Research Article

FACTORS INHIBITING ENGLISH LECTURERS FROM DOING RESEARCH: THE CASE OF THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Lecturers' research capacity has long been considered as an important component that contributes to their own professional development as well as classroom teaching practice. Specifically, teaching effectiveness will be improved significantly when teaching is integrated with research activities (Healey, 2005). However, studies conducted by English lecturers account for a very small portion as compared to those by lecturers of other disciplines. Different reasons have been suggested for the situation but few studies have been conducted to name the specific difficulties that English lecturers are currently encountering. The current study investigates what has specifically prevented English lecturers from various universities in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam from doing research and proposes some suggestions to encourage them to involve more in research activities. Participants include 103 English university lecturers from fifteen colleges and universities in the Mekong Delta. The study provides useful information to institution leaders and policy makers so that they can make some changes to improve the situation.

Keywords: English lecturers, research engagement, professional development

INTRODUCTION

In the mainstream of educational quality improvement, a drive to encourage lecturers' research engagement has in recent years been considered as a conspicuous facet not only for educational policy (Shavelson & Towne, 2002; Thomas & Pring, 2004) but also for English language teaching profession as a feasible practical activity (Atay, 2006; Borg, 2007, 2009, 2010; Nunan, 2006).

Numerous specific benefits to teachers engaging in such activities have been proposed. Regarding this concern from a general perspective, it is argued that when lecturers engage with research and come to possible pedagogical changes basing on their research evidence, it will bring great benefits to both lecturers' teaching and students' learning (Hargreaves, 2001). Among which, lecturers' professional development is one of the undeniable benefits as they are research-involved (Kincheloe, 2003; Lyle, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Kirkwood & Christie, 2006). In addition, research engagement encourages lecturers to change their roles from submissive positions in educational systems to innovative roles in curriculum development (Gurney, 1989). Moreover, such the engagement gives lecturers motivation to make more informed and evidence- based decisions (Borg, 2007; 2009; 2010) as well as enhance their capacities to become more critical, reflective and analytical about their practice in classrooms (Atay, 2008). Furthermore, being research-engaged can also help lecturers reduce their frustrated and isolated feelings in their teaching process as well as their teaching challenges encounters (Roberts, 1993), or become less dependent on external challenges (Donato, 2003) since their research evidence gives them a new insight into dealing with and limiting challenges as well as making possible changes basing on their research findings. As a result, the more chances teachers involve in research, the more their capacity for autonomous professional judgments they can develop (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004).

In the context of Vietnam, there are still small bodies of literature on research engagement. As the matter of the fact, some previous researchers have mentioned research as a less feasible practice among Vietnamese lecturers of English (Doan & Nguyen, 2005; Le, 2005; Pham, 2006) due to certain constraints arisen from internal and external factors. Recently, lecturers' research engagement, however, has been more noticeably concerned, particularly in the tertiary context in which their research achievement has been considered as an

item in the evaluation rubric for lecturers' titles promotion promulgated by the government. Despite of these, there seems to be a paucity of empirical studies conducted to explore English teachers' research engagement in the context of Vietnamese universities with respect to their perceptions and practices. Therefore, the present study was conducted to explore English lecturer's perception and practice of research engagement in the context of one Vietnamese university. Specifically, the following questions are addressed:

1. What is English lecturers' perception toward research engagement?

2. To what extent do these English lecturers say they are research-engaged?

Lecturers and Research Engagement in the Vietnamese Context

Research among lecturers is always an issue concerned and developed in Vietnam. In education and higher education, doing research is one of the important duties that need to be fulfilled so as to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Nguyen (nd.) mentions in his presentation about the combination of teaching and doing research of lecturers at Viet-Hung Technology University that 'through research activities, lecturers can assert themselves as well as recognize their limitations of knowledge so as to improve it...research activities directly impact on the quality of teaching, and they are measure of teachers' professional competence'. Uoc (2013) also shares the similar point of view about the importance of research activities in improving the education quality at universities. Those activities will help lecturers at universities deepen their professional knowledge as well as adapt the content of their lessons so as to perfect them. In addition, through those activities, lecturers can also widen their knowledge of various fields and improve their critical thinking, creativity and their research competence.

Many documents and circulars issued by the government and other related ministries can be considered as legal basis for the orientation of developing research in the context of higher education. These documents are listed as follows:

1. Decision 64/2008/QD-BGDDT (28 November 2008) issued by the Ministry of Education and Training about the working regulations of lecturers. In this decision, doing research is one of the significant duties of lecturers, which is stated in term 5 and term 8 regulating duties of lecturers.

