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Untold stories in Vietnam

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Original Paper

English Language University Teachers' Research Activity: Untold Stories in Vietnam

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores English language university teachers' engagement in research including their interests, publications and co-operation, from which the obligation of research activity at universities in Vietnam is revealed. Twenty-one English language university teachers at Hong Duc University were invited to participate in the research. Survey questionnaire and Skype semi-structured interview were employed to collect necessary data to identify teacher participants' involvement in research. Being seen from socio-cultural perspectives, the findings of the study indicate that how English language university teachers engage in research is inter-twined with the current context where research is done.

Keywords

university teachers, research, research engagement, socio-cultural framework

1. Introduction

The vital role of research to education in general and to English language teaching in particular is acknowledged in policies, institutional regulations and operational plans in Vietnam, especially since the implementation of the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) 2006-2000 (Pham, 2010; Sheridan, 2010). HERA has directly influenced how university teachers react to the reinforced research activity (Le, 2017), which is investigated in this current study. This study identifies the engagement in research of twenty-one English language university teachers at Hong Duc University. Specifically, the teachers' research interests, publications, and co-operation are thoroughly examined in order for an insight into English language university teachers' research activity. Moreover, framed within the socio-cultural viewpoint, the study analyzes how English language university teachers' engagement in research is shaped through the higher education context.

It is assumed that teachers have to play two roles, one is as a practitioner and the other is as a theorist. In this regard, teacher research helps mediate these two roles (Loughran, 2002; Robinson & Lai, 2006). In language teaching, language teacher research has rapidly drawn educational researchers' attention for its research potential (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Nunan, 1989a, 1989b; Freeman, 1998; O'Brien & Beaumont, 2000; Burns, 2010). In terms of English language university teachers doing research, Allison and Carey (2007) and Borg (2009) successfully investigated these teachers' perceptions, aptitudes and challenges of their research engagement. In Vietnam, Hiep (2006) findings reveal a formal position of research in tertiary institutions incorporated with numerous challenges. More recently, Le (2017) explained English language university teachers' perceived difficulties of research from socio-cultural perspectives. However, both Hiep (2006) and Le (2017) focus on obstacles that English language university teachers have to overcome rather than on their research interests, publications and co-authorship. These unaddressed issues are expected to leave the space for my current study, in which such questions like what English language university teachers have done as research, how they have published their work and how they have co-operated in research are examined.

2. Method

2.1 Socio-Cultural Framework

According to socio-cultural theory, human cognition is seen as a dynamic social activity formed through interactions, thus is physically and socially contextualized (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). In this sense, socio-cultural framework is used to identify elements that constitute English language university teachers' research activity. Teachers' research involvement is, in turn, reflects the context where research is performed. In other words, what and how teachers do as research is inter-related. Such knowledge acquisition is seen as a mutually constituting process among individuals and cultural processes (Rogoff, 2003), which occurs at three levels: personal, interpersonal and institutional levels (Rogoff, 1995). Personal level refers to teachers' prior and existing knowledge, experiences and attitudes. Inter-personal level involves different personalities which may be teachers' colleagues, researchers, policy makers, and students. Institutional level accounts for the community covering the government, Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), tertiary context, and curriculum. All these factors forming the whole settings of Vietnamese higher education are inter-related with teachers' research activity.

2.2 Participants

The participants of this study were twenty-one English language university teachers working in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Hong Duc University in Vietnam. Twenty-one teacher participants agreed to take part in the survey whereas only four of them consented to participate in both the survey and the Skype interview. The survey participants were referred to as from **P1** to **P21** while the interview participants were **IP1**, **IP2**, **IP3**, and **IP4**. The participants included 5 males and 16 females whose age ranged from 27 to 50 years old. Three participants were currently pursuing PhD while 19 others had MA degree. Their majors were either English teaching methodologies or applied linguistics. The duration of

teaching experience of these participants ranged from 2 to 20 years. Their monthly salary varied from 150 USD to 350 USD.

2.3 Context of the Study

Vietnam's research performance is poor with low research intensity and modest research quality (Hien, 2010). Universities have been much more teaching-based than research-oriented (Sheridan, 2010). However, the position of research has come at the forefront of educational policies, which has raised an urgent need to enhance research activity at universities, leading to the enforcement of research activity within the workload of all academics working there (Harman & Le, 2010).

