

Research Culture and Factors Affecting their Involvement in Doing Research: Myanmar University Context

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Abstract

The gap between research and practice has been an endemic feature of the English language teaching profession (Borg. 2007). This concern has recently received major attention by the call for empirical investigations to be conducted in order to improve the relationship between research and practice. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the extent to which English teachers engage in doing and reading research. The research also aimed at exploring the motivations that can promote English teachers' research engagement. Data were collected through conducting questionnaire surveys with 113 English teachers with various teaching backgrounds. Analysis of the data revealed moderate level of research engagement. The results also showed a wide range of motivations, including to obtain an outsider perspective toward the practice of teaching and to find out what other people are doing. The analysis also demonstrates that practical relevance of research to classroom setting and developing social network that can promote teachers' research engagement remain their main motivations for research engagement. Teachers' professional development and pedagogical concerns comprise other potential motivations that can be profitably used to encourage teachers' research engagement.

Keywords: English teachers, Research culture, Research engagement, Motivation

Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) profession in Myanmar has recently witnessed various initiatives and sustained interest in improving the relationship between researchers and teachers. In addition, several local and international seminars and conferences were recently held in different parts of the country where educational researchers were invited to discuss various issues related to “teachers’ research engagement”. An important assumption behind these initiatives is that teachers’ involvement in reading and doing research helps them move out of their submissive positions in educational systems and encourages them to play more innovatory and important roles in curriculum development (Gurney. 1989). A further thinking behind the attempts that are made to increase teachers’ research engagement is that when teachers make use of research findings they can make more informed and evidence-based decisions (Borg. 2007). Through engagement with reading and doing research, teachers become more critical, reflective and analytical about their practice in classrooms. Roberts (1993) believes that research engagement can also reduce teachers’ feelings of frustration and isolation. In addition, teachers’ research engagement helps them become less vulnerable to and dependent on external challenges (Donato.

2003) as they develop their capacity for autonomous professional judgments. Discussions around the barriers to research engagement are diverse. In Myanmar context, there are also various strands of inquiry into teachers’ research engagement. However, there seems to be a paucity of research investigating teachers’ level of research engagement, and the motivations that encourage teachers to use academic research more frequently. Such inquiries are both necessary and useful, because the decisions to be made about teachers’ research engagement must be informed by a realistic understanding of teachers’ current level of research engagement and their motivations for doing and reading research. This research explores these questions in the Myanmar ELT context. Specifically, it examines the extent to which English teachers report doing and reading research and their motivations for doing so. These questions are of interest to the Myanmar ELT community, particularly at a time when teachers are increasingly being encouraged to carry out small-scale research studies in their own classrooms, and to assume the role of a teacher-researcher. Research engagement particularly helped Teachers 1) obtain an outsider perspective toward the practice of teaching; 2) find out what other people are doing; 3) see the practical relevance of

research to classroom setting; and 4) develop social networking (providing possibilities for contacting others). Scholars believe that research engagement is a very useful vehicle that, unlike any other form of professional development, is always open to teachers. Campbell and Jacques (2004) exploratory study revealed that teachers believed that research engagement influenced their professional development in different ways. Specifically, it could increase the number of teaching plans, educational objectives, teaching strategies, and teachers' knowledge of what was being taught. In addition, teachers reported that studying research papers improved their reflective behavior, awareness of praise and focus on evaluation and observations of pupils (Campbell & Jacques. 2004). Other studies showed that research can inform and improve practice by providing different interpretations and understandings of educational activities. Roberts (1993) believes that research engagement can reduce teachers' feelings of frustration and isolation. Atay (2008) argues that through engagement with and in research, teachers become more critical, reflective and analytical about their teaching. Teachers' research engagement can also foster the connections between researchers and teachers and help them play a more important role in educational contexts, and

move out of their submissive positions. As the above review shows, in previous studies, research-practice gap has been approached from various perspectives, and subsequently different proposals have been suggested to tackle this problem. Thus, removing the gap between research and practice necessitates in-depth investigations into teachers' personal and social realities.

