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Teacher Research in Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Malaysian and Iranian English Language Lecturers' Perceptions

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Abstract

Systematic research on English language teachers' perceptions of research has not yet shown whether or not 'teacher research' is acceptably understood and carried out in institutions of higher education worldwide. Moreover, understanding cross-cultural (mis)conceptions of and barriers to research is an important initial step in promoting teacher research engagement. This article explores perceptions of teacher research held by 68 university lecturers (38 Iranians and 30 Malaysians) teaching English at graduate and undergraduate levels. Data was collected using questionnaire surveys followed by focus group and electronic interviews. The participating lecturers reported their views on the nature of research, their levels of reading and doing research, and their reasons for research engagement. Comparative analyses of their response frequencies indicated that common perceptions of research were more in line with traditional views of research in both subgroups. Low research engagement by doing and moderate engagement by reading was reported by teachers from both countries. Time limitations and lack of skills were reported as the most frequent barriers to teacher research. A series of Chi-Square analyses comparing the two contexts indicated significant differences in how lecturers saw good teacher research and how they were affected by different de-motivating elements of their institutional research culture. The findings indicate that socio-cultural contexts affect research perception and have valuable implications for the curricular promotion of teacher research in English Language Teaching in institutions of higher education in the targeted institutions.

Keywords: Teacher Research; Teaching English; ELT; Professional Development.

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Introduction and Background

Although a huge amount of 'teacher research' has been carried out over the past three decades or so in the field of English language teaching (ELT), it has conspicuously failed to find solutions for problems in language learning which are universally applicable. According to Borg (2010, p. 396), global pedagogical prescriptions for the teaching of English to speakers of other languages are "unlikely to be productive". Special English language learner needs and pedagogical treatments need to be explored, validated, and applied at a local or regional level. That is probably why context-specificity has been frequently stressed as a feature of local ELT research targeting language classes in different parts of the world. In other words, researchers have to concentrate on their local settings and do more fieldwork in their own contexts to solve their teaching problems. Even though published ELT research is certainly not the output of English teachers alone as Borg (2009) stresses, much of this research is nowadays carried out either directly by teachers themselves or in collaboration with them. Many teachers of English and especially lecturers who teach English in higher education carry out ELT research nowadays.

Unlike problems in language learning, problems in language teacher research engagement have not become the concern of localized research. Instead, both published material on teacher research and research support provided for teachers tend to treat teacher researchers as a homogenous group. Some evidence for the more localized emergence, promotion, and development of teacher research engagement in the field of ELT in recent years is found in the serious attempts made to enable English language teachers to engage in and engage with research. Borg (2009, 2010) calls reading published research 'engagement with research' and conducting and publishing research 'engagement in research'. Both of these have been promoted in the field of ELT in recent decades. Several ELT scholars have published texts for language teachers to increase their knowledge of how to do research (e. g. McDonough 1997; Freeman 1998; Wallace 1998; Burns

1999). Many researchers have tried to explore problems which make it difficult for language teachers to do research (e.g. Macaro 2003; Allison & Carey 2007; Borg 2009; Borg, 2010). Many institutions of higher education around the world have also made serious attempts to get their English language teachers actively engaged in research through workshops, presentations, web-based materials, and in-service training options. For instance, Bai and Millwater (2011) state that research capacity building has become a prominent theme in higher education institutions in China, as across the world and that Chinese TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) academics' research capacity has been quite limited. Bai and Millwater add that "in order to build their research capacity, it is necessary to understand their perceptions about research"(p. 233). In contexts familiar to the authors (e.g. Iran and Malaysia) the number of research preparation activities designed for faculty members has also dramatically increased over the past few years. The promotion of teacher research engagement aiming to solve practical problems at local levels is, therefore, a major concern of scholars, stakeholders, and practitioners in ELT.

Even though 'teacher research' may be understood differently by different individuals and institutions, a common component in all definitions offered in the related literature is that it should be carried out by teachers in their professional settings for possible improvements in pedagogical practice. To offer the broadest possible sense of teacher research, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, p. 22) argue that "teacher research encompasses all kinds of practitioner inquiry involving systematic, intentional, and self-critical inquiry about one's work in different settings". Based on this broad perception of teacher research, unsystematic or unintentional reflection and thoughtfulness about one's educational work does not, on its own, constitute teacher research. The definition of teacher research as considered in this study is the comprehensive one offered by Borg (2010) after his careful examination of existing definitions of the term. He

defines teacher research as:

"...systematic inquiry, qualitative and/or quantitative, conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts,ndividually or collaboratively (with other teachers and/or external collaborators), which aims to enhance teachers' understandings of some aspect of their work, is made public, has the potential to contribute to better quality teaching and learning in individual classrooms, and which may also inform institutional improvement and educational policy more broadly." (p. 396).

