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Article

The Impact of Teacher Guidance on English Majors' Research Awareness: A Qualitative Interview Study

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Abstract: In the context of China's transformation toward innovation-driven undergraduate education, fostering students' research awareness has become a key priority, especially for English majors expecting to develop critical thinking and scholarly communication skills. This qualitative interview study explores how teacher guidance influences the development of research awareness among English majors across different stages of undergraduate education. Drawing on narrative data from eight students—two from each academic year—the study identifies six thematic areas: initial exposure to research, types and frequency of teacher guidance, perceived influence on research awareness, emotional and motivational responses, challenges in the guidance process, and students' suggestions for improvement. Findings reveal that teacher guidance serves as a multifaceted catalyst in shaping students' academic identity and research competence. Teachers contribute not only by imparting methodological knowledge and initiating classroom-based research activities but also by offering emotional support, encouragement, and personalized mentorship. However, the effectiveness of such guidance is often constrained by systemic challenges, including inconsistent feedback, lack of follow-up mechanisms, and limited institutional support. The study highlights the importance of adopting a longitudinal and differentiated approach to research training, as students' needs vary across academic levels. The study offers practical recommendations for enhancing teacher-student research engagement in EFL contexts, including early integration of research components into curricula, structured mentoring systems, and the creation of collaborative platforms for student inquiry.

Keywords: teacher guidance; research awareness; English majors; undergraduate education; research pedagogy

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1. Introduction

In the context of rapidly evolving higher education paradigms, cultivating undergraduate students' research competence has become a central objective of curriculum innovation and talent development. Particularly for English majors, the development of academic literacy and research awareness is not only essential for their academic progression but also critical for fostering critical thinking, independent inquiry, and scholarly communication skills. As China promotes the transformation of undergraduate education toward innovation-driven learning and research-oriented training, it is imperative to understand how students form initial understandings of research and what factors influence their research engagement.

Among these influencing factors, teacher guidance plays an irreplaceable role. Teachers are often the first—and sometimes the only—research mentors whom undergraduate students encounter. Through structured coursework, academic writing instruction, research project supervision, and informal encouragement, teachers serve as facilitators of

students' early exposure to research thinking and methods. Previous studies have indicated that effective teacher scaffolding can positively impact students' academic identity, research motivation, and methodological awareness [1,2]. However, limited research has been conducted in the Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, particularly on how English majors perceive and respond to teacher-led research guidance.

Moreover, while institutional policies increasingly emphasize undergraduate participation in research, there remains a gap between policy intentions and actual practice. Undergraduate research is frequently confined to graduation theses or isolated projects, lacking continuity, coherence, and early-stage integration [3]. Students' research awareness—defined as their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral readiness to engage in research—often remains underdeveloped due to insufficient training and guidance. Therefore, understanding how teacher interventions shape this awareness is essential for designing more effective research pedagogy.

To address this gap, the present study investigates how teacher guidance influences English majors' research awareness across different stages of undergraduate education. Using a qualitative interview approach, the study explores students' experiences of teacher-initiated research activities, the perceived impact of various guidance practices, and their emotional and motivational reactions. By analyzing narratives from students at all four academic levels (freshman to senior), the study aims to provide insights into the developmental trajectory of research awareness and offer recommendations for enhancing research-oriented teacher practices in language education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Understanding Undergraduate Research Awareness

Undergraduate research awareness refers to students' evolving understanding, emotional disposition, and behavioral inclination toward engaging in research-oriented activities [4,5]. It is a multifaceted construct that includes the ability to recognize meaningful research problems, appreciate the value of inquiry, apply appropriate research methods, and communicate findings effectively. In the context of English majors, research awareness is closely linked to academic literacy, critical analysis, synthesis of ideas, and disciplined writing—skills that are essential for success in both academic and professional settings [6].

