English Teachers' Motivations for Research Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Within the last few decades, the conception of research engagement has been widely considered vital in teachers' professional development. The literature is replete with numerous arguments both about the benefits of doing and reading research and the reasons for doing so. Within these discussions, however, the opinions of teachers are mostly ignored or reflected only circumstantially. The present study was conducted to investigate the reasons for which Iranian English teachers engage in research. First, a provisional survey questionnaire was designed, using experts' opinion and a comprehensive review of the related literature. The instrument was then validated through conducting exploratory factor analysis on teachers' responses to the survey instrument. Analysis of the results showed that teachers' reasons and motivations for research engagement can best be categorized in four groups: benefits for professional development, instrumental and personal motivations, organizational expectations, and pedagogical benefits. Subsequent analyses also revealed that research engagement among Iranian English teachers is mainly shaped for personal and professional reasons. The findings point to the importance of developing a holistic perspective toward educational research in order to promote research engagement, making it a sustainable path to professional excellence for language teachers.

KEYWORDS: Factor analysis; Language teachers; Motivations; Questionnaire; Research engagement

1. Introduction

Within the last decade, the desire to foster the relationship between Iranian English language teaching (ELT) research and practice has been made apparent by several initiatives and sustained strands of inquiry intended to encourage teacher-conducted research. The annual convention of Teaching English Language and Literature Society of Iran (TELLSI) in 2012 seemed to provide the first serious impetus to explore the role of teachers in ELT research. The lectures delivered by keynote speakers on the inauguration ceremony focused, for the most part, on the criticism that much of current research in academia is poor in terms of lack of relevance to and genuine impact on practice. The most explicit criticism was made in a symposium by Samar and Mehrani (2012).

> The concurrence of several syndromes in our research accounts for why our academic research is dysfunctional in addressing practical aspects of language education. Our researchers very often address topics in which teachers have little, if any, interest; their studies are often conducted in academic settings and on university students, subjects who are better understood as language users rather than language learners; they often use fairly sophisticated statistical procedures that are unfamiliar to many teachers; they write in a technical language that is too complex for teachers; and they often publish their studies in journals that teachers "have never heard" of.

Following this wave of criticism, several initiatives were made to make ELT research more applicable and accessible to practitioners. For instance, *Roshd Foreign Language Teaching Journal* commenced to publish a special column in each issue

where teachers report on action-research studies they carry out in their own classroom settings. A further section, entitled "my contribution" was also devoted to teachers for sharing their lesson plans and procedures for class activities. More recently, private language institutes such as 'Iran Language Institute' have launched several professional periodicals where academic research findings are translated into pedagogically practical ideas for language teachers. Even the scope of some Iranian academic journals shifted from a theoretical orientation toward a more practical endeavor. For example, in an attempt to better reflect its current focus, the formerly known *Journal of Applied Linguistics* experienced an appellation change to *Journal of English Language Pedagogy and Practice*.

Along with these alternations of policy, several areas of inquiries have recently emerged. Characterized by a drive to promote "teacher-research movement", some researchers, for instance, have appraised ELT research for focusing on too trivial issues (Mehrani & Khodi, 2014; Mehrani, 2014; Samar et al., 2012) and yielding inconclusive findings (Pieters & de Vries, 2007). Others have challenged the traditional conceptions of research dominantly held by Iranian researchers and policy makers (e.g. Rahimi, Madani & Rahimi, 2016) and have demanded for a reform in educational policies (e.g. Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2016). In addition, several researchers have explored the problems that teachers experience in engagement with research (e.g. Dehghan & Sahragard, 2015). A critical review of these studies, however, shows that attempts to bring research and practice into a closer harmony are marked by disappointments. For example, Mehrani and Behzadnia (2013) vehemently contend that reducing the gap requires radical political actions and "given the current socio-political and economic conditions of Iran, it seems that at this time no such action is likely" (p. 28). This argument seems justified because systematic exchange structures between the two communities of research and practice are missing. That is, there is no institution, community, agent or even individuals with a responsibility of turning educational insights into pedagogical impact.