Whether or not 'teacher research' as defined above is acceptably understood and carried out in institutions of higher education involved in ELT worldwide has yet to be shown through the systematic research. So far, "only a limited number of empirical studies of teachers' conceptions of research exist..." (Borg 2009, p. 359). English language teachers around the world can have different conceptions about research influencing their level of research engagement. This can have serious implications for the kind of support needed for the promotion of teacher research. Some teachers may think that their professional development and research engagement is over when they receive their teaching certificates, get a permanent job, get promoted to a high rank in the profession, etc. They may feel that their job is to teach and not to study or do research. Some, on the other hand, may agree with Underhill's (2001) suggestion that they can help their students learn only to the extent that they are learning themselves. They may be affected by principles that invite man to seek knowledge from the dawn of birth to the dusk of death (Gamal El-Din, 2000). They may do and read research for enjoyment and personal development or they may wish to contribute to the development of the irinstitutions.These ifferences in opinions are long-rooted. In 1913, John Harrington Cox wrote:

"That a large number of men and women in our English faculties should engage in research work is of vital importance to the profession, but it is not necessary, nor even desirable, that all should attempt it. Scholarly

productivity has its splendor, but a prime necessity in every college is a group of teachers who esteem themselves as 'trainers of the youthful mind" (p. 214).

Even though emphasized and valued for its numerous benefits, being engaged in research in ELT is certainly not the only tool for the success and professional development of English teachers. Reflection on teaching practices, student feedback and evaluation, self-evaluation, comments and contributions from colleagues, and in-service training are some examples of the tools English language teachers can and do use for developing their professional abilities (Mann 2005; Soproni, 2007). English teachers with a genius for teaching who do not possess the research mind are therefore not to "be thrown upon the educational scrap-heap or branded as an inferior species, because, forsooth, they are not discoverers" (Harrington Cox 1913, p.214). The main point addressed in the current work is that localized research should examine and support how English teachers understand and do research if it is decided at all that teacher research is advisable, mandatory, or beneficial in a particular higher education ELT context.

An important step for the promotion of teacher research engagement in the field of ELT is to understand how they view research, why they do or do not read published research, and how much and why they do research as part of their profession. Some replies to such questions are locally determined and depend on individual ELT contexts. As an initial step in the promotion of teacher research engagement, institutions of higher education need to explore what problems their ELT teachers face in engaging in and engaging with research. Baker (1995, p. 168) suggests that "If we do not make a serious attempt to review research and to find solutions to our problems by independent investigation, we may find ourselves taking a back seat to those of another discipline who will."

Research on teachers' perceptions of research has been recently carried out in a few ELT contexts in Australia, Japan, Oman, Turkey, Hog Kong,

Oman, France, etc. (Borg 2007, 2009; Macaro 2003; Allison & Carey 2007) and has offered valuable information for the promotion of teacher research in these contexts. However, little is known about the perceptions of lecturers teaching English as a foreign language at university level, especially in Asia. In so far as Asian lecturers need to struggle to publish and to read published research in English and in so far as they need to present themselves and represent their communities to international academic communities in spite of the possible deficiencies in their proficiency in English, the exploration of their perceptions in this area can be a priority. Moreover, previous research (e.g. Borg, 2009) has tended to macroscopically view teacher research and teacher research perception neglecting variations due to socio-cultural contexts. This study explores the perceptions of research of Iranian and Malaysian English language lecturers and their reasons for and against engagement in and with research. It also explores differences in perceptions of research, institutional research cultures, and problems facing teacher researchers in these two Asian contexts. Waves of change in the status of English language teachers requiring them to engage in research have affected these contexts as reflected in the great emphasis, especially in higher education in recent years, on teacher research and publication. In the two countries studied in this research, the promotion of teacher research in all fields of study including ELT is a major concern and is clearly stated in the mission statement of their institutions of higher education, including the two selected for this study. The mission statement of the first university in Malaysia is "to advance knowledge and learning through quality research and education for the nation and for humanity". Similarly, the formal strategic plan of the second university in Iran requires lecturers "to contribute greatly to the research publication of their institution as a non-negotiable requirement of continued employment and promotion".

The rationale for this study and for the selection of the two fields for data

collection is manifold. First of all, promoting teacher research engagement in these ELT contexts (like all other settings) very much depends on the careful examination of lecturers' perceptions and problems. Second, findings of similar research in other contexts or other levels of education are not always generalizable. Third, understanding university lecturers' perceptions of research engagement in these contexts (especially in Iran) can explain why research engagement is not a widespread activity in ELT (see Borg, 2007, 2009) and what can possibly done to improve the situation in the targeted contexts. Fourth, staff in these contexts struggle to publish and to read published research in English or to interact with international academic communities in spite of the possible deficiencies in their proficiency in English. Fifth, the study considers research perceptions omparatively in the selected Asian contexts for possible enlightenments because one is in a country where international intercommunication is vast and English is a common medium of instruction, whereas the other represent an internationally sanctioned country where the use of English is much more limited in spite of its desirability.

Literature Review

The lion's share of research on teacher research engagement in ELT has attempted to show that it is indeed a desirable undertaking and that it can have beneficial effects on teachers' professional life to justify the strong emphasis placed it in schools and institutions of higher education around the world. ELT research has shown that the policy to encourage English language teachers to engage in and with research helps them to use their acquired research expertise actively and to enjoy the benefits of continuous learning. During their education, most English teachers around the world practice research methods and learn to do research. They can extend the application of this knowledge for the improvement of their professional career (McDonough 1997). Borg (2009) explains that this can substantially help them in their teaching and professional development. Hargreaves (2001) also asserts that English language teachers'

research engagement can help them make pedagogical decisions informed by sound research evidence and can have a beneficial effect on both teaching and learning. Some other scholars even believe that reading and doing research is a central component of English language teachers' profession (Zeuli 1994; Worrall 2004; McDonough & McDonough 1990).