Recent research highlights that early cultivation of research awareness can foster intellectual curiosity, promote reflective thinking, and prepare students for graduate-level education [7,8]. Studies also suggest that students who develop strong research awareness demonstrate greater autonomy in learning and exhibit a stronger sense of academic identity [9]. In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, where students often face challenges in engaging with academic discourses due to language barriers, enhancing research awareness can empower learners to become more confident and competent knowledge producers [10].

Nevertheless, research awareness is not an innate trait but a skillset that requires explicit instruction, experiential learning, and continuous support. Without structured opportunities to engage in inquiry, many undergraduate students—particularly in non-research-intensive institutions—remain unfamiliar with basic research conventions and feel unprepared to pursue research projects [11]. Therefore, scaffolding research awareness from the early stages of undergraduate education is of critical importance.

2.2. The Role of Teacher Guidance in Undergraduate Research Development

Teachers are often the most direct and influential agents in shaping students' research engagement, especially in undergraduate settings where institutional research infrastructure may be limited. As facilitators, mentors, and role models, teachers influence not only students' research skill development but also their attitudes and beliefs about the nature of knowledge and inquiry [12].

Effective teacher guidance includes a variety of pedagogical actions: modeling how to generate research questions, introducing discipline-specific methodologies, providing feedback on early-stage proposals, guiding literature reviews, and encouraging critical reflection [13]. Empirical evidence shows that students are more likely to participate in research when instructors explicitly integrate inquiry-based learning into coursework and offer mentorship throughout the research process [14].

In China's EFL higher education context, emerging research has highlighted that teacher-facilitated integration of AI-assisted instructional strategies can significantly enhance students' academic motivation and confidence in engaging with complex language-based tasks, including research activities [15]. However, challenges persist. Large class sizes, lack of institutional incentives, limited teacher training in undergraduate research pedagogy, and fragmented curriculum designs often hinder the continuity and personalization of research guidance [16].

Notably, the emotional component of teacher-student interaction—such as encouragement, trust, and mutual respect—has been identified as a critical factor in shaping students' willingness to engage in research. According to recent findings, students who feel "seen and supported" by their teachers are more likely to explore unfamiliar research territory and sustain motivation even when encountering difficulties [17].

2.3. Current Research in the Chinese EFL Context

Within the Chinese EFL context, the last five years have witnessed a growing body of literature focused on enhancing students' research literacy and inquiry abilities. Recent educational reforms have increasingly emphasized the incorporation of research-oriented components into undergraduate curricula, aiming to cultivate students' innovative thinking and comprehensive academic abilities. In response, institutions have launched programs such as undergraduate research training schemes, innovation projects, and student-led inquiry seminars.

However, much of the current research in China still focuses on macro-level policy implementation or descriptive overviews of program outcomes. Empirical studies that examine the specific role of teacher guidance in the formation of English majors' research awareness remain relatively limited. For instance, Fendos et al. pointed out that although students express strong interest in participating in research, their actual involvement is constrained by a lack of teacher feedback and project continuity [18]. Similarly, Mo observed that traditional instructional models in language education often emphasize surface-level outcomes such as rote report writing, with limited attention to inquiry-based learning or reflective thinking—patterns also evident in many undergraduate EFL research activities [19].

Moreover, the qualitative dimension of student experience—how students feel, interpret, and respond to teacher guidance—has been largely overlooked. There is a scarcity of in-depth narrative-based or phenomenological studies that explore students' personal journeys in navigating teacher-led research contexts [20]. This gap is especially salient among English majors, whose curriculum often prioritizes language skills and literature over empirical inquiry and academic research.

Therefore, a qualitative exploration of how English major students across different academic levels perceive, engage with, and are shaped by teacher-led research guidance can provide critical insights for improving instructional design, enhancing research pedagogy, and building supportive learning environments.

2.4. Research Gap and Study Contribution

To date, relatively few studies have examined how teacher guidance influences research awareness development across the four-year undergraduate experience, especially in Chinese foreign language universities. Most existing literature focuses narrowly on sen-

ior students writing graduation theses or participating in competition-based research activities, leaving early-stage development largely unexamined [21]. Furthermore, few studies adopt an interpretivist, student-centered perspective that foregrounds the voices of learners themselves [22].