Although the establishment of institutionalized pathways between academics and practitioners can be conducive, lack of such mediating channels in the Iranian ELT profession ought not to be perceived as a fiasco for research to influence practice. In fact, discussions in educational science advocate various venues for educational research to provide insights for practice. One such route is to encourage teachers to do systematic inquiries in their own classroom settings. Within this relatively new paradigm, variously known as "exploratory practice", "teacher-researcher movement", "practitioner research", teachers are particularly expected to engage in research projects and address their pedagogical concerns through conducting classroom-scale investigations (Dehghan & Sahragard, 2015).

A fundamental argument underpinning the promotion of research engagement among teachers has to do with the inadequacy of traditional frameworks of educational research. In fact, recent critical reports have "vented serious doubts about the quality and relevance of educational research", claiming that traditional paradigms of research often fail to provide a systematic, refined basis on which educational professionals can build their work (Biesta, 2007, p. 2). Only rarely do educational research studies offer conclusive and practical results (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007) and are most often biased and socio-politically loaded (Pring, 2000).

Although engagement in research seems to be a challenging endeavor for Iranian language teachers, as our educational system has historically considered research luxurious, non-compelling, and voluntary (Mehrmohammadi, 1997), the literature does offer numerous benefits for teachers to embark on research. One such benefit is that research engagement can inform teachers' pedagogical decisions with sound research evidence, and this will have beneficial effects on their professional development. In addition, it can reduce teachers' feelings of frustration and isolation (Roberts, 1993) and push practitioners to move out of their submissive position and take a much more innovative role in education (Gurney, 1989). Mehrani (2017) maintains that engagement in research broadens teachers' understanding of language education, provides them with a framework for reflecting on their practice, empowers them to take leadership in educational changes and heightens their awareness of students' needs. Through engagement with research, teachers can generate and improve their local knowledge of teaching while also continuously addressing their pedagogical problems (Darling-Hammond, 2006). This, in turn, makes teachers less vulnerable to and dependent on academic researchers (Hammersley, 2004), as they develop their capacity for autonomous professional judgments (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004).

The exhaustive list of benefits reviewed above provides quite an impetus for promoting research engagement among teachers; nevertheless, it does not necessarily reflect the perspective of teachers for getting involved in research. In other words, the literature on the advantages of research engagement is characterized by scholars' hypothetical speculations. The challenge is, thus, that these alleged benefits remain unapproved and ought to be inspected through empirical investigations. In particular, studies are required to examine how engagement in research can influence teachers' profession. In doing so, it is important to take teachers' opinions on board, so as to provide an insider account of the incentives and advantages of research engagement.

A further confounding issue in the literature is that the presumed benefits of teachers' research engagement are each articulated for a particular local context, yet they are largely assumed to be generalizable to various educational situations. This is not justified because research-practice divide is a consequence of the interaction of an array of inter-dependent factors that lie deeply textured in the educational system. Thus, investigations into such a multi-layered phenomenon need to be ecologically valid so as to capture the complexities involved in each particular setting.

A problem in examining the benefits of research engagement is the absence of any instrument for reflecting teachers' opinions. That is, to the best of my knowledge, there is not any published piece of research in applied linguistics (particularly in the Iranian context) to empirically report teachers' perceived benefits of research engagement. The purpose of the present study is, therefore, twofold. First, the study intends to design an instrument to allow for the quantification of the benefits of research engagement. Secondly the study aims to empirically examine the extent to which Iranian English teachers engage in research and report on their perceived benefits of research engagement. Empirical inquiries of this type are essentially required for efforts made to diminish the gap between research and practice, because they can inform policymakers and stakeholders of what teachers really think about doing and using research.

2. Method

2.1. The development of a survey instrument

Following the guidelines suggested by Dornyei (2003) and Brace (2004), the researcher designed, developed and validated a survey research instrument. In doing so, first a general framework with three independent sections was designed. While, the first section intended to collect participants' demographic information, the second section included four open-ended prompts for examining teachers' level of engagement in research. In designing the third section, which was devoted to teachers' perceived benefits of research engagement, a standard procedure of instrument development was carefully followed. Initially, a comprehensive review of the related literature was conducted to shortlist any benefits presumably associated with research engagement. In doing so, the advantages reported in previous exploratory studies and researchers' speculations were all jotted down and resulted in a provisional item pool of over 40 benefits. Through a tripartite cycle of development, arrangement, and categorization, the items with overlapping contents were then removed, and this led to the development of a provisional data driven model with 19 items in four overall categories of benefits: developing teachers' professional knowledge, improving educational instruction, meeting the requirements of educational institution and fulfilling teachers' personal and instrumental motivations.