This current study was carried out within the context of Hong Duc University, located in Thanh Hoa Province. Hong Duc University, along with other tertiary institutions, is centralized under the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (Nguyen, Oliver, & Priddy, 2009). Recently when MOET started to foster university research capability development (Sheridan, 2010). Hong Duc University has adapted its operational plans towards a research-oriented institution. The university involves research activity with research projects, publishing research articles in journals and attending conferences. Each of these activities is converted into 50-minute periods. One of the compulsory annual tasks of each university teacher is to fulfill at least 180 periods for research activity. If he/she cannot complete this task, he/she will bear a termination of monthly extra-money for poor work performance (Personal communication with the Head of the Department of Scientific Research).

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

2.4.1 Instruments of Data Collection

In this study the instruments of data collection are a survey questionnaire and Skype semi-structured interview. Open-ended questions, enclosed in the questionnaire and interview, are expected to bring about "truly objective" responses from participants (Boden, Kenway, & Epstein, 2005, p. 44).

The survey questionnaire consists of six demographic questions and other eight questions of research content. Copies of the questionnaire were sent to the 21 teacher participants through email. The survey questionnaire would take participants 15 to 20 minutes to finish. All 21 participants returned their completed questionnaire after one week. The survey questionnaire proved itself to be an effective tool when "inspiring a strong feeling among participants" (Boden, Kenway, & Epstein, 2005, p. 45). The participants provided thorough responses, which were seen as their eager when raising their own voice about their research experiences, needs and expectations, allowing meaningful amounts of data to be obtained.

Skype semi-structured interview was used to support the survey questionnaire when collecting data in this current study. The interview helped "clarify, expand and explore participants' responses in their own words and to express their own personal perspectives" (Patton, 2002, p. 348; O'Toole & Beckett, 2010, p. 132). Moreover, semi-structured interview "involves a general set of questions and format which can be modified or varied if the situation demands" (Lichtman, 2010, p. 141) and "is prepared to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed" (Patton, 2002, p. 343). Skype

interview is the same as telephone interview which “helps avoid the safety problems of personal interviews and are much cheaper than these interviews since no travelling cost is involved” (De Vaus, 2002, p. 123). The Skype semi-structured interview was performed among four participants at the convenient time and date. The interviews, lasting for 20 to 30 minutes, were performed and recorded in Vietnamese and then were transcribed verbatim, translated into English and returned to participants for double-checking and modification before approval.

2.4.2 Data Analysis Procedure

Firstly, the data collected from the survey questionnaire was processed following the steps suggested by Creswell (2009). The initial steps were to transcribe, summarize, and arrange participants’ responses into common themes. The same colors were used to mark the identical themes. After scanning all the data for its general sense of information, outstanding or significant patterns of meanings were coded. Finally a brief description of research issues was generated and some recurring categories were indicated.

Secondly, the data collected from the Skype semi-structured interviews was thoroughly analyzed. Initially, the audio records of all four interviews were transcribed and translated into English. Similar or contrasting information was highlighted with the same color before grouping as categories.

After collecting categories from the survey questionnaire and the interview, some comparison and contrast were performed to come up with new themes, which would be interpreted through a reflection with my personal understandings of literature review and socio-cultural perspectives.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Research Interests

3.1.1 Research Approaches

The most popular research approach adopted by teacher participants was mixed methods. Some participants once did qualitative research whereas only one participant had ever experienced with quantitative research. Mixed methods “combine qualitative and quantitative methods” (Harwell, 2011, p. 151) to “allows for the opportunity to compensate for inherent method weaknesses, capitalize on inherent method strengths, and offset inevitable methods biases” (Greene, 2007, p. xiii). Teacher participants used mixed methods in their research to collect both qualitative and quantitative data which resulted in both qualitative and quantitative analysis and integrated inferences. For example, the participant IP1 was carrying on her research on using Hot Potatoes software to teach English vocabulary to English non-majored students at the university.

IP1: At the beginning of the semester, we organized a diagnostic vocabulary test to examine our students’ level of English. We then identified their difficulties with English vocabulary and applied Hot potatoes software in teaching them new words. At the end of the semester, we gave our students an achievement test on vocabulary and compared their current score with the very first score in the diagnostic test to see the effectiveness of the software.

