

FACTORS AFFECTING RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN CHINA

Baoguo Shen

Baoding University, Baoding, China, 071000

ABSTRACT: *The purpose of the study was to investigate factors which influenced faculty participation in innovation and scientific research. 462 English language teachers from common colleges in China were asked to report the factors hindering their research engagement via a questionnaire, and 20 of them were interviewed face to face. The finding revealed that by addressing the 7 major hindering factors of teachers' research engagement i.e. lack of research opportunities, lack of motivation, lack of research knowledge and skills, conventional conception of research, time constraint, lack of effective management system and insufficient material and supplies, teachers' research and innovation in higher education can be enhanced.*

KEYWORDS: Higher education, Teachers' research engagement, Factor analysis

INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of higher education for training a large number of creative talents in China is the key to accomplishing the tasks of the 12th Five-Year program and taking the initiative in global competition. High-level, high-quality teaching staff is the foundation for higher education. In traditional education, the teacher is information giver. Their role is to transfer knowledge, and only to ensure that students cover relevant content and have opportunities to learn truths. They needn't engage research. In modern education, teaching must keep pace with the society and reflects the need of the social development. The teachers should pay attention to the social development. They need to update their skills and knowledge continuously, not only in response to a changing world but in response to new research and emerging knowledge about learning and teaching. They must strengthen their abilities in the way of independent inquiry and professional research. However, most English language teachers are not active to participate in research activities and there has been little accompanying research. The present study attempts to investigate the factors which hinder English language teachers to conduct research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Almost 30 years ago a related strand of inquiry has focused on the notion of research engaged teachers. The influential educationalist Laurence Stenhouse (1981) asserts that teachers must be involved in educational research, proposing that research could be broadly defined as systematic and disciplined inquiry. Worrall (2004) argued to encourage teachers to carry out research by building research culture. He surveyed 28 teachers in the UK in order to examine why teachers did not sustain their engagement in research: (a) the lack of external pressure to do so; (b) lack of time; and (c) personal dispositions. A survey by Allison and Carey reflects increasing empirical interest in English language teachers' engagement in research. The key findings of the study were that these individuals felt constrained in their ability to engage in research by the limited time left available to them after they had fulfilled their teaching duties; lack of encouragement and motivation to do research were also cited as common challenges, particularly where a requirement to do research was not part of teachers' job descriptions. More recent work by Simon Borg examines the conceptions of research held by 505 teachers of English from 13 countries around the world. The findings of this study point to a number of attitudinal, conceptual, procedural, and institutional barriers to teacher research engagement.

In China, teacher research engagement actually began to be focus much later. The author has searched in many recent issues of journals in China for papers on teacher research engagement and has found that there are not many such papers in them. In short, very little research has been carried out in this area, and none of it offers results which can be generalised across different groups and circumstances. This thesis is developing a programme of research which aims to address these issues and here I report on the survey which forms the first stage in this programme.

The purpose of the study was to investigate factors which influenced English language teachers' participation in research. To guide the study, the following research objectives were investigated:

1. To describe what were the selected personal and professional characteristics of English teachers, including age, gender, tenure status, and years of teaching experience, academic rank, and region.
2. To describe obstacle factors which affect English language teachers' research engagement.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

462 English language teachers from universities, middle schools and primary schools in Baoding by stratified random sampling participated in the study. Most of them were female (87.14 percent). More than half of the respondents are 30-40 years of age (68.05 percent), and more than half of them are over 10 years of service (63.36 percent). Most of them had bachelor degree or lower (76.25 percent) and some had master bachelors degree or higher (12.59 percent). Half of them have medium-grade professional titles (50.15 percent).

Instruments

Since there was no ready-to use instrument for the aim of the present study, questionnaire was design on the basis of theoretical input suggested in the literature(Simon Borg 2007), first-hand information derived from the researcher's teaching, research experience and interviews with teachers as well as researchers. To ensure accurate, clear and quick understanding of the specific items, the questionnaire was formatted in China, the subjects' mother tongue. It consists of two parts. The first section collected information such as age, sex, experience, professional status, position, and so on. The second section contained twenty-six items which cover seven aspects in terms of exhibiting factors. It is a 26-item questionnaire using a Likert scale with responses ranging from A=strongly agree; B=agree; C=neither agree nor disagree; D=disagree; E=strongly disagree.

Because the questionnaire was developed by the researchers for this particular study, the reliability analysis was first conducted to check the internal consistency. For the Obstacle factors Questionnaires, the Cronbach's coefficient alpha is 0.835. It is high enough to assure the reliability. The scale of factor analysis was employed to measure their construct validity. Through KMO and Bartlet test, the KMO index is 0.824(well above the acceptable level of 0.6) and sig=0.000<0.05. It indicates factor analysis is appropriate. The data support the use of factor analysis and suggest that the data may be grouped into a smaller set of underlying factors. Through principal component analysis with varimax rotation, seven factors were extracted for the questionnaire, accounting for 72.036% (>60%).It indicates that the cumulative percentage of variance extracted by the factors reaches a satisfactory level.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The solution appears in Table 1. Factor 1 with 6 items included can be named "Lack of research opportunities for teachers", Factor 2 with 4 items included "Lack of research motivation", Factor 3 with 3 items included "Lack of research knowledge and skills", Factor 4 with 3 items included "Conventional conception of research" Factor 5 with 3 items included "Time constraint" Factor 6 with 3 items included "Inefficient management system", Factor 7 with 3 items included "Insufficient material and instrument".