By focusing on English majors from freshman to senior year, and by employing semi-structured interviews to understand how students perceive and respond to teacher-initiated research guidance, the present study addresses these gaps [23]. The findings aim to not only enrich current understanding of undergraduate research pedagogy in the Chinese context but also inform practical strategies for more inclusive, engaging, and sustainable teacher-student research partnerships [24,25].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to investigate how teacher guidance influences English majors' research awareness. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes. This research is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, focusing on how individuals construct understanding based on personal and contextual experiences.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 8 undergraduate students majoring in English at Guangdong University of Science and Technology, with 2 students selected from each academic year (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) (see Table 1). This stratified sampling ensured representation across different stages of academic development, allowing for comparative insights into how teacher guidance impacts students at various levels of research exposure.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Participants	Gender	Year of Study	Research Experience
P1	Female	Freshman	Joined a classroom-based mini research project
P2	Male	Freshman	Course-related assignment
P3	Female	Sophomore	Participated in teacher-guided project
P4	Male	Sophomore	Attended academic writing workshop
P5	Female	Junior	Assisted in teacher-led research
P6	Male	Junior	Submitted paper to student journal
P7	Female	Senior	Graduation thesis in progress
P8	Male	Senior	Participated in research competition

All participants were selected through purposive sampling, with the criterion that they had experienced at least one form of teacher-initiated research guidance. This could include guidance related to coursework, academic writing, research project involvement, competition mentoring, or graduation thesis supervision. The sample included both male and female students, with varied academic standings and research-related experiences, offering a diverse set of perspectives for analysis.

3.3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interview guide was organized around six thematic areas: 1) Prior exposure to research and research-related activities; 2) Types and frequency of teacher guidance received; 3) Perceived influence of teacher guidance on research awareness; 4) Emotional and motivational responses to teacher involvement; 5) Challenges or

limitations in the guidance process; and 6) Suggestions for improving teacher support in student research. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, recorded with consent, and later transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis. Follow-up questions were used flexibly to encourage elaboration.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase model. Manual coding was performed to identify meaningful units of data and recurring patterns. Codes were iteratively clustered into broader themes, such as types of teacher guidance, perceived impact, behavioral responses, and emotional engagement. Meanwhile, NVivo software was used to assist in data organization and visualization. To ensure reliability, selected transcripts were peer-reviewed, and theme definitions were refined through team discussions. Member checking was also employed to confirm the accuracy of interpretations.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Guangdong University of Science and Technology. All participants gave informed consent and were clearly informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and all identifiable information was removed from the data. The interviews were securely stored and accessed only by the research team. Participants were also offered the opportunity to review and verify their transcripts, ensuring accuracy and transparency. These measures were taken to uphold ethical standards and protect the rights and well-being of all participants.

4. Findings

Through thematic analysis of the eight semi-structured interviews, six interrelated themes were identified, aligning with the structure of the interview guide. These themes reveal how teacher guidance shapes English majors' research awareness, attitude, and engagement over different academic stages.

4.1. Initial Exposure to Research

Participants' initial contact with the concept of research generally occurred during the early stages of their university studies, often in the context of writing courses or classroom projects. Most participants had limited or vague understandings of research before university, and it was through guided academic tasks that they began to grasp its meaning and relevance.

P1 recalled:

> "I first heard about research in high school, but I really understood it only when our teacher assigned a small project on English learning strategies. We had to design questionnaires and analyze data. That was when I realized what research actually meant."

Similarly, P2 noted:

> "My awareness started during our writing course. The teacher introduced academic writing by analyzing student papers and highlighting how even simple classroom essays can evolve into research topics. That really opened my eyes."

This pattern highlights the crucial role of course-based research activities in transitioning students from passive exposure to active understanding. For juniors and seniors like P6 and P7, more formal research—such as journal submissions or graduation thesis preparation—represented milestones in developing deeper research competence.