2. Decision 711/QD-TTg (13 June 2012) approved by the Prime Minister about 'The educational development strategies in

period 2011-2020'. The aim of this decision is to lead all of training and education institutes in Vietnam to innovate the education management system and improve teaching staff in the context of globalization. In this decision, the connection between teaching and doing research is mentioned in Term 5.

3. University education law in 2012 regulating the rights and responsibilities of lecturers also states lecturers' duty of doing research, developing scientific applications and transferring technology as well as assuring the quality of education.

4. Decree 99/2014/ND-CP (25 October 2014) issued by the Government regulating the investment for potential developments as well as the support for science and technology activities at universities regulates terms of investment in which human resources for developing science and technology at universities would be improved. The crucial part of this decree is to train and develop research groups and leading researchers as well as young scientists. Besides that, materials and facilities supporting for research at universities are also invested. Moreover, the decree also includes terms encouraging and supporting the science and technology activities at universities. Those regimes include giving better conditions and having funding support for research groups, delivering financial support for lecturers participating in domestic and international workshops and conferences in their fields, giving an equivalent amount of teaching hours for those publishing articles in scientific journals (Appendix 1).

5. Circular 47/2014/TT-BGDDT (31 December 2014) issued by the Ministry of Education and Training regulating the working regulations for lecturers also mentions about the importance of involving in research activities of lecturers. The seventh term in this circular regulates the duty of doing research for lecturers. According to this regulation, lecturers have to spend at least one third of their annual working hours for research. Besides, they have to complete this requirement every year; based on that, the result of their duty completion will be evaluated.

6. Official Note 230/BGDDT-KHCNMT dated 16 January 2015 about the implementation of Decree 99/2014/ND-CP indicates four main tasks, three of which focus on promoting research activities including making policies to support lecturers and students to do research, creating budget for science and technology promotion at universities, particularly giving priority to research activities at university level.

In general, it can be seen that research activities at universities are concerned and encouraged among lecturers in the country. With these forms of encouragement and enhancement, the perception and practice of English lecturers toward research engagement in Vietnam is worth studying.

The study context

In the region of Mekong Delta, there are different universities that have staff working as lecturers on English majored and non-majored undergraduate programs. Among these universities, several ones have a significant amount of research in different fields. However, the emphasis of these studies has been primarily on scientific fields rather than on social and educational field. Although it is clear that lecturers' research capacity has long been considered as an important component that contributes to the lecturers' professional development as well as classroom teaching practice since teaching effectiveness will be improved significantly when teaching is integrated with research activities (Healey, 2005), studies conducted by English lecturers account for a very small portion as compared to those by lecturers of other disciplines.

Participants

One hundred and three teachers from colleges and universities in thirteen cities and provinces in the Mekong Delta are invited to participate in this study. Most of participants are female (69%) and from thirty-one to forty-five (68%) years old. Most of them have higher education degrees including 70.9% with Master degree and 17.5% with Doctoral degree or following a Doctoral program. About teaching experience, 65% of participants have worked for more than ten years compared with 26% of five-to-ten year participants and the rest under 5 years occupies a pretty small percentage (9%).

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative data have been collected from a questionnaire adapted from Borg & Alshumaimeri (2012). The questionnaire consists of two main parts. Part I draws out the English lecturers' perception of research engagement while Part II explores English lecturers' practice of research engagement regarding the extent they are research-engaged and factors inhibit them from engaging in research.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

English Lecturers' Perception of Research Engagement

English lecturers' perception of research investigated in the current study

include their perception of (1) what can be considered a research engagement activity, (2) the benefits that research engagement can bring them, and (3) their evaluation of the importance of nineteen listed research criteria. For the first type of perception, nearly all of English lecturer participants consider writing an article for scientific journal and conducting an experimental study in the classroom (97.1%) and having a presentation at a seminar or conference (89.3%) as research engagement activities (see Table 1). Besides, a large number of them agree that reading studies published in scientific journals or books and having scientific studies at different levels also mean research-engaging.