In the next stage, each item was formulated to fit into a five-point Likert rating scale through which respondents were supposed to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each item. Subsequently, seven experts with a background in language teacher education were asked to review and revise the questionnaire items. Their comments, resulting in alternations in the wordings of some items, were taken into account, and in order to detect any ambiguity in the items, the final version was piloted by administering it to a group of 24 EFL teachers. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of the instrument was calculated and yielded 0.91. Having ensured the precision and clarity of the items, the questionnaire was then administered to the participants, as described below.

2.2. Participants

The validation of the instrument proceeded by disseminating over 530 copies of the questionnaire among English teachers in different cities covering central, eastern, and northern parts of Iran. Both hard copies and email attachments were used for instrument distribution. A total of 407 copies were completed by the respondents and returned to the researcher. Upon initial inspection, however, the researcher had to remove 84 questionnaires because they either were not carefully completed or were uncompleted. Through a second round of inspection, 108 of the completed questionnaires were also discarded because in response to the questions in the second section of the instrument participants reported a low or lack of research engagement. The screening process at this stage was to exclude teachers who reported that they were never involved in any research projects, nor did they read research studies regularly. This resulted in 215 completed instruments by teachers who reported a moderate-to-high level of research engagement.

Analysis of respondents' demographic information showed that teachers' experience ranged from 1 to 32 years, though the majority had less than 10 years of experience. About 79% of the sample had Bachelors' degree, 15% had postgraduate qualifications, 2.5% had professional upper diploma, and 3.5% either had diploma or did not specify their qualifications. Over 40% of the respondents were affiliated with educational institutes in the private sector, and 59% were engaged in public schools.

2.3. Validation procedure

As was explained, the survey developed in this study for investigating the benefits of teachers' research engagement was substantiated by the domain knowledge and experts' opinions. However, since judgments were made a priori as to the number and nature of benefits, this conceptual model had to be validated so that it can be employed as a valid instrument for the present and future studies. Thus, teachers' responses given to each of the items were subjected to a factor analysis statistical procedure. The analysis was conducted in a two-step sequential principal axis factor analysis with varimax rotation in order to assess the underlying structure for the 19 items.

A preliminary analysis was conducted to determine how many factors can be optimally extracted in the main analysis. This was done through a scree plot and yielded in a break after the first four components. In other words, the scree plot indicated that four is the ideal number of categories of factors to account for the benefits of teachers' research engagement. This was in line with the hypothetical framework developed through the literature review. Therefore, four factors were requested in conducting the main analysis. The analysis resulted in four internally consistent factors. The first factor accounted for 14.53% of the variance, the second factor accounted for 14.49%, the third factor accounted for 11.72%, and the fourth factor accounted for 10.24%. Table 1 displays the items and factor loadings for the rotated factors, with loadings less than .30 omitted to improve clarity.

Table 1. Factor loading for the rotated factors of motivations for research engagement

Item	Factor loading 1	2	3	4	Communality
Item 1	.801				.62
Item 2	.691				.63
Item 3	.535				.41
Item 4	.531				.47
Item 5	.433				.40
Item 6	.379				.30
Item 7		.634			.48
Item 8		.620			.49
Item 9		.608	.384		.65
Item 10	.321	.596			.52
Item 11		.582			.43
Item 12		.575			.44
Item 13	.378	.390			.43
Item 14			.871		.70
Item 15			.763		.63
Item 16		.431	.600		.65
Item 17	.344			.817	.68
Item 18	.409			.673	.63
Item 19		.312		.639	.61
Eigen values	2.76	2.75	2.23	1.95	
% of variance	14.53	14.49	11.72	10.24	

Note: Loadings < .30 are omitted.

As Table 1 indicates, the first factor, which indexes variables related to teachers' professional development, loads most strongly on the first six items. The second factor, which accounts for personal and instrumental incentives mostly associated with teachers' personal desires and financial issues, is composed of the seven items with loadings in the second column of the table. As Table 1 shows, the third, fourth and seventh items have their highest loadings on the second factor, but have moderate cross-loadings over .3 on the third and first columns too. The third factor, which indexes the items relevant to educational policies, comprises three items. The third item in this column, however, seems to be moderately associated with the second factor too. Lastly, the fourth factor indexes issues related to classroom procedure and pedagogical items. The first two items in this column show moderate loadings on the first factor, and the last item shows moderate loading on the second factor.