The participant IP1 mentioned qualitative data of students' difficulties with English vocabulary. In addition, the comparison between students' score in the achievement test and those in the diagnostic test embedded quantitative data. In this sense, the research data analysis and data interpretation needed the combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The popularity of mixed methods was, on the one hand, the result of the common assumption among scholars in Vietnam that research illustrated with tables, charts and graphs looked more scientific and convincing (Hiep, 2006). On the other hand, for a lack of time, funding, and skills of solving complex calculations, English language university teachers could not cover a large scope of research and a huge number of participants (if any) which were required by quantitative research. Consequently, those teachers chose something in the middle of quantitative and qualitative research or the combination of these two types. With the use of mixed method, they could present their research proposals with some numerical data as well as combine both quantitative and qualitative data for integrated interpretations.

3.1.2 Types of Research

Action research and case study were reported to be the most common types of research because these types were believed to be able to contribute to teachers' teaching and students' learning process. The participants tended to frame their experiences and understandings of research within applied research in general or action research in particular because they had to face a variety of research problems arising from their own teaching practice (IP1-2-3-4). Action research was conducted for "solving a specific problem or for providing information for decision making at the local level" (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009, p. 13); hence, by doing action research, those teachers hoped to find solutions to their problems in order for improving their teaching job. Moreover, the participants usually selected their research subjects from students in classes where they were teaching to act as a case study. In this sense, their case study was mostly applicable to particular groups of students, as IP2 once experienced.

IP2: Whether a research initiative being effective or not depends on contexts. For example, a teaching technique can bring positive result to this group of students but it cannot be applicable to other groups. However, we cannot say the study on that teaching technique is not valid.

What the participant IP2 said about values of research was supported by Lincoln and Guba (1985). According to these authors, judgments of the quality of teacher research did not include reliability and generalizability because these criteria were rarely feasible in studies teachers conduct in their classrooms (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Roberts; Bove & van Zee, 2007). By doing action research and case study research, English language university teachers prioritized their teaching practice and their students over anything else. Every teacher participants looked forwards to practical values presented by the improvement in their students' learning results.

3.1.3 Research Topics

It was reported that English language university teachers' research topics mostly covered English teaching methodologies. The selection of research topics could be divided into forced-choice topics and free-choice topics. Forced-choice topics were determined by the university's authority represented by the

Department of Scientific Research whereas free-choice topics were selected by university teachers (Personal communication with the Head of the Department of Scientific Research).

Also according to the Head of the Department of Scientific Research, forced-choice topics accounted for about three to five percent of all research projects. The topics were mainly assigned to English language university teachers in preparation for thematic conferences in which they presented their research proposals about particular themes.

IP2: Research topics can be assigned by my university.

IP3: In my university research topics are periodically assigned to teachers by the authorities of the Faculty or the University.

To some extent, forced-choice topics helped orient relevant issues discussed in such conferences (personal communication with the Head of the Department of Scientific Research). To the other extent, it was impossible for those topics to always satisfy all English language university teachers' personal interests or suit their background knowledge.

IP3: Sometimes teachers do not have insightful understanding of some topics. For instance, I was once assigned a research topic of management in teaching and learning of which I had no experience.

In this case, the quality of my research was not good enough. I felt stressed with it.

At this institutional level, the participant IP3 asserted that forced-choice topics did not always produce the so-called good quality research. They even depressed English language university teachers whose research was not up to their expectations. Also according to the participant IP3, less experienced English language university teachers have a heavier bulk of forced-choice topics than more experienced ones. Such novice teachers publish fewer research articles in specialist journals which were assumed to provide more freedom in terms of research topics. Hence, they had to conduct research on forced-choice topics required by the university to fulfill their assigned research activity.

However, as stated above, forced-choice topics only occupied the minority of all research topics, the majority was for free-choice ones. Theoretically, free choice implied English language university teachers' freedom in their research. Nevertheless, the question that whether the teachers completely felt comfortable with their free-choice topics needed more thorough consideration.

Free-choice topics were generated by English language university teachers themselves. Almost all of the topics were provoked from teaching practice. Some was inspired by literature that the teachers read.

IP2: I select topics depending on its practicality. I mean ... from teaching practice some problems are raised, I consider such problems and adapt them into research topics.

IP4: In order to find effective teaching techniques or methods, I spend some time on doing research. It was clearly seen that the conception of free-choice topics were limited or narrowed by English language university teachers. Personally, they only researched what was necessary to their own teaching practice. Moreover, they took the fulfillment of their assigned research activity into consideration when deciding what and how to do as research.

IP3: Doing research individually helps them (teachers) to quickly fulfill such 180 periods as they do

not have to share with any others.

IP4: According to the university's requirements, each teacher needs to perform research activity converted into 180 periods.