The benefits of teacher research engagement in ELT as shown in previous research are in their contributions to personal, professional, and institutional development. Lankshear and Knobel (2004) believe that teachers' own research develops their capacity for independent professional judgments. It helps them in bringing about innovation in the curriculum (Gurney 1989). Teacher research has also been shown to help in finding answers to problems faced while teaching and in promoting reflection and critical about teaching behaviors in the classroom (Atay, 2006); When teacher engage in research they can also create stronger links between theory and practice in their profession (Crookes 1993). To these benefits for ELT teacher research, Olson (1990: 17-18) adds "the creation of a problem-solving mindset, the improvement of teachers' instructional decision-making processes, the increase of teachers' professional status, and the empowerment of teachers in bringing about changes at classroom, district, state and national levels". In short, research has shown that teachers' research engagement can be eneficial to learners, institutions, and teachers themselves in many ways even though little has been written on the nature and challenges of this engagement.

Unlike publications on research methods for teachers and papers on the benefits of teacher research engagement, published research addressing teachers' and lecturers' perception of research in ELT is scarce and does not vividly show how research engagement is viewed by teachers. A few surveys of ELT professionals have shown that these people see quantitative and statistical enquiry as research. For example, a survey of the views of research of 34 teachers of English as a foreign

language by McDonough and McDonough (1990), a survey of 607 members of an international ELT association by Brown, Knowles, Murray, Neu, and Violand-Sanchez (1992), and a survey of the conceptions of research of over 500 English language teachers from 13 countries by Borg (2009) reported notions of research closely tied to more traditional, quantitative, and statistical methods of research. Allison and Carey (2007), however, reported more empirical interest in English language teachers' engagement in research. These studies targeted samples from various socio-cultural backgrounds and provided valuable findings. However, they barely highlighted differences in research perception and research engagement among teachers working in different contexts.

In addition to the research work on the benefits of teacher research and on teachers' understanding of research, some research in this area of ELT has also focused on the types of challenges and barriers that teachers report. In a study of 80 heads of modern foreign language departments in the UK, Macaro (2003) reported the inaccessibility of published language teaching research as a key barrier to teacher research engagement. In a survey of 22 members of staff teaching at a university language centre in Canada, Allison and Carey (2007) reported felt constraints in ability to engage in research, limited time left after the fulfillment of teaching duties, lack of encouragement and lack of motivation as the main barriers for teacher research in ELT. Local surveys of barriers to teacher research perceived by lecturer at the higher education level in Iran (e.g. Moghimi-Rad, 2000; Yahya, 2000) also reported barriers such as lack of trust in research findings, lack of faith in research evaluation committees and the expertise of their members, lack of trust in research support units, lack of time, restricted financial support, limited knowledge of research methods, injustice in research assessment, and unnecessary bureaucratic procedures for conducting research.

This review of research illustrates that little is yet known about what lectures see as research in ELT at

higher education level and what encourages or prevents them from engagement in research. Many questions have remained unanswered in this respect. What level of professionalism is required of teacher research? What level of publication (school level, personal, local, national, or highly professional international level) is the goal of teacher research report? What steps can be taken to promote teacher research in particular ELT context? Does a single agenda for research promotion fit different context? To answer questions like these, evidence need to be collected from different groups of EFT professionals.

Aim of Study

The aim of this study was to explore research perceptions of lecturers in the field of ELT and to extend empirical data on teacher research in an Asian context. A survey was used to explore lecturers' perceptions of research in ELT in two Asian institutions of higher education: A university in Malaysia and another in Iran. Data was collected through questionnaires and interviews relating to a set of research scenarios, a set of research characteristics, and a set of reasons for teacher research engagement. Descriptive statistics of questionnaire response frequencies, Chi-square inferential statistics for frequency comparisons, and theme analyses for interview data were used to investigate the perception of research engagement held by convenient subsamples of Iranian and Malaysian lecturers. In other words, a mixed method of data analysis was employed involving quantitative analyses or questionnaire followed by qualitative analyses of interview data. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the possible differences between Iranian and Malaysian English language lecturers in terms of their knowledge of teacher research? First, what kinds of activity do they regard as 'research', and secondly, what characteristics do they report as those of good research?
2. What are the possible differences between Iranian and Malaysian English language lecturers in their

perceptions of their institutional research culture?

3. Are Iranian and Malaysian English language lecturers significantly different in their research engagement? First, to what extent do they report reading published research and why, and secondly, to what extent do they report doing research and why?