Based on the results, therefore, teachers' reasons and motivations for reading and doing research can be categorized in four groups: benefits for professional development, instrumental and personal motivations, organizational expectations, and pedagogical benefits.

3. Results

In order to gain insights into the importance of each item in rousing teachers' drive to engage in research, ratings given to the items were analyzed through calculating a weight score for each item. To this end, a proportional weight score was first obtained for each teacher's response to each item. The proportional weight scores were obtained by assigning a score of +2 to every "strongly agree" response and a score of +1 to every "agree" response. Similarly, "strongly disagree" responses were assigned a score of -2 and "disagree" responses were given a score of -1. Teachers' "undecided" responses received no score, and therefore, the range of proportional scores was between -2 and +2. For each item, the mean of the proportional scores was calculated to derive a weight score. Within this formulation, the magnitude of each weight score suggested the significance of the reason.

Respondents' data revealed that the most important reasons for teachers' research engagement were because they believed that reading and doing research help them develop their professional knowledge and skills, find better techniques and strategies for language teaching, and be aware of the recent developments in language teaching. These reasons clearly have a strong pedagogical focus. In contrast, more instrumental motives such as better income, and fulfilling authorities' expectations were less prominent in teachers' responses. The results of teachers' responses are shown in Table 2Table 2.

Table 2. Weight scores for motivations for research engagement

Questionnaire items	No. of respondents[1]	Weight scores	SD
مطالعه و انجام پژوهش به رشد و توسعه شغلی من کمک میکند. •	215	1.32	.707
با هدف یافتن روشها و تکنیکهای بهتر در تدریس زبان به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش میپردازم. •	215	1.20	.781
جهت آگاه بودن از مطالب جدید در رشته آموزش زبان مطالعه میکنم. •	213	1.17	.760
با هدف افزایش دانش و آگاهیهای فراشناختی در فرآیند تدریس به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش میپردازم. •	215	1.11	.824
از مطالعه و انجام کارهای پژوهشی لذت میبرم. •	215	1.02	.823
برای برطرف کردن مشکلات و موانع تدریس زبان به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش میپردازم. •	215	.94	.884
برای تقویت رزومه کاری ام به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش میدهم. •	214	.82	.962
برای بهتر کردن شرایط آموزشی مدرسه (مؤسسه) مطالعه و پژوهش انجام میدهم. •	215	.78	.914
با هدف پذیرفته شدن در دوره تحصیلی بالاتر به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش میپردازم. •	213	.71	.976
برای شرکت در جلسات و سمینارها نیاز به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش دارم. •	213	.62	1.091
برای گذراندن دوره آموزشی که اکنون در حال طی کردن آن هستم مطالعه و پژوهش میکنم. •	213	.58	.936
برای بحث و تبادل نظر با همکاران و معلمان دیگر به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش میپردازم. •	211	.52	.917
برای کسب ارتقاء شغلی و ترفیع سازمانی نیاز به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش دارم. •	213	.38	1.229
برای کمک کردن به همکاران و معلمان دیگر به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش میپردازم. •	213	.35	.923
با هدف یافتن شغل بهتر به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش میپردازم. •	213	.25	1.170
با هدف چاپ و انتشار مطالب پژوهشی خودم به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش میپردازم. •	211	.22	1.079
سیستم آموزشی از من انتظار دارد که به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش بپردازم. •	213	-.08	1.171
مدیر مدرسه (مؤسسه) از من انتظار دارد که به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش بپردازم. •	214	-.12	1.181
با هدف کسب درآمد بیشتر به مطالعه و انجام پژوهش میپردازم. •	211	-.23	1.141

4. Discussion

The present study described the development and validation of an instrument for examining teachers' perspectives on their research engagement. For this purpose, a conceptual framework was first designed based on a thorough review of the literature, and then was tested on a sample of over 200 Iranian English teachers using factor analysis. The analysis corroborated the initial conceptual model, suggesting that from teachers' perspective the benefits of engagement in research can best be explained in terms of four overall categories: professional motivations such as improving the quality of education and professional development; instrumental and personal motivations including improving occupational resume, finding a better job, getting admission to higher educational programs, publishing manuscripts, obtaining a better income; institutional motives – both a priori motivations to get involved in research and also the posterior incentives experienced after research projects – such as fulfilling manager's expectations, educational system's requirements, and institutional promotion; and finally pedagogical concerns, including finding better techniques and strategies for teaching, developing knowledge and meta-cognitive understanding, and solving educational problems. Analysis of teachers' ratings to each item also revealed the significance of each of these reasons in the Iranian ELT context.