No teacher participant mentioned the total number of hours spent on research activity, including reading materials, investigating research setting, attending workshops, conferences and publishing final research product. Instead, they repeated the minimum standard workload of research activity or the required "180 periods" in their interviews. The obsession of the assigned "180 periods" was interpreted as pressure of task fulfillment in that number itself. As a result, teacher participants took such "180 periods" into serious consideration when selecting research topics. Easily-approached and relevant topics were favorable because they took less time on studying and the teachers could speed up their workload completion. Institutionally, the university's rules in general and the required "180 periods" of research activity in particular somehow influenced English language university teachers' choice of what to research.

3.2 Research Publications

3.2.1 Volume of Research Activity

As previously discussed, research activity assigned to English language university teachers included conducting research projects, publishing research articles in specialist journals, attending conferences and workshops. Each sort of research activity was converted into different number of periods. Teachers were free to choose any sort of research activity provided that they could fulfill 180 periods. That was the reason why the number of research initiatives each English language university teacher did every academic year varied from one to four depending on if they had already finished 180 periods or not. For example, in the last academic year by writing and publishing one research article in the university's journal, the participant IP1 could complete her 180 periods of research activity. Equally, the participant IP3 had to perform one Divisional-level presentation, three Departmental-level presentations on particular research issues and attended other conferences or workshops to fulfill her assigned research activity. It seemed that English language university teachers were struggling to meet the required workload of research. Moreover, when they already finished their workload, they had no intention of doing more research. Such teachers' reluctance to do research indicated that research was mainly related to satisfy employment criteria. In this sense, teachers' research engagement seemed to be a burden rather than an inspiration.

3.2.2 Publishing Research

What the participants IP1 and IP3 said revealed the two most popular channels of publishing research as agreed by all 21 participants: submitting to the University Internal Circulation, and presenting in domestic workshops, seminars and conferences. The third channel mostly taken by experienced teacher researchers was sending to domestic specialist journals. Two other much less popular ways were presenting in international conferences and sending to foreign specialist journals. Only three participants experienced presenting in international conferences whereas only one participant once sent his research

article to a foreign specialist journal. This closure to international environment was interpreted as English language university teachers' lack of confidence in their research quality on personal plane:

IP4: Some (research initiatives) have not been applied in reality, so I do not know about their effectiveness.

As well as a lack of opportunity for international exposure on interpersonal plane:

IP1: I once attended an international conference.

And also a result of the university's obligations on institutional plane:

IP1: ... according to our university's requirements, it is NOT obligatory for teachers to publish articles in foreign journals. Publishing research articles in domestic specialist journals is enough for fulfilling duties.

This shortage of international research output explained Vietnamese low position of research capacity when such capacity was assessed basing on the number of peer-reviewed international publications and citation statistics (Hien, 2010). This measurement of research capacity of a country ignored domestic research output. Therefore, no matter how enormous domestic research output was, it could not help improve the position of a country's research capacity in international environment. Moreover, this measurement of research capacity of a country did not take into account the fact that many of the Peer-Reviewed International Publications (PRIPs) in Asian countries were co-authored by foreigners. In so saying, such measurement seemed to be unfair to some extent; however, it was time for Vietnamese researchers to seriously consider their international research output.

3.2.3 Choosing Languages

One more legacy of such above closure to international environment was the dominance of Vietnamese used in research initiatives. Although all participants were university teachers of English, they conducted their pieces of research in Vietnamese. It did not mean that those teachers' competence of English was insufficient. Instead, they needed to publish research in Vietnamese if they wanted to have their work published in local journals and meet the research target. First of all, because the teacher participants tended to send their research articles to domestic journals printed in Vietnamese (IP2), they had to write their work in Vietnamese. Also according the participant IP2, he adapted his M.A thesis to a research article and sent to a domestic linguistic journal. In doing so, he had to translate his original version written in English into Vietnamese to match the journal format. The situation was somehow the same to the participant IP3 when she sent her research article to the university's Department of Scientific Research for verification. She submitted her research proposal written in English but the Department asked her to translate it into Vietnamese because they hardly understood its content. In this sense, those teachers had to do more job without any support. Additionally, the similar situation happened to domestic conferences.

IP1: Attendees in such (domestic) conferences are Vietnamese majored in different field and their English competence is of low level (so I used Vietnamese).