Table 1. Rotated component matrix(a) of the factors hindering teachers' research engagement

| | Component | | | | | | |
|---------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Item 3 | .796 | .077 | .135 | -.029 | -.107 | .020 | .028 |
| Item 6 | .697 | .065 | .075 | -.014 | -.101 | .171 | .151 |
| Item15 | .690 | -.053 | .130 | .366 | .215 | .051 | .085 |
| Item 17 | .776 | .275 | .175 | -.050 | .203 | -.144 | -.130 |
| Item 20 | .651 | .261 | -.054 | .323 | .096 | .108 | .073 |
| Item 21 | .816 | .182 | -.018 | .264 | .028 | .019 | .208 |
| Item 11 | .202 | .821 | .064 | .273 | .061 | .033 | -.037 |
| Item 12 | .142 | .831 | .172 | .198 | .054 | .139 | -.086 |
| Item 14 | .223 | .613 | .325 | .467 | -.006 | .169 | -.092 |
| Item 24 | .164 | .804 | .056 | .068 | .035 | -.054 | .089 |
| Item 4 | .341 | -.092 | .637 | .170 | -.284 | .097 | .240 |
| Item 5 | .162 | .048 | .872 | -.133 | -.097 | -.007 | .086 |
| Item 8 | .070 | .246 | .672 | .070 | -.086 | -.127 | -.486 |
| Item 1 | .308 | .148 | .419 | .462 | -.185 | -.137 | .040 |
| Item 13 | .037 | .282 | .069 | .789 | -.024 | -.023 | -.060 |
| Item 18 | .120 | .297 | .135 | .488 | .460 | -.350 | .345 |
| Item 7 | -.022 | -.036 | .195 | .077 | .871 | .017 | .051 |
| Item 10 | -.388 | .413 | .364 | .021 | .489 | -.080 | -.036 |
| Item 16 | .369 | .013 | -.009 | -.007 | .523 | -.556 | -.082 |
| Item 19 | .411 | .341 | .032 | .185 | .305 | .595 | .081 |
| Item 23 | -.176 | .381 | -.057 | -.071 | .177 | .636 | .362 |
| Item 26 | .108 | .018 | -.177 | -.068 | .007 | .774 | -.110 |
| Item 2 | .313 | .343 | .290 | .216 | .085 | .161 | .521 |
| Item 22 | .343 | .171 | -.150 | -.048 | -.056 | -.066 | .803 |
| Item 25 | .105 | .327 | .161 | .158 | .139 | -.048 | .684 |

After all the data were rightly coded and processed using the SPSS 14.0, the means and standard deviations of all the obstacle factors were to be calculated to identify the overall characteristics concerning the participants' reported factors.

Lack of research opportunities for teachers

This study shows most serious barrier factor is lack of research opportunities for teachers. As displayed in the investigation, the respondents have strong desire to have opportunities for research ($M=4.101$). The teachers hope to have help from organizers and leading teachers. And Collective enquiry is absolutely critical to sustaining most individuals work. Teachers develop a thirst for finding out more from formal research as they begin to question their own practice. Beginning teachers emphasized on the need of well-structure mentoring schemes, collegial support. The respondents hope to hold academic activities to communicate between senior and junior faculty members.

Lack of research motivation

Motivation and engagement have been described as individuals' energy and drive to engage, work effectively, and perform to their potential and the behaviors that follow from this energy and drive. Motivation and engagement play a large part in individuals' interest in and enjoyment of what they do. Motivation and engagement also underpin their achievements. With the development of society and economy, people pay more attention to the quality of higher education in China. Teacher job satisfaction has improved in recent years. Even so, the overall level of job satisfaction remains low, and far more needs to be done to raise teacher morale to levels that will impact significantly on teacher research. The survey shows pay/salary is major source of teacher job satisfaction. The teachers, especially young teachers prefer teaching to research engagement because they can directly get salary from each period of teaching. However, doing research takes a lot of time and publishing cost a lot of money in China. Moreover, ordinary teachers have difficulty in obtain research funding from government.

Lack of research knowledge and skills

China's traditional education focuses on knowledge instruction rather than research and inquiry. Nowadays, most in-service teachers in high education are lacking research advanced knowledge and research skills. The respondents believe the lack of advanced knowledge and research skills hinder their research engagement ($M=3.20$). In the interview, some respondents expressed they were plunged into the depth of anxiety because they can not find appropriate research topics. And many teachers don't understand the process of research project. These factors hinder the teachers to engage in the research. They desire to have access of information on academic tendency and they hope to have opportunities to obtain the research skills.