Bearing this in mind, the researchers in this study do not intend to argue that teachers must necessarily be research-engaged; rather the point is that the decisions to be made about what is possible and desirable in relation to Myanmar language teachers' research engagement need to be informed by empirical investigations that we currently lack. Such studies can elucidate teachers' perspectives on the extent to which they are research-engaged, and the reasons for being so (Borg. 2007: 2009). Therefore, the present study was conducted to explore the extent to which Myanmar English teachers engage in and with research and the reasons for their research engagement. The following research questions were addressed:

To what extent do Myanmar English teachers engage academic research?

What are the teachers' motivations for using research findings in their teaching?

Research Methodology

Participants

To answer the above questions, 113 teachers (83 females and 30 males) from selected universities were asked to participate in the research. Their teaching experiences ranged from 2 to 32 years. In terms of latest academic degree, 5% teachers had PhD degrees and 95% Master's degrees.

Data collection

In order to collect data, the researchers invited each participant to take part in a semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview is a meeting in which the interviewer does not strictly follow a formalized list of questions. They will ask more open-ended questions, allowing for a discussion with the interviewee rather than a straightforward question and answer format. To encourage the interviewees to express themselves fully and freely, they were asked whether they preferred to speak in Myanmar or English. With the exception of two, most teachers opted to speak in Myanmar. After obtaining each participant's agreement for audio-recording the interview sessions, the teachers were individually interviewed. First, they were asked questions about the time they spent on reading and doing research. Depending on their responses, they were then asked to mention and elaborate on

the reasons for doing so. There was also space for more flexible interaction through which teachers were able to elaborate on any matters relevant to their views and experiences of research engagement. The interview sessions lasted, on average, about one hour. Based on Borg's (2007) guidelines, the content of the interviews was then transcribed and fully content analyzed.

(i) Teachers' reasons for doing or reading research (Borg. 2007)

The main function of a teacher is teaching. Reading journals and conducting action research on a regular basis are now considered professional responsibilities of Myanmar teachers. So far, a number of in-service courses on research have been conducted for them. The purpose of the research was to evaluate teachers' research culture and factors affecting their involvement in doing research. As part of the study, we examined the factors that motivated teachers for doing or reading research. Table 1 shows the teachers' reasons for doing or reading research.

Table 1 Teachers' reasons for doing or reading research (n=113)

SN	Categories of motivations for research engagement	Sub-categories	Responses			Avg Positive Response	Avg Negative Response
			Agree	Not Sure	Disagree		
1	Pedagogical motivations	Solving pedagogical problems	71	24	18	47.79%	52.21%
		Developing an overall perspective	50	29	34		
		Facilitating instructional process	41	52	20		
2	Institutional motivations	Authorities' expectations	51	28	34	58.41%	41.59%
		Universities' expectations	76	27	10		
		Students' expectations	71	25	17		
3	Professional motivations	Improving the quality of education	77	16	20	66.67%	33.33%
		Teachers' Professional development	74	25	14		
		Developing communication networks	75	24	14		

Table 1 (Continued)

SN	Categories of motivations for research engagement	Sub-categories	Responses			Avg Positive Response	Avg Negative Response
			Agree	Not Sure	Disagree		
4	Instrumental motivations	Being aware of the recent developments	55	46	12		
		Participating in educational meetings	44	52	17	43.07%	56.93%
		Personal desire	47	47	19		

The results also showed a wide range of motivations, including solving pedagogical problems, universities' expectations teachers' professional development, improving the quality of education and personal desire that can promote teachers' research engagement. Institutional motivations such as authorities' and universities' expectations can be differentiated from factors concerning teachers' professional development such as 'developing social network' and 'improving the quality of education'. Table 1 summarizes the categories and relevant instances of teachers' motivations for research engagement.