4.2. Types and Frequency of Teacher Guidance

Teacher guidance was multi-faceted and occurred across various formal and informal educational settings. All eight participants indicated that their instructors introduced basic research concepts such as problem formulation, literature review, and data collection. However, the depth and continuity of guidance differed depending on the academic level and context.

P3 shared:

> "Our writing teacher devoted two sessions to explaining how to ask good research questions and design surveys. She even showed us past students' reports, which made the process feel real and achievable."

P5 emphasized the importance of being mentored through a research group:

> "My teacher said: 'You don't have to write perfectly at first, just be willing to try. I'll help you through it.' She invited us to join her project team. That was when I felt supported and motivated."

Some forms of guidance were embedded into assignments. As P4 explained:

> "Before every writing task, the teacher made us write two research hypotheses. At first it was hard, but it made me think more critically, and over time I began to enjoy it."

Beyond coursework, teachers often recommended additional resources or platforms for students to explore further. P6, for example, mentioned:

> "My teacher sent me links to undergraduate research journals and writing competitions. I followed her advice, revised one of my course papers, and submitted it. I didn't get published, but I learned a lot."

These responses suggest that frequent and varied forms of teacher guidance—whether embedded in curriculum or offered as extracurricular support—greatly influence students' research exposure and engagement.

4.3. Influence on Research Awareness

Participants generally reported a transformative impact of teacher guidance on their understanding of what research entails. Many described a conceptual shift from seeing research as a distant, expert-only activity to a practical and accessible mode of academic inquiry.

P2 reflected:

> "I used to think research was done by scientists in labs. Now I understand that as long as I have a question and a way to explore it, I can be a researcher too."

This evolving awareness was often connected to guided experiences in data analysis, literature review, and peer collaboration. P4 noted:

> "After the teacher explained how to break down research into steps—problem, data, findings—it started making sense. It's like telling a story with evidence."

Some students recognized how research training enhanced their academic mindset. As P7 articulated:

> "I used to focus on completing assignments. Now, after my thesis supervisor guided me through the research process, I've started thinking in terms of questions, patterns, and explanations. That's a huge change."

This increased awareness not only helped students develop methodological literacy but also nurtured a sense of intellectual curiosity and ownership over their learning.

4.4. Emotional and Motivational Reactions

A strong emotional dimension emerged in how students responded to teacher guidance. Many participants described feelings of recognition, trust, and encouragement, which positively influenced their willingness to engage with research activities.

P1 said:

"Our teacher encouraged us by saying, 'You are not just students, you can be researchers too.' I felt seen and inspired. That kind of motivation really mattered to me."

P3 echoed this sense of validation:

"My teacher wrote detailed feedback on every assignment. It made me feel like my ideas had value. I started to think of myself as someone who could do research."

These emotional affirmations were often tied to positive experiences with hands-on research activities, which helped students build confidence. For instance, P8 shared:

"I was nervous during the research competition, but my teacher trusted me with the data collection part. That trust made me want to do my best."

Conversely, the absence of emotional support or follow-up sometimes led to hesitation or discouragement, as P2 observed:

"The teacher recommended some readings and competitions, but didn't follow up. I felt a bit lost and wasn't sure how to proceed."

Overall, students valued not only technical guidance but also the affective support that affirmed their capacity to engage in research.

4.5. Challenges and Limitations in Teacher Guidance

Despite largely positive experiences, participants identified several persistent barriers in the current teacher-led research guidance framework. Chief among them were time constraints, lack of continuity, and insufficient scaffolding for beginners.

P6 remarked:

"There's no clear system after we submit our research assignments. We write, but then what? There's no place to showcase or publish."

P5 noted the challenge of overextended faculty:

"My teacher was great, but she had too many students. Sometimes we waited weeks for feedback, which made it hard to keep going."

Others emphasized the need for structured follow-up. P4 suggested:

"After we start a project, it would help to have regular check-ins. Sometimes we're just left on our own without knowing if we're on the right track."