Table 1 English Lecturers' Perception of What can be Considered a Research Engagement Activity

Activity	N	%
1. Conducting an experimental study in the classroom.	100	97.1
2. Reading studies published in scientific journals or books.	81	78.6
3. Having a presentation at a seminar or conference.	92	89.3
4. Writing an article for scientific journals.	100	97.1
5. Having scientific studies at different levels	83	80.6
(university, province, ministry, etc.)	7	6.8
6. Others		

Regarding the benefits that research engagement can bring, ninety nine percent of participants agree that it helps them to improve their professional knowledge. In addition, a large number of respondents assert that engaging in research helps facilitate their critical thoughts and increase their awareness of students' need, with 89.3% and 85.4% of agreement respectively. Moreover, English lecturers in the current study highly agree with the ideas that research engagement boosts their self-esteem, enhance their teaching efficiency and build academic basis for their pursuit of higher education later (see Table 2).

Table 2 Benefits Research Engagement Brings English Lecturers

Benefit	N	%
1. Improving lecturers' professional knowledge.	102	99
2. Facilitating lecturers' critical thoughts	92	89.3
3. Boosting lecturers' self-esteem.	66	64.1
4. Increasing lecturers' awareness of students' needs.	88	85.4
5. Enhancing lecturers' teaching efficiency.	85	82.5
6. Building academic basic for lecturers' pursuit of higher education.	81	78.6
7. Others	5	4.9

The next part of the questionnaire presented a list of nineteen criteria and asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they felt was important in defining the quality of educational research. The results in Table 3 are organized in descending order according to the percentage of respondents who said a criterion was "more important" (i.e. important or very important). "Less important" here refers to not important or no important at all.

Fourteen criteria in the list were considered to be important in defining the quality of educational research by more than half of respondents. Among them, the four criteria of (1) Conclusion are supported by evidence, (2) The research has a clear purpose, (3) Previous research is reviewed, and (4) Data are analyzed systematically were agreed to be important by almost all respondents. Meanwhile, five criteria of using interviews, studying an original topic, collecting a large volume of information, results applying to many educational contexts and studying a large number of people received more "unsure" answers from the respondents.

Table 3 Criteria for Defining Research Quality

Benefit	More important %	Less important %	Unsure %
Conclusions are supported by evidence.	98.3	0	1.8
The research has a clear purpose.	98.2	0	1.8
Previous research is reviewed.	98.2	0	1.8
Data are analyzed systematically.	98.2	0	1.8
The research is ethical.	94.6	0	5.4
The results give teachers ideas they can use.	89.3	1.8	8.9
The researcher is objective.	83.9	5.4	10.7
Hypotheses are tested.	83.9	3.6	12.5
A representative sample is studied.	82.1	16.1	1.8
Variables are controlled.	78.6	1.8	19.6
The results are publishable.	73.2	3.6	23.2
Data are collected in natural settings.	67.9	12.5	19.6
Information is analyzed statistically.	62.5	23.2	14.3
Questionnaires are used.	50	23.2	26.8
Interviews are used	48.3	19.6	32.1
An original topic is studied.	46.5	8.9	44.6
A large volume of information is collected.	46.4	14.3	39.3
The results apply to many educational contexts.	44.6	16.1	39.3
A large number of people are studied.	37.5	26.8	35.7

The findings of the current studies are in line with those of the previous ones (e.g. Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2012; Borg, 2013; Willemse & Boei, 2013; Almazrawi, 2014). In particular, English lecturers are aware of the benefits that research engagement can bring them and perceive research engagement in a technical way. The lecturers, by expressing their opinion toward the importance of listed research criteria, showed that they have a preference for a "scientific" view of research. In other words, they perceived that research should involve experimental designs, testing hypotheses, using questionnaires and

they conducted the research themselves and haft of them (48.2%) collaborated with their colleagues. Only six respondents (10.7%) said that they had never been involved in any types of research. Meanwhile, 37.5% and 28.6% of respondents said that they asked colleagues and students to join their research projects respectively.

For the number of research projects funded by different levels (i.e. university, province, ministry) that English lecturers have done, about half of the respondents (48.5%) chose null number, which means they never got any funded research projects. For the rest of respondents, twenty two of them had one research project in their career, fifteen had two, and the rest had from three to five funded projects.

Similar findings were found regarding the number of conference paper lecturers presented and articles published. That is, more than half of respondents never presented a paper at a conference (64.1%) and published an article (57.3%). The lecturers who stated that they had at least one chance to present at a conference and published a paper were mostly the ones who had followed their Master and Doctorate study programs abroad. Forty-four English lecturers were first and thirty-four the second author in a published paper. More than half of them had one or two publications, with 16 and 18 respondents for first author and second author publication respectively.