(ii) Teachers' views and experiences of research engagement

The focus of this paper is teachers' points of view in relation to engagement in and with research which is somewhat elusive. Selected teachers' voices can be found in the data; and while it is probable that these voices are an incomplete representation, they often demonstrate teachers' positive attitude towards their research engagement. This is particularly so when teachers' engagement is as practitioners undertaking research into their practice. Responses of the participants on views and experiences of research engagement are presented in the following table.

Table 2 Responses of the participants on views and experiences of research engagement (n=113)

SN	Views and experiences	Responses		
		Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
1	In terms of research engagement, teachers obtain an outsider perspective toward the practice of teaching.	57	28	28
2	In terms of research engagement, teachers find out what other people are doing.	56	37	20
3	In terms of research engagement, teachers see the practical relevance of research to classroom setting.	45	51	17
4	In terms of research engagement, teachers develop social networking (providing possibilities for contacting others).	30	69	14

This table shows the views and experiences of research engagement as professional development. Two main views and experiences of research engagement distinguished in the data are: ‘In terms of research engagement, teachers obtain an outsider perspective toward the practice of teaching’ and ‘In terms of research engagement, teachers find out what other people are doing’. A small number of teachers are not sure research as the recent standard for teachers’ professional development. In other words, they will not engage with research. Analysis of the data revealed moderate level of research engagement. The results also showed a wide range of motivations, including to obtain an outsider perspective toward the practice of teaching and to find out what other people are doing.

(iii) Teachers’ engagement in doing research

During the interview sessions, teachers were first asked some questions about the extent to which they are engaged in reading or doing research. In particular, teachers were asked: (1) whether they conducted any educational research independently and; (2) whether they participated in any educational research projects as a collaborator or assistant, (3) how frequently they read educational research materials; (4) and which published sources in the field they read. Table 3 shows the responses of the participants on the extent to which they are engaged in doing research.

Table 3 Responses of the participants on the extent to which they are engaged in doing research (n=113)

SN	Engagement in doing research	Responses		
		Always	Sometimes	Never
1	Do you usually conduct any educational research independently?	18	42	53
2	Do you participate in any educational research projects as a collaborator or assistant?	16	34	63

The overall response to the question items 1 and 2, concerning teachers’ level of research engagement was that many teachers do not carry out educational research. Some teachers did mention that they had been involved in academic discussions surrounding language education, but many were particularly hesitant to declare that they had done any independent educational research. Some participants have never participated in any research plan because they don’t know anyone who does research.

(iv) Teachers’ engagement in reading research

In response to questions about reading published materials, teachers’ responses varied. While many teachers plainly acknowledged that they “don’t study regularly” or even “don’t study at all”, some stated that they study “only when they need to”. There were also a few teachers who reported more precise and frequent levels of research reading.

Table 4 Responses of the participants on the extent to which they are engaged in reading research (n=113)

SN	Engagement in reading research	Responses		
		Study regularly	Only when we need to	Don’t study at all
1	Do you frequently read educational research materials?	28	42	43

The data made by some teachers capture such hesitations. In addition, depending on the subject, they often do or read something. When they feel that their students have problems with research method or when a technique does not work, they search to find better ways. According to interview responses of the participants, generally, some study about one or two hours every week. They read issues of research Journals. Once or twice a week they also check different websites. Basically, they study at least for an hour per night, but sometimes they read more for example, when they are supposed to talk about a particular point or do something.

Teachers who do not learn to read will have difficulty mastering academic content, succeeding at university, and fulfilling their life potential. Yet that goal remains elusive. Instead of looking to authoritative and valid evidence of what works, teachers frequently rely on experience and anecdotal information to guide their teaching. Although experience is valuable, depending on experience alone typically leaves many teachers behind. Reading research exposes teachers to nonfiction topics. It has them investigate and report in writing to demonstrate comprehension.