Furthermore, several participants expressed confusion when theoretical instruction outpaced their background knowledge. As P3 put it:

"When the teacher talked about research paradigms and methods too quickly, I felt lost. A beginner-friendly pace would help."

These responses indicate that while teacher enthusiasm is often present, institutional and structural support remains underdeveloped.

4.6. Students' Suggestions for Future Teacher Support

Participants offered a range of suggestions to enhance teacher guidance and promote sustained student involvement in research. Most emphasized the need for early exposure, structured progression, and collaborative platforms.

P7 proposed:

"Every core course should have a research component, even a small one. That way we start building research skills from the beginning."

P8 recommended a mentorship framework:

"It would be great to have postgraduate students help guide undergraduates. They could bridge the gap when teachers are busy."

Many participants expressed the desire for regular research events or showcases. P6 noted:

"A student research exhibition or publication platform would be really motivating. It gives us a sense of purpose."

Finally, several students stressed the value of peer interaction. P3 suggested:

"We could have research discussion groups across grades, like academic clubs. Sharing ideas with senior students would help us learn faster."

These suggestions reflect a strong demand for more systematic, collaborative, and institutionally supported research experiences.

5. Discussion

This study reveals that teacher guidance plays a pivotal role in shaping English majors' research awareness across different stages of undergraduate education. The findings underscore not only the instrumental function of instructional support but also the emotional and motivational dimensions of teacher-student interaction. In this section, we interpret these findings in light of existing literature and discuss their implications for research pedagogy in the EFL context.

5.1. Early Research Awareness Emerges Through Course-Embedded Exposure

The study confirms that students' initial research awareness typically emerges in writing courses or minor classroom-based projects. This aligns with Brew's proposition that research understanding develops through authentic participation in inquiry-based learning [4]. For many participants, this marked the transition from abstract conceptions of research to concrete engagement with data collection, problem formulation, and analysis. Notably, these early experiences were not necessarily framed as "research" in a formal sense but nonetheless triggered meaningful shifts in perception.

The literature suggests that integrating research elements into foundational courses facilitates gradual enculturation into academic inquiry [9]. Participants' accounts illustrate that even small-scale, teacher-facilitated activities—such as hypothesis generation or questionnaire design—can demystify research and help students recognize their own capacity to contribute to knowledge production.

5.2. Teacher Guidance Operates Across Cognitive, Behavioral, and Affective Domains

The data reveal that teacher guidance extends beyond the delivery of research skills; it profoundly impacts students' academic identity, emotional engagement, and motivation. Teachers' mentorship—through modeling, encouragement, and feedback—was consistently cited as a catalyst for research confidence and self-efficacy. These findings echo the argument that affective scaffolding (e.g., recognition, trust, validation) is as important as cognitive instruction in nurturing research interest [17].

For example, participants described how teachers' affirmations—such as "you are researchers too"—created a psychological sense of belonging in academic spaces traditionally perceived as inaccessible. This reinforces the notion that effective teacher support fosters a "growth-oriented" research mindset [1,2]. Moreover, participants' increased curiosity and critical thinking reflect how motivational guidance leads to the internalization of inquiry values, validating Pham's claim that research awareness is as much about disposition as it is about knowledge [10].

5.3. Inconsistencies in Guidance Undermine Research Continuity

Despite positive experiences, participants expressed concern over inconsistent or fragmented teacher support. These limitations—such as lack of follow-up, unclear pathways for publication, or insufficient feedback—can hinder the sustainability of research engagement. Such gaps are symptomatic of broader structural constraints in China's EFL

teaching context, including large class sizes, limited research infrastructure, and insufficient teacher training in undergraduate research pedagogy.

This tension between enthusiasm and institutional barriers reflects findings by Fendos et al., who observed that students often begin research projects with interest but drop out due to limited continuity [18]. The present study reinforces that sustained and well-structured guidance is essential to move students beyond superficial exposure toward deeper engagement and academic ownership.