Conventional conception of research

It is not a straightforward issue to define research. The study by Ratcliffe et al. (2004), based on interviews with over 60 science educators, found that respondents, unless already experienced in research, had limited understandings of the nature of and the processes involved in social science research. Simon Borg (2009) believes research is a number of commonly cited minimal elements—a problem or question, data, analysis, interpretation. Characteristics of the process, such as systematicity and rigour, are often commonly cited (though these are of course open to multiple interpretations). Additionally, it has been argued that to qualify as research, inquiry needs to be made

public. These factors will be borne in mind as the results to this question are analyzed. According to this investigation, teachers in China think differently both understanding of research and effective teaching. The respondents believe effective teaching has not much association with research ($M=2.67$). Even some strongly agree that doing research has always been a tedious task and should be performed exclusively by professional experts or full-time researchers. And teachers' research engagements have a negative impact on quality of teaching.

Time constraint

The survey by Simon Borg(2009) indicated that the overwhelming for not doing research was a lack of time. This investigation is consistent with the studies by Simon Borg. The respondents obtained high score in the factor ($M=3.337$). In China universities, teachers have the monthly salaries and allowances. The allowances are paid according to staff's periods of classroom teaching. Compared to the teaching, doing research takes teachers private time. For ordinary teachers, they have to make a living by teaching. They have reasonably heavy teaching workload to teach many periods in a week and to handle many students in a class. It is impossible for them spend a lot of time to do research.

Inefficient management system and insufficient material and instrument

Research engagement needs efficient management of institutions and good conditions of doing research. This survey shows one of the factors to hinder teachers' research engagement is lack of efficient managements and good condition of research ($M=3.214$).The participants expressed the current management system in the universities are lacking incentive mechanism and fair competition. The teachers with primary and middle titles are required to complete the research task beyond competence and too high standards are enforced. Due to the above reasons, some teachers give up doing research and others have to plagiarize. According to Ministry of Education statistics, these new staff members account for over 70% of total full-time teachers. For the teachers with the title of professor, there are no special rules of academic achievements. They are lacking personal accomplishment.

Reading research is essential to the beginning teachers in the first stage of research engagement and reading research can make contribution to teachers' professional activities. The survey shows teachers are inaccessible to the selected research papers ($M=3.214$). Insufficient research papers and instruments hindered the teachers' research development.

DISCUSSION

The present research studied the current situation of Chinese research engagement of foreign language teachers, particularly the factors affecting research engagement. The newly emerged factor that affects teachers' research engagement is insufficient opportunities to access research activities. The research opportunities were manifested by six indicators: 1) lack of academic leaders and research organizers, 2) inaccessibility to the projects funded by the government, 3) lack of research culture, 4) lack of mentoring, 5) lack of the opportunities of professional development, 6) lack of activities of academic exchanges.

CONCLUSION

This finding is consistent of the research by David Leat. He analyzed the teachers' diaries and concluded most of the teachers going through a series of phases as they engaged in innovation and research. The teachers also noted what had helped them through their enquiry process. These descriptions are important because in other circumstances the teachers may well have given up. Teachers have experience anxiety as they change their practice and during this phase teachers need different resources and opportunities to support their research as their enquiry develops and they may need emotional support (Leat 2004). This factor depicts the kind of new research paradigm which requires teachers to be more responsible for their research teams. The advent of the factor has changed the way how policymakers and management personnel perceive innovation and scientific research. It may revolutionize how administrators perceive professional development and how teachers approach the teaching and research cycle. Time constraint is another factor affecting teachers' research engagement. This finding confirms the descriptive finding by Simon Borg. But this study does not show time constraint is the most serious problem the teachers face in research engagement. The difference is most likely the result of the participants from different districts. The respondents participating in the study by Simon Borg are from research universities in western countries and the most participants of this survey are from local common higher education in China.

This study used data from the researchers; therefore, the results may not be directly generalizable to different populations. Teachers may behave differently than other population groups in their ability and motivation to participate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers recommend that educational leaders and researchers of higher education should understand what inhibiting factors influence teachers' research engagement. Specifically, the results give additional guidance higher education administrators on the improvement of innovation and research that are associated with teachers' engagements.

REFERENCES

- Stenhouse, A.(1981). What counts as research.British Journal of Educational Studies 292: pp. 103–14.
- Worrall, N.(2004).Trying to build a research culture in a school: Trying to find the right questions to ask. Teacher Development, 8, pp. 137–148.
- Desmond, A. and J. Carey.(2007). “What do university language teachers say about language teaching research?” in TESL Canada Journal, 25 no2, pp. 61-81.
- Borg, S. (2009). English language teachers' conceptions of research. Applied Linguistics 30/3: pp.355-388.
- Ratcliffe, M., H. Bartholomew, V. Hames, A. Hind, J. Leach, R. Millar & J. (2004). Osborne. Science education practitioners' views of research and its influence on their practice. York: Department of Educational Studies, University of York.
- Borg, S.(2007). “Research engagement in English Language Teaching”, Teaching and Teacher Education 23.5, pp, 731–747.
- Leat, D. (2004). Partnerships and Participation in Teacher Research. Cranfield, Bedfordshire: National College for School Leadership.