Table 5 Responses of the participants on the extent to which they are engaged in reading research (n=113)

SN	Engagement in reading research	Responses		
		Specialized peer-reviewed journals	Online forums and professional weblogs	A wide variety of journal sources
1	Which published sources in the field you read?	46	38	29

Some of the participants who consulted research studies reported using a wide range of resources. The research materials they read ranged from specialized peer-reviewed journals (n=46) to online forums and professional weblogs (n=38). However, many could not even name a few printed sources. These assertions demonstrate that academic research journals which represent the traditional forms of scientific research are not often read by language teachers. They say that reading papers may change their assumptions, ideas, conceptions, but they use the internet for more practical issues. They can find more prac-

tical pieces of advice, teaching techniques and strategies in various websites and weblogs. They say the internet is a more direct and practical source, but reading research papers may indirectly help teachers improve their teaching by changing their perspectives. They say there have not been problems to be solved through reading research.

(v) Teachers’ motivations for research engagement

Among the motivating factors identified by the teachers was the sense that some teachers were almost “predisposed to enjoy research” (Watkins. 2006). This was raised in different ways by some of the participants.

Table 6 Responses of the participants on motivating factors of research engagement to teachers (n=113)

SN	Motivating factors	Responses		
		Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
1	Teachers obtain an outsider perspective toward the practice of teaching.	67	18	28
2	Teachers find out what other people are doing.	76	17	20
3	Teachers see the practical relevance of research to classroom setting.	85	11	17
4	Teachers develop social networking (providing possibilities for contacting others).	80	15	18

It has been found that teachers who have positive attitudes and practice self-reflection on their teaching performance do embark on research. They are also aware of the importance of research to improve teaching. They found satisfaction when they can share or report their findings to others. According to the data, a number of interviewees (85%) strongly emphasized that research is an integral part of teaching and they see the practical relevance of research to classroom setting, on the other, 80% of the teachers develop social networking (providing possibilities for contacting others).

Results

Attempts are made to provide relevant results from teachers' responses to convey key themes and what they typically said about themselves. It should be mentioned, however, that though English teachers who participated in this part of the study were heterogeneous in many respects, the obtained qualitative results cannot be generalized to the whole community of Myanmar English teachers. Therefore, teachers' detailed responses to the interview questions in this study provide provisional information about the level of research engagement, views and motivations of teachers. The first noteworthy point in teachers' responses is that although some teachers acknowledged that they sporadically do research-like activities such as departmental research to be submitted to the university, many were hesitant to declare that they conduct truly educational research. When teachers were asked about their collaboration with researchers, many reported low to moderate levels. The professional development and professional motivations are among the most important motivations for teachers (66.67%) to be research engaged. For the English teachers involved in this study, institutional development has also been found very often (58.41%) a key factor in research engagement.

