Linguistics and TESOL Research

Understanding the distinction between theoretical and conceptual frameworks is not enough; students also need to see how these frameworks are applied in practice within various subfields of linguistics, applied linguistics, ELT, and TESOL. In order to demonstrate how various frameworks are used to direct data collection, analysis, and interpretation, this section offers specific examples taken from recent empirical studies, doctoral dissertations, and published research articles.

A. Application in Applied Linguistics

Applied linguistics, by definition, is an interdisciplinary field that addresses language-related problems in the real world, utilizing knowledge from various disciplines, including social theories, psychology, education, and core linguistics.

In this case, theoretical/conceptual frameworks may or may not be included based on the type of research and scope of inquiry.

Sociolinguistics and Language Policy

Within areas of inquiry such as sociolinguistics and language policy, many researchers use frameworks that allow for an analysis of the complexities of power, identity, and access in multilingual or multicultural contexts. Bourdieu's Theory of Linguistic Capital (1991) is a popular choice. The theory offers a powerful framework for viewing language as operating within larger systems of social stratification and inequality. In this view, research could analyze how different languages—and, in some cases, dialects—are ascribed different values within political, economic, and educational systems and the implications of the assigned values on who accesses resources and opportunities.

A researcher researching how local languages are marginalized in Gulf educational contexts could apply Bourdieu's (1991) framework for understanding the construction of language as a type of cultural capital, even when this means marginalizing Arabic or indigenous languages. Bourdieu's (1991) theoretical framework extends beyond mere means of communication, as it reveals a socially stratified asset that serves to foreground or marginalize individuals through institutional norms and ideological impositions.

In applied linguistics, the choice between theoretical frameworks and conceptual frameworks is inherently subjective and sometimes depends on the purpose of the research, as well as the approach utilized. Theoretical issues (frameworks) must be compatible with the study's purpose and provide a useful structure for analyzing identity, policy, classroom, or discourse.

Intercultural Communication

Investigations in intercultural communication frequently descend to conceptual frameworks as researchers are often interested in the fluid, context-dependent aspect of human communication across cultural boundaries. Intercultural communication studies commonly mix and match very well-known theoretical perspectives related to intercultural communication and variables tied to the context of the research. In these studies, researchers use several models and related concepts rather than base it on only one reason.

Researchers could, for example, leverage some of Hofstede's cultural dimensions—such as power distance or individualism/collectivism—and amalgamate them with constructs relating to classroom behavior, teacher beliefs, or local communication conventions. In particular contexts—such as with multicultural or multilingual education—these constructs permit a nuanced discussion on cultural values and interpersonal relations/interactions.

A study of intercultural pragmatics in Omani EFL classrooms may represent such an application; a researcher may conceptualize a conceptual framework that pulls together Face Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), Hofstede's Power Distance Index, and teacher-student rapport. In addition, drawing on published literature in pragmatics and educational communication, the conceptual framework would allow the researcher to examine, for example, how students and teachers navigate politeness, hierarchy, and interpersonal relations in classroom discourse.

Conceptual frameworks allow for both flexibility and contextual depth, as they provide the researcher with room to map complex interactions that do not neatly align with a single theorized proposal. This is

particularly useful when depth and aspects of communication, culture, and identity interact in an engagingly complicated and diverse manner.

B. Application in ELT and TESOL

Identity, curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy are frequent topics in ELT and TESOL research. These often need conceptual frameworks, sometimes incorporating a plethora of sources, but directing the use of theories where available. Teacher Identity and Cognition

Theoretical: Studies might draw from Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978), or Figured Worlds Theory (Holland et al., 1998).

Conceptual: Researchers frequently build a conceptual framework specific to the teaching situation by combining several identity-related constructs such as "critical incidents," "emotional labour," and "agency."

An example might be a narrative inquiry examining the professional identity of Turkish non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), which could have a conceptual framework that consolidates institutional support, linguistic insecurity, and emotional resilience. Here, the researcher might draw on Norton's (2000) identity work from themes derived from their data.

Curriculum and Materials Design

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1994) and Genre Theory (Swales, 1990) can be theoretical frameworks in research conducting text analysis of textbooks or EAP (English for Academic Purposes) curriculum design.

For example, SFL may be used to perform a linguistic analysis of representations of gender, culture, and ideology in English textbooks used in Saudi Arabia.

C. Frameworks in Mixed-Methods Research

Mixed-methods studies often require both types of frameworks—one to guide the quantitative component and another to support the qualitative interpretation.