“The lack of proficiency of foreign languages is a particular hindrance to the improvement of quality in Vietnamese higher education” (Pham, 2010, p. 56). In this case, English as a foreign language was proved to be challenging to the enforcement of research activity. This problem demanded comprehensive measurements for improvement in foreign proficiency. It was not only teacher researchers but also those who were in charge of editing research as well as public readers needed to be master on foreign languages.

3.3 Co-Operation in Research

3.3.1 Discussion of Research with Colleagues

Nineteen out of twenty-one teacher participants confirmed that they did discuss research topics or research directions with their colleagues. Two interview participants explained their discussion in more details as followed:

IP2: When I do research and encounter difficulties, I talk to my colleagues to see if they have any suggestions or recommendations. It is really of great help.

IP3: I usually ask for advice from experienced colleagues.

Discussion with experienced colleagues for advice and recommendation seemed to be favorable. On personal plane, this matched Vygotsky’s emphasis on the necessity of “interaction with more skilled partners” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 148) because such interaction provided inexperienced people with a means for learning about the world. Teacher participants had different levels of qualifications and experiences. Through discussion, they learned much from each other. Gradually a personal habit of sharing knowledge was created. More and more discussion, in turn, was done.

At the institutional level, the physical environment of the university encouraged conversation among their teaching staff. In fact, that environment fostered both personal talk of research and formal meetings for discussion of research. On the one hand, each English language university teacher had no private office; instead all of them used a common room. It was where those teachers met and talked in intervals between teaching periods. Such shared space gave English language university teachers opportunities for more contact and discussion than any private offices could do. On the other hand, every month a formal meeting was held. All the issues related to teaching job and research activity covering problems arose from teaching practice, recommendations for solutions, and schedule of the coming month were discussed there. In addition, academic conferences specialized in research projects were organized periodically. Positioned in such environment, English language university teachers’ interest in discussion of research with their colleagues was a matter of certainty.

3.3.2 Co-Authorship

The favor of discussion of research with colleagues did not entail a bigger number of co-authored works than individual works. In fact, all English language university teachers had more research initiatives done individually. The choice of working alone on research work was for three main reasons. On personal plane, it was independence on time management.

IP2: when doing research individually ... they (teachers) can manage time flexibly and independently.

IP3: I tend to do research individually. Time management is the first reason. Some teachers and I possibly want to co-author but we cannot arrange convenient time for all of us.

On interpersonal plane, it was avoidance of conflicts with co-authors in terms of research ideas or directions (IP3 & IP4). The participant IP3 also provided the last reason on institutional plane, which was to accelerate task fulfillment:

IP3: Doing research individually help them (teachers) to quickly fulfill such 180 periods allotted for research activity as they do not have to share with any others.

Although individual works out-numbered co-authored works, teacher participants appreciated advantages of co-authorship. According to those participants, co-authorship provided teachers with great cooperation and support from their partners. The workload shared by all partners became less heavy (IP2 & IP4). In fact, English language university teachers did co-author with their partners, especially in high-level research projects such as national-level projects, provincial-level projects, and organizational-level projects (IP2). The participant IP1 added:

IP1: At the moment I am co-authoring with 2 other colleagues in an organizational-level research project. It's the project about using Hot potatoes software to teach vocabulary to English non-majored students.

English language university teachers' experience of co-authorship was mostly reported to be domestic authorship. Only one teacher once co-authored with a foreign researcher. The others had not ever worked on research with a foreign partner before; however, they all welcomed an opportunity to do so (IP2, IP3 & IP4). Such teachers' willingness of having foreign authorship was interpreted as a desire for integration. Working with foreign researchers promised to be a chance for English language university teachers to communicate with other cultures (P3) as well as learn effective research skills from more advanced countries (P4).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study explored English language university teachers' research activity specified in three categories including their research interests, publications and co-operation. Seen from socio-cultural perspective, such research involvement is mutually constituted within Vietnamese higher education settings. From what teacher participants have voiced, the research-related policies and operational plans seem to force, instead of encouraging, university teachers to do research. A sense of obligation and an obsession of task fulfilment among teachers appear to outweigh their desire, interests and dedication to research. In this regard, the enforcement of research activity at universities has only helped to increase the number of research publications, but could do almost nothing to raise their research quality. Furthermore, peer-reviewed international publications are likely to be out of these teachers' reach, leading to the general poor research performance in Vietnam because research intensity is

measured by the total number of Peer-Refereed International Publications (PRIP) per one million persons. All things considered, it is high time more practical and supportive research-related plans were implemented if the authorities would like to improve Vietnam's research performance.

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