Participants

In order to explore and compare the research perceptions held English language lecturers in the two Asian countries, data was obtained from a random sample of 68 male and female lecturers teaching at the universities in the second semester of 2010. All the participants (38 from the Iranian university and 30 from the Malaysian university) were teachers of English as a second or foreign language and were teaching learners from different departments at graduate and undergraduate levels. All part-time and full-time English language lecturers at the two institutions were given a printed copy of the survey instrument. The selection criteria included the professional domain (ELT), institutional affiliation (Iranian university and Malaysian university), and current employment (full or part time) in English language teaching. Both institutions are major Asian research universities with a strong emphasis on teacher research. The choice of the two institutions was based on convenient sampling. The respondents differed in age from 25 to 55, gender, professional rank (junior and senior lecturers), academic qualifications (MA and Ph.D.), years of teaching experience (3- 30),nd nationality (Iranian and Malaysian). The academic setting in which they worked was the main moderating variable in the study of their perception of research in ELT. The 68 lecturers who returned the completed questionnaires constituted around 70 per cent of the targeted population in both institutions. Subsamples of the Iranian respondents and the Malaysian participants also agreed to make up a focus group and provide interview data for the study.

Instruments

The questionnaire used in this study covered the major themes affecting teacher research reported in the related literature: a) perceptions of the nature of research, b) the characteristics of good research, c) institutional research culture, d) reading published research, and e) doing research. This was a piloted and modified version of the instrument constructed and used by Borg (2009) to investigate the research conceptions of ELT teachers in 13 countries around the world. It was pilot-tested with a group of 15 lecturers and reviewed by two ELT experts teaching research methodology courses. A few minor modifications were made at this stage in response to feedback and comments. Directions for filling out the questionnaire were modified to match the context and the estimated time for completion, originally 15-20 minutes and later extended to 20-30 minutes. The original questionnaire asked respondents not to report their reasons for doing or for reading research when they said they "rarely" read or did research. It also asked them to ignore items relating to reasons for not doing or not reading research when they said they "sometimes" did or read research. The pilot data indicated that the respondents preferred to answer all the items and wished to express their ideas on doing and reading research even if they themselves did not actually read or do research. Those who reported more frequent reading and doing of research also wished to express their views on reasons preventing teacher research engagement among their colleagues. The questionnaire was modified so that the participants could respond to all items to report their views. A final modification was the removal of items eliciting personal information on the grounds that this was not the concern of the study.

In its final version, the questionnaire included five sections. Section 1 presented ten research scenarios which participants had to evaluate on a scale from 'definitely not research' and 'probably not research' to 'probably research', and 'definitely research'. In the final analyses, the frequencies for the first two options and the second two

were pooled to class each scenario description as 'research' or 'not research' in the opinion of the respondents.

In the second section of the questionnaire, the respondents were presented with a list of eleven characteristics of good quality research, such as using statistics, testing hypotheses, being objective, etc. These they had to evaluate on a scale from 'unimportant' and 'moderately important' to 'unsure', 'important', and 'very important'. Response frequencies for the first and the last two choices for these items were again pooled to simplify the data analysis. In the third section, the respondents reported their levels of agreement with nine statements describing their institutional research culture (e.g. 'the management encourages lecturers to do research'). Part four of the instrument contained different items on lecturers' views about the reading of published research. The last section included nineteen reasons for doing or not doing research, and the task for the respondents was to indicate which reasons applied to their own situation. Items in sections 2, 3, 4, and 5 are stated in the section on results and analyses.

With a Cronbach Alpha reliability of 0.76, the questionnaire proved capable of providing reliable data on lecturers' perceptions of teacher research in ELT, as it could easily be administered to a large group of participants. Since the use of a questionnaire in research on people's perceptions involves the risk that participants will report what they believe to be ideal rather that what is actually true about them (See Dornyei 2003), additional data on perceptions of teacher research, characteristics of good research, and challenges in reading and doing research were collected from a sub-sample of the Iranian participants by means of focus group interviews, and from a sub-sample of the Malaysian respondents through electronic interviews. Interview data were summarized and coded to supplement the quantitative findings in the survey.

Analysis and Results

The analysis of data from the questionnaire and the interviews in this study was designed sequentially. In the first phase, questionnaire responses

were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS, and lecturers' perceptions of research engagement were summarized in the five sections addressed in the instrument: a) what is or is not research, b) the perceived characteristics of good research, c) perceptions of institutional research culture, d) reasons for engagement in research, and e) reasons for lack of research engagement. The statistical significance of the differences between response frequencies for Iranian and Malaysian lecturers was also tested for each section.

In the second phase of the analyses, additional interview data relating to each of these sections was coded and summarized for complementing and understanding the findings of the first phase in each case. Drawing on the results presented below, Iranian and Malaysian lecturers in the field of English Language Teaching do indeed show different context-specific perception of teacher research and significantly differ in some aspects of their problems with research engagement. We will start with the comparison of the 38 Iranian and 30 Malaysian participants' perceptions of 10 described research scenarios, summarizing the results in Table 1.

Frequencies of responses, that is, the number of Iranian and Malaysian lecturers who perceived the scenarios as 'research' or 'not research' were calculated and inferential tests of frequency comparison (Chi-Square analyses) were used to test the significance of differences between the two sets of lecturers.