Different reasons for lecturers' not doing research have been investigated in the study (see Table 4). Among which, not having time for doing any type of research was chosen by most of respondents (52 of them, accounting for 50.5%). The two second popular reasons include difficulties in getting funding for research (46.6%) and irritating paper work for research funding (44.7%). Another barrier that 34 respondents (33%) agreed that getting educational research published seem to be difficult work for lecturers. Comparatively, a significant number of respondents also claim about having no enough about educational research methods as well as the limited accessible books and journals, the barrier that prevent them from doing research, occupying 24.3 % and 20.4%. Almost similar number of respondents (from 15 to 18 of them) chose the following reasons as the constraints by which they did not do research. They are Most of my colleagues do not do educational research, I cannot think of any topics that are worth researching, I need someone to advise me but no one is available, and I am not interested in doing educational research. The answers that were ticked by the fewest respondents are My employer does not support me and Doing educational research is not relevant to my teaching.

Table 4 Reasons for not Doing Research

Reasons	N	%
1. I do not have time to do research of any kind.	52	50.5
2. It is difficult to get funding for research.	48	46.6
3. The paper work for research funding is irritating.	46	44.7
4. It is difficult to get educational research published.	34	33
5. I do not know enough about educational research methods.	25	24.3
6. I do not have access to the books and journals I need.	21	20.4
7. Most of my colleagues do not do educational research.	18	17.5
8. I cannot think of any topics that are worth researching.	15	14.6
9. I need someone to advise me but no one is available.	15	14.6
10. I am not interested in doing educational research.	11	10.7
11. My employer does not support me.	2	1.9
12. Doing educational research is not relevant to my teaching.	2	1.9

The results of this survey section reveal that English lecturers in the Mekong Delta engage in doing research to a moderate degree. This is in line with those by Borg & Alshumaimeri (2012). However, the reasons for their little engagement in doing research were different. Despite the fact that lecturers in both Saudi Arabia and Vietnam have the same main reason of not having time for doing research, those in Vietnam have two important inhibitions that do not exist in Saudi Arabia and both relate to financial factors. It is worth mentioning that although the authorities and employers encourage lecturers to do research, they do not do it by means of financial support. It is not easy to get funding in the field of educational research in general and English language teaching and learning in specific. This may root from the fact that impact in the educational filed is harder to see than that in other “practical” fields such as food technology, aquaculture and agriculture. In addition, once lecturers get funding, they feel lost in the huge pile of paper work that they have to complete in order to get the reimbursement. Although the situation has been improved in the past few years with simpler procedure and less paper work, not many English lecturers feel willing to reapply for funding because of the not-very-good impression they had before.

Discussion

The current survey with English lecturers of different universities in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam shows that they are well aware of the benefits that research engagement can provide. However, these lecturers still have traditionally technical view toward research. Most of them still think of research as something with sampling, questionnaire, statistical tests and interventions or experiments. In addition, the study results also reveal that the respondents have a moderate level of research engagement in doing research. Various reasons have been investigated but the most noticing one for both types of research engagement is time constraint. Moreover, funding-related issues are two popular reasons that inhibit lecturers from doing research.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the inhibiting factors for research engagement figured out in the current study, various suggestions are proposed as follow.

First and foremost, the universities should create more favorable conditions to encourage English lecturers to engage in research. First, more journals in the fields of applied linguistics and foreign language learning and teaching should be made available to them. Second, funding application and reimbursement procedure at the university level should be simplified. Third, seminars and workshops on how to write funding proposals for province and state levels should be organized more frequently and made relevant to English lecturers.

In addition, lecturers should receive better support from others. More specifically, there should be research mentors who have a lot of experience of doing research available to guide and give consultations to English lecturers, especially the inexperienced ones in every step of conducting research. These mentors themselves should be given some reward for the jobs they do. Moreover, lecturers who want to do research should be exempted from teaching too much.

Last but not least, the lecturers must be fostered for the love of research engagement. They should be trained and updated on how to do research by inspiring researchers on their fields of interest. Then, they should be sent to domestic and international conferences to find out inspirations and ideas for research. Last, they should be encouraged to do research by their employers and colleagues.

Once these suggestions can be put into practice, we strongly believe that the perception and practice of English lecturers' research engagement will change positively.

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