5.4. Differentiated Needs Across Academic Levels Require Tiered Support Models

The stratified design of this study enables an important insight: research guidance needs vary significantly across academic years. Freshmen and sophomores benefit most from basic conceptual scaffolding and emotional encouragement, while juniors and seniors require more advanced mentorship related to methodology, publishing, and academic discourse. This observation supports Wang, Yang, and Gong's recommendation for tiered intervention strategies based on developmental stages [8].

Participants' suggestions—such as integrating research tasks into core curricula and establishing peer mentoring systems—offer practical models for progressive engagement. By structuring research education longitudinally and adaptively, institutions can cultivate students' inquiry skills in a more coherent and sustainable manner.

5.5. Toward a Culture of Collaborative and Visible Undergraduate Research

A recurring theme in the participants' feedback was the desire for a more visible, collaborative, and institutionalized research culture. This includes platforms such as student-led symposia, undergraduate journals, and inter-year research discussion groups. These aspirations resonate with calls from both domestic and international scholars to democratize research opportunities and embed them into the broader academic ecosystem [12].

Such a culture shift requires coordinated effort—not only from individual teachers but also from departments and universities—to recognize undergraduate research as an integral part of academic development. Creating opportunities for students to showcase their work can enhance intrinsic motivation and foster a sense of community among novice researchers.

In summary, this study highlights the multifaceted role of teacher guidance in fostering English majors' research awareness within the Chinese EFL context. Teacher support not only provides students with foundational research skills but also serves as a key source of emotional affirmation and motivational encouragement. However, the findings also point to systemic challenges, such as inconsistent follow-up and limited institutional scaffolding, which can hinder students' sustained engagement with research. To cultivate a robust undergraduate research culture, it is essential to implement tiered, continuous, and emotionally supportive guidance strategies that address students' evolving needs across academic stages. By reimagining research pedagogy as both a technical and relational endeavor, educators and institutions can better empower students to develop into confident, curious, and capable contributors to scholarly inquiry.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

This study investigated how teacher guidance influences the development of research awareness among English majors at different stages of undergraduate education within a Chinese EFL context. Drawing on rich narrative data from eight students representing all four academic years, the study identified six thematic areas: initial exposure to research, types and frequency of guidance, influence on research awareness, emotional and motivational reactions, challenges and limitations in teacher guidance, and student suggestions for improvement. The findings indicate that teacher guidance functions as a

multifaceted catalyst in students' research journeys. Teachers play a formative role by introducing basic research concepts, modeling inquiry behaviors, and validating student efforts through constructive feedback and emotional encouragement. These interventions not only demystify the research process but also help students internalize a sense of academic identity and scholarly curiosity. Furthermore, the study reveals that students' research needs evolve across academic stages—ranging from conceptual orientation in the early years to more advanced methodological mentoring in later years—highlighting the importance of a differentiated, longitudinal approach to research instruction. However, the study also uncovered systemic limitations, such as inconsistent feedback cycles, a lack of institutionalized support structures, and insufficient continuity in project follow-up. These barriers suggest that while teacher enthusiasm is evident, it must be complemented by structural reforms to create a sustainable research culture at the undergraduate level.

6.2. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to a single institution, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Although participants offered diverse perspectives across academic levels, their experiences may not fully represent those of English majors in other universities or regions. Second, while interviews provided deep insights into student perceptions, triangulation with teacher interviews or classroom observations could have offered a more holistic understanding of the guidance process.

Future research could address these limitations by expanding the participant pool across multiple institutions and incorporating mixed-methods designs. Longitudinal studies tracking students' research development over time would also be valuable in examining how teacher guidance impacts long-term outcomes such as research competence, academic identity, and graduate school readiness. Moreover, further studies could explore the role of peer mentorship, digital platforms, and institutional policies in reinforcing teacher-led research guidance. Such inquiries would contribute to building more robust, equitable, and student-centered undergraduate research ecosystems.

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