It should be noted in relation to Table 1 that the Chi-Square statistical method was used to test the significance of the differences between the perception of each scenario as "this is research" in the second main column (category 1) and nationality (category 2). The frequency of 1 in the in Malaysian ("This is not research" column) for scenario 4 (and all other frequencies in this column), for example, was not tested in comparison with the frequencies of responses offered by the Iranian for this column. In other words, Chi-Square statistical comparisons were made to see differences in the areas where the two nationalities did see scenarios as research.

Table 1 Comparisons of what is or is not research for Iranian and Malaysian Lecturers*

Scenarios	This is research			This is not research			Statistical Comparisons	
	Iranian	Malaysian	%	Iranian	Malaysian	%	Chi-Square	Significance
4	32	29	89.7	6	1	10.3	2.81	.931
5	28	28	82.4	10	2	17.6	4.45	**.035****
6	26	28	79.4	12	2	20.6	6.36	**.012****
2	24	29	77.9	14	1	22.1	10.9	**.001****
3	24	19	63.2	14	11	36.8	.000	.992
10	20	20	58.8	18	10	41.2	1.36	.243
9	22	17	57.4	16	13	42.6	.010	.910
1	17	18	51.5	21	12	48.5	1.56	.211
7	10	17	39.7	28	13	60.3	6.45	**.011****
8	7	15	32.4	31	15	67.6	7.64	**.006****

* 38 Iranian and 30 Malaysian English language lecturers

** Two-tailed significance df=1

Scenarios are ranked according to the degree to which they are perceived as research, measured by the total percentages in the column labelled "this is research". For reasons of space, we here discuss only scenarios 4, 5 and 6 at the top end of the scale, and scenarios 7 and 8 and the bottom end. For the readers' convenience we reproduce five of the scenarios here:

Scenario 4: A university lecturer gave a questionnaire about the use of computers in language teaching to 500 teachers. Statistics were used to analyze the questionnaires. The lecturer wrote an article about the work in an academic journal.

Scenario 5: To find out which of two methods for teaching vocabulary was more effective, a teacher first tested two classes. Then for four weeks she taught vocabulary to each class using a different method. After that she tested both groups again and compared the results to the first test. She decided to use the method which worked best in her own teaching.

Scenario 6: Two teachers were both interested in discipline. They observed each other's lessons once a week for three months and made notes about how they controlled their classes. They discussed their notes and wrote a short article about what they learned for the newsletter of the national language teachers' association.

Scenario 7: A headmaster met every teacher individually and asked them about their working conditions. The head made notes about the teachers' answers. He used his notes to write a report which he submitted to the Ministry of Education.

Scenario 8: Mid-way through a course, a teacher gave a class of 30 students a feedback form. The next day, five students handed in their completed forms. The teacher read these and used the information to decide what to do in the second part of the course

Scenario 4 was perceived as

research by the greatest number of respondents (89.7%) with no significant differences between the perceptions of Iranian and Malaysian lecturers. Interviews revealed that this description contained four elements that made the lecturers class it as research: a) the use of a questionnaire, b) the large number of participants, c) the use of statistics, and d) publication in academic journals. The Iranian lecturers stressed the large amount of data and statistics involved, while the Malaysians stressed the clear methodology, analysis, and results, and the publication in an academic journal.

Scenarios 5 and 6 were also very highly perceived as research, but in these cases, there were significant differences between the Iranian and Malaysian respondents. Significantly more Malaysians perceived them as research (n=28; 93.3% for both scenarios) than Iranians (73.6% for scenario 5 and 68.4% for scenario 6). What emerged from the interviews is the Iranians did not see these as research in view of the small amount of data and the unclear quantitative analysis; more Malaysians on the other hand regarded them as research in view of the methodology, analysis, and results/outcomes.

More than 60% of the respondents rated scenarios 7 and 8 as "not research", a view expressed more frequently by the Iranians than by the Malaysians. The reason emerging from the interview data is that they did not involve the analysis of a large amount of data to test a statistical research hypothesis. The Iranian participants interviewed also thought that classroom notes and feedback from a limited number of students were not valid data for research.

The Perceived Characteristics of Good Research

In order to compare Malaysian and Iranian perceptions of 'good research', participants were presented with eleven characteristics of research and asked to rank them in importance. To simplify the analyses, response frequencies for 'Unimportant' and 'Less important' were pooled as 'Not important', and frequencies for 'Important' and 'Very important' were

pooled as 'Important'. The eleven characteristics are listed in Table 2 and ranked in descending order of importance. Hypothesis-testing, the usability of results, control of variables, the collection of a large volume of information, and objectivity emerged as five of the most important characteristic of good research. As shown in the Pearson Chi-square values comparing the two sub-samples, the Iranian lecturers attached significantly greater importance to hypothesis-testing and the collection of a large volume of information, while the Malaysian lecturers stressed the usability of research results and objectivity in research. As results in Table 2 show, making the research results public, using questionnaires, and the generalizability of the results to other contexts were rated as the least important characteristics of good research. Significantly fewer Iranian than Malaysian lecturers rated 'making research results public' as important. In the focus group interview with a sub-sample of the questionnaire respondents, lecturers (N=8) were asked to explain their reasons for the rating of these characteristics in the way they did. Based on the interview data, it was important for the lecturers that research helped them overcome the problems that they faced in their profession. Making results public (e.g. by publishing) were not regarded as important. Here are some example statements made by the interviewees:

Table 2. Lecturers' views of important characteristics of good research

Characteristics of good quality research	Important			Not important			Statistical Comparisons	
	Iranian	Malaysian	Total %	Iranian	Malaysian	Total %	Chi-Square *	Significance**
Hypotheses are tested	34	19	77.9	4	11	22.1	6.66	**.010**
The results give lecturers ideas they can use	28	24	76.5	10	6	23.5	18.74	**.000**
Variables are controlled	27	24	75	11	6	25	.716	.398
A large volume of information is collected	35	16	75	3	14	25	13.44	**.000**
The researcher is objective	19	29	70.6	19	1	29.4	17.58	**.000**
Experiments are used	32	15	69.1	6	15	35.9	9.19	**.002**
A large number of people are studied	34	12	67.6	4	18	32.4	18.75	**.000**
Information is analyzed statistically	26	18	64.7	12	12	35.3	.521	.471
The results apply to many ELT contexts	19	21	58.8	19	9	41.2	2.76	.096

Questionnaires are used	22	15	54.4	16	15	45.6	.421	.516
The results are made public	11	21	47.1	27	9	52.9	11.34	**.001**

* 38 Iranian and 30 Malaysian respondents, ** Two-tailed significance, df=1

Application is a distinctive characteristic of research. Otherwise, there will be no reason to do research.
The results of my research should help me in the classroom.
Research reports filed in library shelves and quoted by others with no use are a real waste of time and money.
Like in other contexts, action should speak louder than words in applied research.
Much of the research done abroad does not apply to our context of teaching even though it carefully test hypothesis through careful data collection and analyses.

The lecturers believed that good research should provide them with solutions to apply to their problems in teaching. The interview data mirrored the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire indicating that only 11 Iranian lecturers (28.9%) believed in publicizing research results whereas 21 Malaysian lecturers (70%) believed that results of research had to be made in public in some way.

Perceptions of Institutional Research Culture

The majority of the participants (75%) agreed that the management of their institutions in both countries encouraged teacher research and that it was generally felt that doing research was part of a lecturers' job (73.5%). On the contrary, very few (22%) agreed that they read published research or that time for doing research was built into their workloads. As Pearson Chi-Square values and their significance levels in Table 3 illustrate, Malaysian and Iranian sub-samples were not significantly different in these respects, i.e., their views on the highest and the lowest items ranked based on the total percentage of agreement.

Table 3 Comparisons of institutional research culture reported by lecturers*

Institutional research culture	Don't know	Agree			Disagree			Statistical Comparisons	
	Frequency (%)	Malaysian	Iranian	Total %	Malaysian	Iranian	Total %	Chi-Square *	Significance**
The management encourages lecturers to do research.	7(10.3)	27	24	75	7	3	14.7	.992	.609
Lecturers do research themselves.	8(11.8)	28	22	73.5	5	5	14.7	.283	.868
Lecturers feel that doing research is an important part of their job.	12(17.6)	16	19	51.5	13	8	30.9	3.55	.169
Lecturers have access to research books and journals.	9(13.2)	7	24	45.6	24	4	41.2	25.80	**.000**
Lecturers are given support to attend ELT conferences.	10(14.7)	9	19	42.1	24	6	44.1	13.62	**.001**
Lecturers have opportunities to learn about current research.	12(17.6)	9	19	41.2	23	5	41.2	14.40	**.001**
Lecturers talk about research.	9(13.2)	4	17	30.9	29	9	55.9	17.99	**.000**
Time for doing research is built into lecturers' workloads.	11(16.2)	6	9	22.1	25	17	61.8	2.02	.363
Lecturers read published research.	8(11.8)	12	8	22.1	21	9	44.1	5.63	.601

* 38 Iranian and 30 Malaysian participants ** Two-tailed significance, df=1

Significant differences were observed between Malaysian and Iranian lecturers in four elements of institutional research culture: lecturers' access to research books and journals, support to attend conferences, opportunities to learn about current research, and talking about research. In these four areas, significantly fewer Iranian lecturers agreed that the research culture of their institution was favorable. Interview data also confirmed the same four elements. One of the interviewees claimed, "I have no doubts that I should be doing research. But I want to say that the management's policy is more idealistic than realistic. The reality is that I need to reduce the assistance I provide for my students to be able to publish". Another continued, "and I have to cut down so much on my extra teaching in other institutions.... They should also arrange for low-cost editing and revising services ...."

Reasons for Engagement in Research

The most frequently reported reason

for teacher research engagement, accounting for about half of the responses (44.7% Iranians and 46.7% Malaysians), was that the employer expected it. This was followed by personal enjoyment and promotion. The least frequently-reported reasons for research engagement included improvement of the institution and solving teaching problems. These research characteristics have been ranked based on the reported total frequencies in Table 4.