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[1] Throughout this section, where totals in tables do not add up to 215, this is due to missing data.

One of the most interesting findings was that, consistent with the literature, the most important outcomes of research projects were not seen just about developing research skills, nor even about an increased understanding of the subject matter of the research. Although these were obviously very important for many teachers in this study, research was clearly seen as a vehicle for professional development that unlike any other form of professional development remains open to teachers throughout their carrier.

In the Iranian context, teachers' professional development programs normally consist of short term programs, often conducted by a group of "imported experts" (Mehrani & Behzadpoor, 2022). These programs are ideally assumed to provide teachers with a chance to meet colleagues and discuss their professional problems, and be exposed to stimulating new ideas. However, investigations show that the knowledge offered is generally far removed from the contexts of the teachers, and the situational factors affecting their classroom practices are not often taken into account (e.g. Khanjani, et al., 2017). As a consequence, the aim of increasing teachers' professional development is rarely achieved. Engagement in research, on the other hand, as an alternative form of professional development could be considered as customizable, in that teachers decide what kind of knowledge to receive how and when. Therefore, in pre-service teacher education programs, research engagement can be promoted as an on-going opportunity for developing teachers' professional skills based upon their own individual needs.

The results of the study also showed that for some individuals the motivations for research engagement are primarily instrumental. That is, for some teachers reading or doing research is not an end in itself, but a path which paves the way for obtaining other achievements such as a better job, salary raise, university admission for higher education, etc. This, by implication, points to the actual unimportance of some of these factors in our educational system. As a fact of the matter, the analysis of the weight scores reflects that many teachers indicated that they do not receive any financial raise in their salaries for doing or otherwise engaging in research. These findings suggest that instrumental motivations such as financial and intellectual reinforcements can function as efficient tools for encouraging teachers to get involved in educational research. Such instruments, thus, can potentially be employed in making the Iranian language education an evidence-based profession.

The examination of the weight scores also indicated that within our educational system organizational requirements, and principals' expectations do not currently have the potential to rouse teachers' drives for keeping up with research. Given the roles that such institutional motives could play in promoting teachers' research engagement it seems necessary that policy makers implement a set of promotive educational policies to push teachers further toward research.

Unlike institutional motives, teachers' pedagogical concerns appeared to be very influential in increasing the level of their research engagement. For example, teachers believed that research findings can provide them with an extra level of assurance about what works in practice, and help them develop a meta-cognitive knowledge about the process of teaching. Despite a wide degree of skepticism about researchers and research findings, the findings in this study suggest that many Iranian teachers still hold positive views toward research. However, this attitude is not likely to be sustained and profitably used, unless material conditions in schools, and more broadly in our educational system are altered, and unless teachers and researchers come together to learn about, conduct and discuss research.

5. Conclusion

The present study provided an empirical analysis of the research engagement among Iranian English teachers. Methodologically, the study was robust and resulted in a research instrument that can be used in other contexts. In terms of the findings, the main contribution here is the first-hand data in support of the argument that teacher engagement is by no means a simple, straight forward issue. Although, the participants involved in the study were exclusively limited to those teachers who were moderately-to-highly engaged in research, there was little evidence in favor of the many hypothetical claims made in the literature about the benefits of research engagement for language teachers. As a matter of fact, the results showed that research engagement among Iranian language teachers is mainly shaped for personal and professional reasons. Teachers do not often feel obliged by their institutions to engage in research, nor do they read and do research for receiving financial and intellectual supports. These findings suggest that initiatives made to promote research engagement would be likely to confound the status-quo, unless a holistic and thorough investigation is made in each educational context. In other words, arguing against the simplistic conceptualization of research engagement, the findings point to the fact that in promoting the notion of teacher as a researcher, the idiosyncrasy of each context must be taken into account.

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