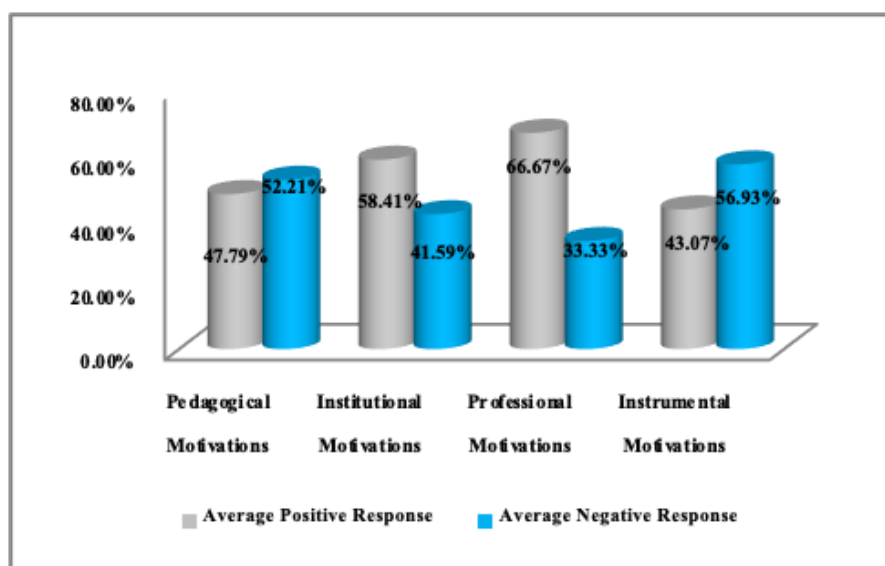


Figure 1 Teachers' reasons for doing or reading research

Discussion

The main function of a teacher is teaching. Reading journals and conducting research on a regular basis are now considered professional responsibilities of Myanmar teachers. The purpose of the research was to evaluate teachers' research culture and factors affecting their involvement in doing and reading research. As part of the study, we examined the factors that motivated teachers to do research. This research examined to what extent Myanmar teachers conducted research especially those who have undergone in-service courses and workshops on it. Teachers who have positive attitudes and practice self-reflection on their teaching performance do embark on research. They are also aware of the importance of research to improve teaching. They found satisfaction when they develop social networking (providing possibilities for contacting others). The study also looked at engagement in reading research. Specialized peer-reviewed journals are mentioned with high frequency followed by online forums and professional weblogs and a wide variety of journal sources. For many teachers, doing and reading research was interconnected to their teaching profession. A number of interviewees strongly emphasized that research is "an integral part" of teaching. Some others mentioned that studying

research could facilitate their teaching job. High levels of motivation will increase persistence, enhance cognitive processes and lead to improved performance. Teachers should be aware of these different traits and reinforcing consequences of their students in order to use natural motivation and curiosity to guide the learning of new and more complex tasks. According to the data, participants see themselves as professional language teachers, so they wish to be aware of the recent events in their profession, even if they may not be able to apply them in teaching. They hope and believe that someday they will be able to use them. What they learn today might not be applicable to teaching for different reasons. They just want to promote themselves not to change anything. That is a matter of professionalism. Thus, they have to develop language knowledge and teaching skills. It is important for them to be updated. Among other motivating factors identified by the teachers was the sense that some teachers were almost "predisposed to enjoy research" (Watkins, 2006).

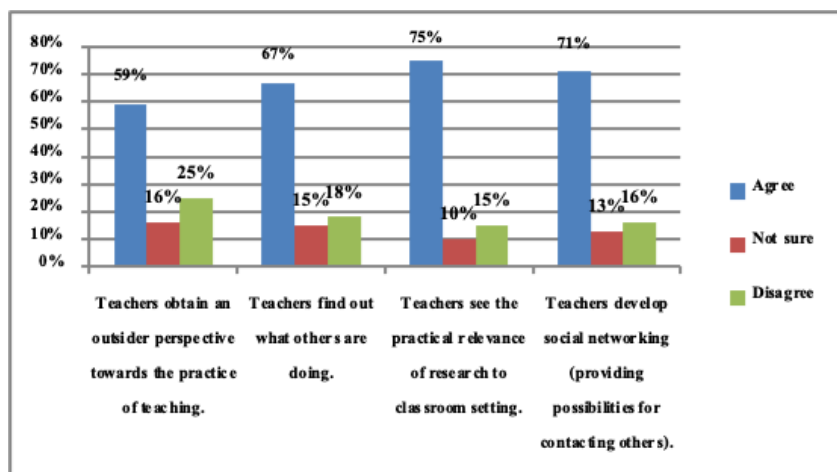


Figure 2 Responses of the participants on motivating factors of research engagement to teachers

As English teachers, they need to have a higher level of knowledge of the English language. If they rely on the book they are teaching, they would soon be at the same level of knowledge with students. Perhaps, they do not study a lot, but they see studying as part of their duty. It eases their job, and they can teach better. When they learn better and more quickly, they feel better. It was recognized by some teachers that reading and doing research can inform and improve teachers' meta-cognitive knowledge of teaching through the provision of different interpretations and understanding of language teaching and learning (Biesta. 2007).

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