Table 4 Lecturers' reasons for engagement in research*

Reasons for doing research. I do research...	**Iranian**	**Malaysian**	**Total**	**Chi-Square**	**Significance****
Because my employer expects me to.	17	14	31	.874	1.000
Because I enjoy it.	11	14	25	.132	.205
Because it will help me get a promotion.	17	7	24	.067	.079
As part of a course I am studying on.	11	11	22	.449	.604
To find better ways of teaching.	5	16	21	.000	**.001**
Because it is good for my professional development.	3	16	19	.000	**.000**
To solve problems in my teaching.	6	10	16	.590	.149
Because other lecturers can learn from findings of my work.	6	10	16	.090	.149
To contribute to the improvement of my institution.	3	7	10	.074	.094

* 38 Iranian and 30 Malaysian English language lecturers ** Two-sided significance, df=1

Significant differences between Iranian and Malaysian lecturers were found only for two of the reasons: professional development and finding better ways of teaching. Sixteen of the Malaysian lecturers (53.3%) cited professional development and better ways of teaching as reasons for engagement. These were significantly higher than those for the Iranian lecturers with only 3 (7.9%) and 5 (13.2%) for these characteristics respectively. The follow-up interviews similarly confirmed that 'personal enjoyment of research' and 'meeting the expectations of the institution' were the main reasons for research engagement. The interviewees were asked what other reasons they could site for the desirability of reading and doing

research and, in addition to reiterating the reasons summarized in Table 4, they expressed themes like knowledge acquisition, variety in professional work, and job requirements. Here are example extracts from the transcripts:

I sometimes feel I am being fossilized when I do not get the chance to read or to do some research for a long time even though I do not care about not being promoted at all.
I sometimes feel tired of just coming out of one classroom and going on to the next without reading or doing some research.
When I do some research, I see how dynamic my profession can be.
I read research to improve my classroom techniques and to make my teaching more informative.
When my students participated in one of my research projects, I realized how much more awareness and understanding I got of their needs.

Lecturers' Reasons for Lack of Research Engagement

Time limitations, unfamiliarity with research methods, and difficulties in collaborating with colleagues were the reasons most frequently cited for not engaging in ELT research. This was particularly true of the Iranian lecturers, who cited them with significantly higher frequencies ($p \leq 0.05$) in all cases, as shown in Table 5. None of the 98 participants selected 'lack of interest' as a reason for not doing or not reading research, and only two cited limited access to books and journal as a reason.

Table 5 Lecturers' reasons for lack of engagement in research*

Reasons for not doing research	Iranian	Malaysian	Total	Chi-Square	Significance**
I don't have time to do research.	35	12	47	.000	**.000**
I don't know enough about research methods.	33	0	33	.000	**.000**
Other lecturers would not cooperate if I asked for their help.	29	0	29	.000	**.000**
I need someone to advise me but no one is available.	20	1	21	.000	**.000**
My employer discourages it.	11	2	13	.020	**.029**
Most of my colleagues do not do research.	8	2	10	.096	.167

My job is to teach not to do research.	4	5	9	.485	.500
The learners would not cooperate if I did research in class.	1	5	6	.543	.080
I don't have access to the books and journals I need.	1	1	2	.865	1.000
I am not interested in doing research.	0	0	0	---	---

* 38 Iranian and 30 Malaysian English language lecturers ** Two-sided significance, df=1

In addition to confirming these response frequencies, the analysis of recurring themes in the follow-up interview also provide further important information. Serious problem with proficiency in English was very frequently cited by Iranians as a reason for not doing research for publication in international journals. For example, one of the interviewees commented:

"All good sources for research methods and tools are in technical English. Web resources are in English. Moreover papers for international journals need to be written in high standard academic English and international editing services are very expensive for me. Local editing services are sometimes even more expensive. You take all the trouble to do the research but it does not bear fruit...."

A second frequent theme emerging in interview data by the Iranian participants was a lack of trust in procedures for resource allocation and evaluation. Other reasons included lack of time, failure in team work, filtered and limited access to publication sources, insufficient research funding, and unfair judgments and sometimes equal treatment of those who do research and those who do not. Here is another example extracted from the interview transcript:

"The development of the research question, the preparation of research tools, the collection of data, the analyses, and the writing are all highly technical steps that take a lot of time to complete if one wishes to do 'good research'. Sometimes, you cannot do all these alone and you need the help of different people at each stage...."

Discussions and Conclusion

The findings of the study imply that the general tone of the feedback on teacher research is positive. The study supports the teacher-as-a-researcher perspective for the field of ELT at higher education levels (See Borg 2009, 2010). Academic employers tend to expect teachers to be engaged in research. Teachers tend to see research as an activity with practical value, both for their careers and (especially in the case of the Malaysian teachers) for their performance in the classroom. Research is also perceived as enjoyable, and no teacher claims to be uninterested. For English teachers in the higher education sector, doing research related to their teaching is part of the job. In line with the findings of Borg's (2009) study of English language teachers from different countries, the participants in this study also report a constrained, traditional, quantitative understanding of the nature of research. However, they demonstrate significant context-related differences in their research perceptions.