Example: In a study examining online writing performance:

- Quantitative part: Guided by Cognitive Load Theory
- Qualitative part: Uses a conceptual framework combining “self-regulation,” “technological literacy,” and “feedback responsiveness” to analyze interviews and reflective journals

Here, the researcher must explain how each framework contributes to answering different parts of the research questions.

Table 3: Matching Framework to Paradigm and Method

Paradigm	**Typical Framework Type**	***Research Focus***	***Example***
Positivist	Theoretical	Hypothesis testing	Krashen’s Input Hypothesis in SLA
Interpretivist	Conceptual	Meaning-making	Teacher beliefs in EFL contexts
Critical	Theoretical or Conceptual	Power, equity	Critical Pedagogy or hybrid identity frameworks
Constructivist	Conceptual	Participant experience	Narrative inquiry of language learners

Conclusion

In the diverse and interdisciplinary fields of applied linguistics, ELT, and TESOL, the appropriate selection and application of a theoretical or conceptual framework is not merely a procedural step in research, it is the intellectual backbone of scholarly inquiry. Whether used to explain, interpret, structure, or

explore, frameworks play a central role in guiding research questions, shaping data analysis, and ensuring the coherence and credibility of academic work.

This paper has demystified the distinction between theoretical and conceptual frameworks, emphasizing that they serve different yet equally valuable purposes. Theoretical frameworks, grounded in established knowledge, offer explanatory power and deductive clarity, particularly in empirical or hypothesis-driven studies. Conceptual frameworks, by contrast, are often constructed by the researcher to provide a flexible, inductive roadmap for navigating complex, situated phenomena, especially within qualitative and mixed-methods paradigms.

Through real-world examples across subfields such as phonetics, sociolinguistics, assessment, and teacher identity, we have illustrated how frameworks are applied in practice. We have also outlined practical strategies for choosing, justifying, and integrating frameworks, while highlighting common pitfalls, such as epistemological misalignment, conceptual vagueness, or uncritical adoption of dominant theories.

As the landscape of language education and linguistic research continues to evolve, especially in a globalized, digitally connected, and culturally diverse world, there is a growing need for researchers who are not only methodologically competent but also critically literate in the intellectual traditions they draw upon. By treating frameworks not as academic jargon but as purposeful, generative tools, emerging researchers can contribute with greater clarity, rigor, and originality to their respective fields. In short, a well-chosen and well-applied framework is not a box to tick, it is the lens through which the research sees, speaks, and makes meaning.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1991). Language and symbolic power (J. B. Thompson, Ed.; G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Harvard University Press.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). Politeness: Some universals in language usage. Cambridge University Press.

Canagarajah, A. S. (2002). *A geopolitics of academic writing.* University of Pittsburgh Press.

Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax.* MIT Press.

Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 20*(1), 43–63. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.1990.tb00174.x

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior. Plenum Press.

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies. Oxford University Press.

Flege, J. E. (1995). Second-language speech learning: Theory, findings, and problems. In W. Strange (Ed.), Speech perception and linguistic experience: Issues in cross-language research (pp. 233–277). York Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* Herder and Herder.

Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). Identity and agency in cultural worlds. Harvard University Press.

Hyland, K. (2004). Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing. University of Michigan Press.

Kitchener, K. S., & King, P. M. (2004). Reflective judgment: Theory and research on the development of epistemic assumptions through adulthood. *Educational Psychologist, 39*(1), 5–18. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3901_2

Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition.* Pergamon Press.

Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development. Oxford University Press.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, appraisal, and coping. *Springer*.

Leki, I. (2007). Undergraduates in a second language: Challenges and complexities of academic literacy development. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning.* Jossey-Bass.

Norton, B. (2000). Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change. Longman.

Swain, M., Kinnear, P., & Steinman, L. (2011). Sociocultural theory in second language education: An introduction through narratives. Multilingual Matters.

Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings.* Cambridge University Press.

Tajfel, H. (1978). Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations. Academic Press.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall.

Taylor, E. W. (2009). Fostering transformative learning. In J. Mezirow & E. W. Taylor (Eds.), *Transformative learning in practice* (pp. 3–17). Jossey-Bass.

Tribble, C. (2017). ELF and writing for academic publication: Applications, implications, and classroom practices. *ELT Journal, 71*(4), 395–404. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccx034

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Harvard University Press.