As a study of research perceptions, what this survey does not tell us is what research the respondents are actually doing, if indeed they are doing any research at all due to the limitation of questionnaires in collecting data (Dornyei 2003). In this connection, the lack of symmetry between the reasons given for doing and not doing research is noteworthy. Like their colleagues elsewhere, English teachers in Iran and Malaysia have a combination of internal and external motivations for doing research. The main reason for not doing it is lack of time. If teachers are expected to do research, then research has to be built into their job descriptions, make up a measurable proportion of workloads, and be included among their key performance indicators (KPIs). Five Malaysian respondents do not see research as part of their jobs. They may well be right. Malaysian universities distinguish between guru bahasa 'language teachers', whose job it is to teach proficiency, and lecturers, who teach academic courses in English and carry

out research. Someone employed as a guru bahasa could interpret the employer's attitude to research as one of discouragement in their particular case, and this could explain the two responses claiming employer discouragement. Similarly, few Iranian lecturers report that research is not part of their job in spite of highlighting some obstacles in their institution.

The reasons for not doing research given by the Iranian respondents are more worrying, because they point to an apparent lack of a research culture. Before teachers can do research, they have to be given the necessary training and support to broaden their perceptions of the nature of research and research engagement. If they are expected to publish their research findings, and if publications have to be written in acceptable English, then they also need the training and support they need to write research papers in English. Of course we are dealing here with perceptions, and we lack systematic evidence on what research support is provided in reality by the university in Iran. But for teachers to have the confidence to carry out research the necessary support has to be available and it has to be perceived to be available. In this case, the teachers' perceptions point to an obstacle that is very likely to be hindering research. The results imply that insinuations of higher education similar to the ones studied here need to build the culture of research by providing training and assistance in a) reading published research, b) understanding research, c) doing research, d) writing up research reports especially in English, and e) publishing research. Support in these areas can be maximized to overcome barriers such as unfavourable working conditions, conceptual barriers, attitudinal barriers, shallow knowledge of the nature of research, and unrealistic expectations about research and publication referred to by Borg (2010).

The reconsideration of statistically significant differences between Iranian and Malaysian lecturers in their perceptions can also be interpreted to mean that different higher education contexts may present different challenges and limitations for teacher research engagement and may therefore

require different remedial steps for the promotion of research and publication. Based on challenges reported by the participants in this study, a recommendation for higher education settings is to develop national curricula for the continuous in-service training of lecturers practicing ELT. Moreover, material preparation and presentation for the promotion of teacher research needs to take into account local empirical evidence to proceed based on situation analysis. Regular workshops, weekly or monthly research meetings and research training sessions, more frequent seminars, symposia, and conferences can be organized on research methodology, the language of research, and the research publication process. Regular workshops on the different types of research, writing advice sessions, easily accessible writing centres, and flexible assistance with English proficiency can also promote teacher research in English departments in Asia. ELT lecturers report challenges in doing and reporting research in spite of their interest. Therefore, group projects, teamwork on progress reports or research summaries, and collaborative research led by seniors can promote their research. When being a research-engaged lecturer is the aim, publications can be expected at interdepartmental and more local research magazines and journals as easy starting points that can encourage lecturers for seeking higher expertise in conducting research.

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تحقیقات در آموزش عالی: مقایسه موردی عملکردها و برداشت های استادان زبان انگلیسی ایران و مالزی

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تحقیق درباره ماهیت پژوهش از دیدگاه استادان زبان انگلیسی مشخص نکرده است که آیا ضعف در این زمینه مربوط به کج فهمی های احتمالی نیز می شود یا خیر. درک کامل از برداشت ها و دیدگاه های استادان زبان انگلیسی از بنیادی ترین ملزومات در تلاش برای ارتقای همه جانبه تحقیق و پژوهش در این جامعه به شمار می رود. این تحقیق به بررسی مقابله ای دیدگاه استادان زبان انگلیسی نسبت به تحقیق ، میزان انجام تحقیق و پژوهش و دلایل انجام و عدم انجام تحقیق و عوامل مؤثر در ارتباط با تحقیقات در آموزش عالی در ایران و مالزی می پردازد. نمونه آماری مورد تحقیق دراین مطالعه 69 نفر از استادان زبان انگلیسی در گروه های زبان دو دانشگاه در ایران و مالزی هستند که به صورت تصادفی انتخاب گردیدند. داده های لازم درباره نگرش استاتید درباره تحقیق، میزان انجام تحقیق و پژوهش و دلایل انجام یا عدم انجام تحقیق و عوامل موثر بر آن به کمک پرسشنامه استاندارد و مصاحبه نیمه ساختاری جمع آوری گردید. تحلیل کمی و کیفی داده ها و یافته های پژوهش نشان داد که اساتید میزان متوسط رو به بالا تحقیق انجام میدهند و کمبود وقت دلیل اصلی آنها برای عدم انجام تحقیق است. یافته های پژوهش همچنین نشان داد که نگرش عمده به تحقیق و پژوهش در بین استادان این دو کشور بسیار متفاوت و بیشترمحدود به نگرشی مبتنی بربرداشت های سنتی، کمی (آماری) و کاربردی تحقیق و پژوهش است.

واژ گان کلیدی: تحقیق و پژوهش، آموزش عالی، نگرش اساتید، آموزش زبان انگلیسی

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